White-tailed Deer Management in Cleveland County

Heath Herje
Agriculture Educator
Heath.Herje@okstate.edu

The 2011 Oklahoma deer season ends this month and land managers and hunters in Cleveland County will begin hanging up their equipment. Many had success this season due to the drought and lack of cover. Coupled with this, deer were regularly visiting feeders and food plots compensating for the lack of late-summer forage. While some are wrapping up the season, others are focusing on deer management plans for 2012. No other element is more important to achieving success in a deer management plan than herd management. Herd management begins with clearly outlined/realistic objectives and discipline. Some hunters prefer maximum opportunity and harvest the first buck they see. Some fail to harvest adequate numbers of antlerless deer, only harvesting bucks. Antlerless harvest is very important to maintain healthy populations in balance with existing habitat conditions. In addition, a fast-growing group of hunters have begun focusing on quality and managing under more progressive guidelines. Quality Deer Management (QDM) is growing in popularity and thousands of Oklahomans are involved. For more information related to QDM visit www.qdma.com.

Study long enough and you will find there is no silver bullet to unlock the potential of a deer herd or habitat. It comes from patience, hard work, knowledge, and by allowing young bucks the chance to mature. Coupled with this, harvesting an adequate number of does should maintain the antlerless population at or below the carrying capacity of the property. The deer herd in Oklahoma has as much potential as any state, but it is up to hunters (and state regulations) to decide when we will reach that potential. One aspect of herd management that is misunderstood is genetics. Many hunters speak of antler genetics when justifying why they harvest certain bucks. Many use the term “cull” when describing small-antlered bucks. Many hear the word “genetics” on hunting shows filmed in Texas where hunters are on intensely-managed, high-fenced ranches. However, in the real world of free-range, wild deer, there is no way to overhaul the genetics of an entire herd simply by harvesting a handful of bucks. Keep in mind, the buck with the “trash” rack may have the real potential to be a monster in 5 years. He also has a family tree larger than yours and mine combined; with genetic branches of all shapes and sizes. He also had a mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother who contributed significantly to his genetics. Keep that in mind next time you want to harvest a small-racked buck to improve your herd “genetics”.

There are dozens of reasons a buck may have a small rack; many of which have nothing to do with genetics. This list may include age (most common), drought, diet, stress, parasites, pests, habitat, illness, herd density etc. Same story for yearling spike bucks. Spikes have just as much potential as their counterparts. Some spikes are simply born late the previous summer and most grow a normal rack the following year. Multi-tined or spike yearlings are comparable to 13-year-old boys in development and simply need time to grow and express their genetic potential. Nothing is “genetically” wrong with them; they are just young. Just like most “trash” bucks. Give them a little time to grow up and you’ll be amazed at what they may turn into. Most bucks grow larger racks each year of their lives, but this is not always the case. A few may decline, while others may stay relatively the same. Bottom line, rack size and shape alone are not indicative of a buck’s age and should never be used to make aging determinations. The simple way to harvest large, mature bucks, if this is your goal, is not to harvest them when they are young. The key to great deer and deer hunting is simple; conservative state buck regulations, liberal doe harvest, and hunters allowing young bucks a free pass.