

Why Protect Yearling Bucks?

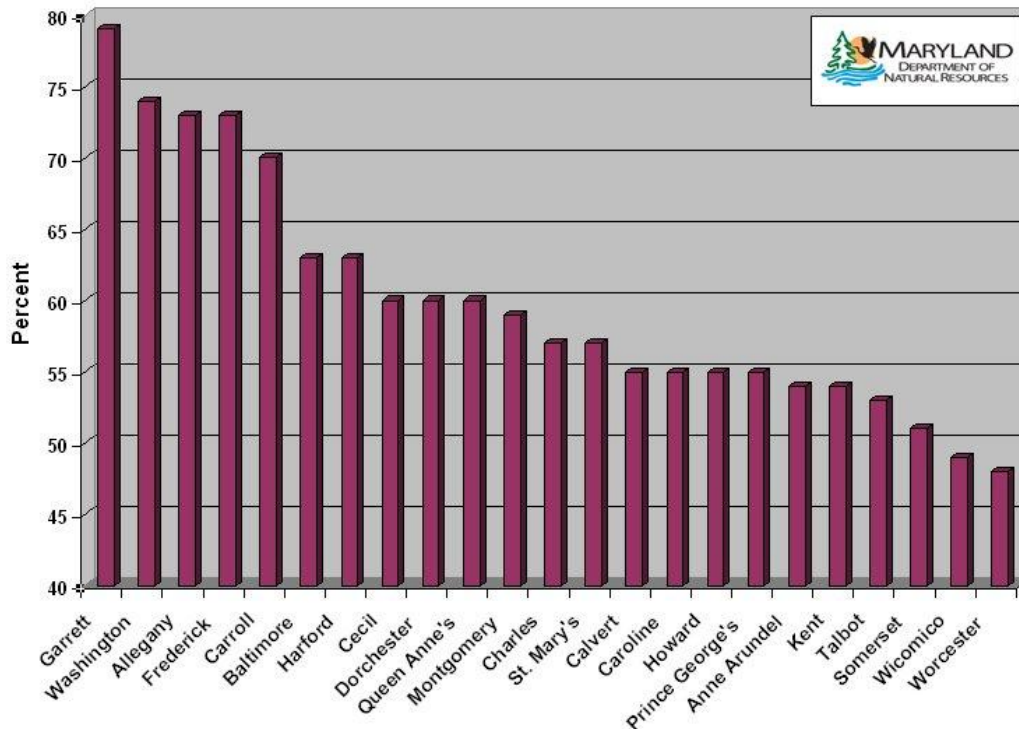
This was one of the most asked questions asked at events across Maryland this year. Some Maryland Deer Hunters unfamiliar with Quality Deer Management (QDM) incorrectly assume QDM is only about large-antlered bucks. Many also feel antler point restrictions (ARPs) are synonymous with QDM. Pieces from both of these beliefs **can be parts of QDM programs but QDM is about much more than just antlers or ARPs.**

In simplest terms QDM involves balancing the deer herd with the habitat and having deer-bucks and does- in multiple age classes. Determining and achieving the right number of deer for the habitat is a topic for another discussion and this article will focus on multiple age classes of deer. Most areas have a good age structure for the doe population. Jaw Bone Aging Posters and "How To" seminars produced from QDMA and Branch Events have helped to increase knowledge for hunters aging the deer they harvest. It's common for hunters to harvest does 1.5-6.5+yr old. This age structure exists because of traditional deer management practices where hunters focused much of their harvest pressure on bucks which allowed does to survive and fill multiple age classes.

Very few areas have this same age structure for the buck population. Typical buck populations include a high percentage (60-80%) of yearlings, a small percentage (10-30%) of 2.5yr olds, an even smaller percentage (5-10%) of 3.5yr olds and almost no 4.5+yr olds. This young age structure is a direct result of harvest pressure by hunters. In the not-too-distant past most hunters focused intense pressure on the harvest of yearling bucks which removes the majority of the yearling age class. See Chart below:



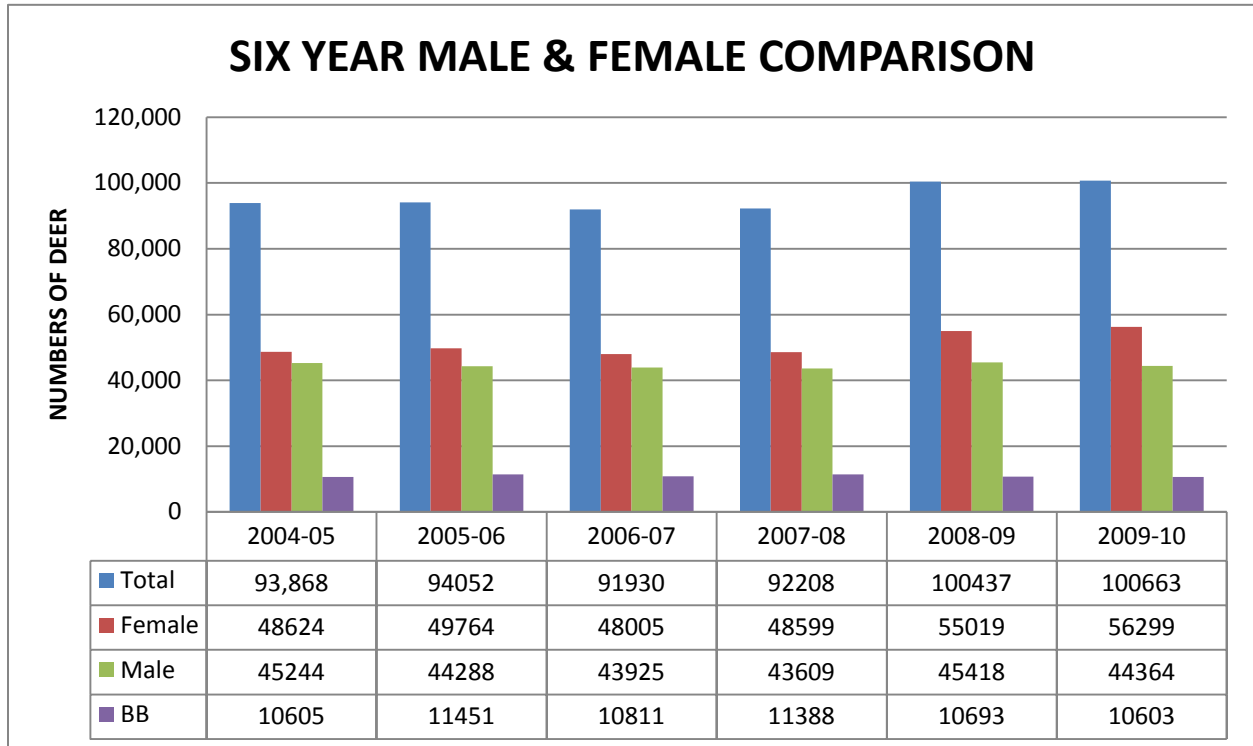
Average Percent Yearling Buck in the Adult Buck Harvest by Maryland County (1990-2009)



Quality Deer Management (QDM) helps correct this imbalance by protecting young bucks and allowing them to survive into the older age classes. Quality Deer Management **isn't about protecting bucks until they reach 5.5yrs old- that's Trophy Management.** Quality Deer Management, in simplest terms is about protecting yearling bucks. Yearling bucks are the easiest adult deer to harvest and has no effect on population management. But if deer hunters pass them and allow them to reach 2.5yrs, they become a little smarter and some will avoid hunters and reach 3.5+yrs. Pretty soon you end up with a deer population that has bucks in multiple age classes even while allowing bucks 2.5yrs and older to be harvested. A complete age structure is good for deer and great for hunters.

Critics often speak of trophy bucks and antlers as the driving force. Why would you pass on a yearling buck when Maryland total deer harvest for the past two years has grown to over 100,000+ deer harvested? Hunters and managers who truly delve into the QDM philosophy quickly learn the correct number of deer for the landscape's area, age structure and balanced sex ratios. These objectives simultaneously can be reached by harvesting the biologically appropriate number of antlerless (adult does) deer and passing young bucks. Unfortunately harvest data show there is a limit to the number of deer an individual hunter is willing to take annually even with liberal bag limits in place. The impact of antlerless harvest is to maximize harvest of adult does and minimize harvest of fawns, by focusing on adult does rather than fawns can/will help reach management objectives more quickly. The QDMA recommends buck fawns (BBs)

constitutes **less than 10% of your total antlerless harvest**. By looking at past years total male-female harvest (continued below chart)



it's easier to see how deer population management is progressing. Educating hunters on distinguishing fawns from adult deer and even separating buck and doe fawns in the field is a relatively simple matter with QDMA's memberships, Quality Whitetails, and educational posters. **I'll stress that mistake will happen!!** By focusing on adult does rather than fawns provides more meat for the table, helps balance the herd more quickly, and allows additional buck fawns to survive. More buck fawns means more yearling bucks the following year, which is good for balancing the adult sex ratio and will improve hunter satisfaction because there will be more older class bucks to hunt. Hunters are needed to manage deer populations by harvesting adult does while buck management is the reason to keep hunters afield and will increase hunter recruitment.

The big question then is what is the best way to protect yearling bucks from harvest? There are several techniques to protect yearlings and they all have advantages and disadvantages.

- Point restrictions are a common technique and they involve establishing a minimum number of points.
- Antler width restrictions, involves establishing a minimum width of antler outside spread. Ear tip to tip distance is approximately 14-16 inches. Most QDM co-ops use this 15" rule.

- Age restrictions based on body characteristics.
- Earn-a-buck program typically used in areas with high deer density.
- Buck harvest quotas limited numbers of buck tags.



Any technique should be established with local by county harvest data and the aid of a deer biologist and not based on politics. The challenge is to educate deer hunters and land managers on the benefits and limitations of each and achieve broad-based support for the selected technique. The most biologically sound technique will provide the most benefits and will improve a sound deer management program when applied correctly with hunter support.

So, is QDM just about large-antlered bucks and are ARPs synonymous with QDM? The first answer is obviously "**NO**".

Quality Deer Management is about balancing the deer herd with the habitat and having bucks and does in multiple age classes. You end up with larger older bucks because they are a byproduct of good deer management. The second answer is also "**NO**"; ARPs are merely one technique to get bucks into multiple age classes while harvesting the biologically appropriate number of adult antlerless (female) deer.

The take home message is: The Quality Deer Management Association is a nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to ethical hunting, sound deer management and preservation of the deer hunting heritage.

Remember as the hunter/manager you will make the final management decisions every time you harvest a deer. It's not QDM when yearling are not protected from the harvest.

Hunt Safe and Ethically, QDM will only work when used!!

Respectfully,

E. W. Grimes

Director/President of Maryland State Chapter QDMA

Information included in this article provided from:

- Quality Whitetails the bi-monthly journal from QDMA
- Kip's Korner written by Kip Adams, Certified Wildlife Biologist and Northern Director of Education and Outreach for QDMA
- QDMA's Whitetail Report 2010
- Maryland DNR Annual Deer Reports