



Kevin Kading (left) and Jack Reich discuss deer depredation prevention measures at Reich's operation near Zap in Mercer County. Reich is president of the North Dakota Stockmen's Association and Kading is the Game and Fish Department's private land section leader.

MIKE ANDERSON

DEER MANAGEMENT AND DEPREDATION

Preparing for Another Winter

By Craig Bibrle

Every winter, North Dakota Game and Fish biologists work with livestock producers who want to keep deer out of their livestock feed supplies.

During mild winters the phone hardly rings, during severe winters like 2008-09, it seemingly rings off the hook. For instance, 2007-08 was relatively mild as North Dakota winters go, and Game and Fish staff responded to fewer than 50 problem situations across the state.

Last winter Game and Fish worked with more than 400 landowners, which seems like a lot, until comparing it to 1996-97 – the record-setter for snowfall in many areas – when the response level reached nearly 1,000 at a time when the state's deer population was somewhat lower than it is today.

Since that record year the state has had mostly mild winters overall, with relatively few deer and other wildlife depredation problems, but producers, hunters and Game and Fish biologists have not sat idly.

Several hundred livestock producers, with help from Game and Fish, put up deer-proof hay yards. Many others looked at their situations for ways to minimize potential problems, while throughout the same years Game and Fish managers also looked for options that would reduce the potential severity the next time a difficult winter came along.

That winter came along last year and it's one that landowners and hunters will remember for a long time. It started in the western half of the state with an early November blizzard the day before the deer gun opener, and hung on into early April. It's fortunate that the eastern third of the state didn't get much snow until later in December, or it could have been much worse.

Heavy snowfall and cold temperatures force wildlife to change their habitat and feeding patterns. Deer tend to congregate near

– and will travel long distances to – food sources that are not covered by snow. Sometimes that source is hay, silage or standing cereal crops. The compounding factor is that severe winters are the times that producers can least afford to lose part of their feed supply to wildlife.

Depending on the location, some farms are more prone to depredation than others. Farmsteads near river corridors, good winter cover, nearby food sources or lands that harbor high deer populations which receive little hunting pressure, are more susceptible to deer problems than other farms.

Deer Management and Depredation

Depredation is seldom simply the result of one thing, such as too many deer in a hunting unit, or limited hunting access in one area. Usually, depredation occurs because of a combination of many factors, such as land use, crop types, availability of food and cover, local and unit-wide deer populations, severity of winters, standing crops, hunting access, local area hunting pressure and many others.

Therefore, managing the state's deer population is a never-ending effort to balance hunter satisfaction with available habitat and landowner tolerance. While some hunters would say there is no such thing as too many deer, private landowners may not agree if deer are causing problems.

The most effective way to manage deer populations is with the regular deer-gun season, supported by bowhunting and muzzle-loader harvest.

Every five years, along with public input, the Game and Fish Department develops deer population goals for each hunting unit. While Game and Fish sets the number of licenses, how the harvested is accomplished within the unit is largely determined

by landowners and hunters. For example, if a group of landowners feel deer numbers are getting too high in their immediate vicinity, they have the ability to work together to increase hunting pressure and encourage harvest of does to reduce the population in that specific area.

The Game and Fish Department has also developed a hunter/landowner contact program to assist landowners who have had depredation problems and want to work toward an adequate harvest in their area.

On the other hand, landowner efforts to attract deer into an area by providing a sanctuary or severely restricting hunting, harvesting only “trophy” bucks, or feeding/baiting deer can be counter-productive if reducing deer numbers is the objective.

Game and Fish is continually developing ways to address deer management and influence deer harvest. Some examples include:

- Allowing multiple antlerless deer licenses per hunter.
- Allowing hunters to use concurrent season antlerless licenses during any appropriate legal season.
- Reduced nonresident license fees and removed the nonresident unit cap for antlerless licenses after the initial lottery drawing.
- Experimental September and October antlerless-deer-only seasons in select hunting units.
- Landowner/Hunter Contact Program.
- Private Land Open To Sportsmen: The PLOTS program provides landowners with a variety of options for improving habitat and allowing walk-in hunting access on their property.

Even after significant hunting pressure and a thorough harvest, landowners can still experience problems with deer. Deer depredation has been documented back to the days when deer numbers were extremely low across North Dakota compared to today. On the other hand, deer depredation cases in the last 10 years have been well below those experienced in the 1980s and 1990s, even though deer populations have been significantly higher in recent years.

Some of that is likely due to a long stretch of mild winters, but some of it is also the result of livestock producers and Game and Fish preparing for worst case scenarios, actively doing what they can to minimize depredation potential should a winter like last year come to pass.

CRAIG BIHRLE is the Game and Fish Department's communications supervisor.

Stacking round bales upright is a useful method for preventing access to a larger stored hay supply.



Game and Fish Depredation Response Policy

When deer become a problem and producers contact Game and Fish for possible help, the Department's policy calls for staff to respond within 24 hours and conduct an on-site investigation within 48 hours.

The depredation response policy

includes: technical assistance; short-term treatments such as repellents, scaring devices, and temporary fencing; and long-term treatments such as permanent deer-proof hay hard fencing.

Following last winter, the Department purchased enough materials for an addi-



Landowners and hunters with antlerless licenses can work together to manage deer populations in local areas.

Hunting is a Practical Approach

When looking at an overall effort to minimize deer depredation, North Dakota Stockmen's Association President Jack Reich, Zap, says landowners can help reduce potential winter problems by allowing at least some hunting in the fall.

“If you continue to have a problem with deer, you'll have to allow some hunting if you can, as far as the doe population needs to be kept in check in certain areas,” Reich said in an interview for the Game and Fish Department's weekly television news feature, “North Dakota Outdoors.” “It goes a long way toward preventing depredation, too. If the (deer) numbers are too high, or you continue to have a problem ... that's one way of managing it.”

Reich also said hunters shouldn't be afraid to knock on doors if they encounter posted land.

“A lot of folks post their land,” he noted. “We post our land, and a lot of it is, we have a lot of friends and neighbors, and we have a pretty big hunting party ourselves ... but, once we're filled up, we sure don't mind somebody coming in to shoot a doe, but we need to know where they're at, and make sure they're not anywhere our cattle are at.”

“Just because land is posted doesn't mean people won't allow hunting, it's just that we want to know who's out there ... most people don't mind, especially if you've got a doe tag to fill.”