

Game Cameras: A Management Tool for White-Tailed Deer?

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White-tailed deer management involves more than just managing habitats and planting supplemental food plots. Deer management “done right” requires managing populations as well. However, population management is not as simple as just maintaining deer numbers within carrying capacity of the land. Estimates of deer population characteristics and developing good harvest management strategies based on this information also are important for maintaining a healthy and productive deer herd.

So, how does one go about estimating deer population characteristics? Much of the information needed to make management decisions regarding deer populations can be gathered from a properly conducted game camera survey. What began as a cool gadget for photographing bucks and monitoring food plots or game trails has since become an important survey instrument for deer managers. Deer population characteristics, such as buck-doe ratio, fawn crop and age structure, provides biologists and deer managers with insight into the demographics and productivity of a particular deer population. Biologists then use this information to make recommendations that help landowners or hunting clubs reach their management goals.

Buck-doe ratio is simply the number of adult males compared to the number of adult females in a deer population. Deer populations with buck-doe ratios skewed heavily toward females (five adult does for every one adult buck), is a strong indicator of over-harvest of bucks and under-harvest of does. Such a heavily skewed buck-doe ratio might also mean there is an overpopulation problem. Increased doe harvest would thereby reduce forage intake and allow the habitat to provide more food per individual deer, which would improve deer quality and productivity.

Annual fawn crop estimates are a good way to gauge deer herd productivity or recruitment. This information helps form the basis for harvest recommendations. For example, if one of your management objectives is to stabilize population growth, then adult deer harvest should be about equal to that of the previous year’s fawn crop.

What if the estimated fawn crop numbers are low in proportion to adult doe numbers in the population? Low fawn recruitment can be a result of several different factors or a combination of factors. Habitat conditions may be poor as a result of overpopulation or from lack of habitat management. Poor habitat can translate to poor physiological condition of does, which negatively impacts their re-

