

Kip's Korner



Antlered Buck Harvest December 2009

The 2009-10 deer season is closed or nearing so for states across the whitetail's range, and biologists will be crunching data in the coming months to assess the outcome of this past season. Until that data is available, let's look at harvest data from the two most recent seasons - 2007/08 and 2008/09. Of the 37 states in the Midwest, Northeast and Southeast that comprise the majority of whitetail habitat, we (QDMA) acquired harvest data from all 37 for 2007, but 2008 data is not yet available for Alabama and Florida. Therefore, I omitted 2007 data from these two states in the following analyses. For this article, Midwest states include IA, IL, IN, KS, KY, MI, MN, MO, ND, NE, OH, SD and WI; Northeast states include CT, DE, MA, MD, ME, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VA, VT and WV; Southeast states include AL, AR, FL, GA, LA, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN and TX.

The following data are from each state's wildlife agency. States use several different techniques to collect this data, and some states collect more data than others. Analyses between states may not always compare "apples-to-apples", but each state provided their best possible data. Also, analyses across years should be robust to differences in confidence levels each state has in its data.

With respect to antlered buck harvest, hunters from all three regions tagged over 2.8 million bucks in each year. In total, the difference in the two year's harvest was less than 0.5 percent. However, the data showed that 2008 was a good year for most states in the Northeast and Southeast, but a tough one for the Midwest. Texas reported the largest harvest at 340,159 antlered bucks. Michigan was next with 248,350 and Tennessee was third with 164,413 antlered bucks.

The Northeast harvested 526,193 antlered bucks in 2008, a 4 percent increase from 2007. Nine of 13 northeastern states (69%) shot more bucks in 2008 than in 2007. The average increase was 7 percent and ranged from 1 percent in New York to 12 percent in Pennsylvania. Numerically, Pennsylvania shot 13,210 additional bucks in 2008. All four Northeastern states that shot fewer bucks in 2008 were in New England. New Hampshire's harvest was reduced 17 percent, Maine's was 16 percent lower, Massachusetts' was 4 percent lower, and Rhode Island's was 1 percent lower. New England is well known for its severe winters and their corresponding impacts on deer herds and hunter harvests. It's important to note the deer project leaders for the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department and Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife both predicted reduced buck harvests in 2008.

The Southeast (minus Alabama and Florida) harvested 1,240,537 antlered bucks in 2008, a 4 percent increase from 2007. Six of 9 southeastern states (67%) shot more bucks in 2008. The average increase was 7 percent and ranged from 0.1 percent in Mississippi to 18 percent in Texas. Numerically, Texas shot 51,932 additional bucks and Georgia shot 16,475 additional bucks (+12%) in 2008. Of the 3 states that shot fewer bucks, Arkansas' (-2%) and Tennessee's (-0.3%) harvests were nearly equal to 2007, while Louisiana's was considerably less at 23,650 fewer bucks (-21%). Interestingly, Louisiana hunters also shot exactly 21 percent fewer antlerless deer in 2008 than 2007 (71,190 in 2008 vs. 90,540 in 2007).

The Midwest harvested 1,047,153 antlered bucks in 2008, an 8 percent decline from 2007. Many states in the Midwest had a tough year as seven of 13 (54%) shot fewer antlered bucks in 2008. The average decrease was substantial at 11 percent, and it ranged from -5 percent in Iowa to -19 percent in Wisconsin. Numerically, Wisconsin shot 31,635 fewer bucks, Missouri took 20,567 less (-17%), Michigan tallied 19,079 less (-7%), Minnesota shot 13,000 fewer (-12%), and even Illinois shot 9,543 fewer bucks (-12%). On the plus side, Kentucky shot 4,952 additional bucks (+10%), and Ohio hunters shot 2,314 more bucks (+3%). South Dakota shot nearly equal numbers in 2007 and 2008, and Indiana, Kansas and Nebraska all shot 3 to 5 percent more bucks in 2008.

Age Structure

We also acquired the age structure of the above harvest data for most states. Thirty-two states reported the percentage of their antlered buck harvest that was 1.5 years old, and 26 states reported the percentage that was 2.5 and 3.5 years or older. In 2008, the average percentage of the antlered buck harvest that was 1.5 years was 41 percent, down from 43 percent in 2007. That means nationally only about 4 of 10 antlered bucks harvested last year were 1.5 years old. That's a vast improvement over the high yearling harvest rates of the past. Arkansas averaged the fewest yearlings (13% of antlered buck harvest) and Minnesota averaged the most (67% of antlered buck harvest). Other notables included Vermont (15%), Kansas (17%) and Mississippi (17%) all shot low percentages of yearlings, while Michigan (61%), Maryland (62%), New York (62%) and New Jersey (64%) all shot high percentages.

Twenty of 32 states (63%) shot a lower percentage of yearling bucks in 2008 than 2007. The average decline was 3 percent and ranged from -1 percent in several states to -12 percent in Maine and Oklahoma. Other notables included Vermont shot 10 percent fewer yearlings, and Arkansas and Rhode Island each shot 9 percent fewer. Hunters are clearly passing more yearling bucks and allowing them to reach at least one year older.

The average percentage of the antlered buck harvest that was 2.5 years was 31 percent in both 2007 and 2008. This statistic ranged from 19 percent in Texas to 59 percent in Vermont. Indiana and Tennessee averaged 40 percent 2.5-year-olds, and Missouri averaged 54 percent 2.5-year-olds in the state's antler-point-restriction (APR) counties (Missouri averaged 31 percent in non-APR counties). Overall, 14 of 26 states (54%) shot a higher percentage of 2.5-year-olds in 2008 than 2007. The average increase was 3 percent and ranged from 1 percent in several states to 9 percent in Vermont. Hunters are obviously benefiting from passing yearling bucks.

The average percentage of the antlered buck harvest that was 3.5 years and older was 27 percent in 2008, up from 25 percent in 2007. This statistic ranged from 10 percent in Minnesota to 58 percent in Mississippi. Other notables included Arkansas (49%), Kansas (49%), Louisiana (50%) and Texas (54%). It's quite an accomplishment that these states move such high numbers of bucks into the 3.5 years and older age classes. Overall, 14 of 26 states (54%) shot a higher percentage of 3.5 year and older bucks in 2008 than 2007. Kansas had the largest increase from 2007 by shooting 13 percent more 3.5 year and older bucks, followed by Rhode Island (+12%) and Oklahoma (+10%). A short time ago most hunters couldn't fathom passing yearling bucks. Today, that restraint is allowing significant numbers of bucks to reach older age classes.

The age structure of modern-day antlered deer populations and harvests is far better than that of a decade or two ago. Through progressive deer management programs and more knowledgeable hunters, today's deer herds have a more balanced and natural buck age structure, and they're providing tremendous hunting and viewing opportunities for sportsmen and women. Deer hunters and managers should be proud of the role they're playing in reducing yearling buck harvests and allowing more bucks to reach maturity. History will describe today's hunters as managers and stewards rather than the mere consumers of yesteryear.

Note: See the full "White-tailed Deer Harvest" report, complete with map and data charts in our 2010 Whitetail Report. The Report will be available at www.QDMA.com in late January.

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