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Decline in deer harvest no surprise  
DNR: 14-percent harvest decline compared to last year

BY LAUREL BEAGER  
Editor

The decline in the deer harvest this season isn't a surprise to Minnesota Department of Natural Resource's International Falls area wildlife manager.

Larry Petersen said this week that the season that ended Nov. 24 was expected to harvest less deer because of a fairly severe winter last year.

"There was not a lot of recruitment," he said. "Fawns don't survive winter as well as adults, so there wasn't the normal number of yearlings."

The decline in harvest was seen statewide, he said.

All the three permit areas around Koochiching and eastern St. Louis counties in Petersen's work area saw a decline in harvest of 14 percent compared to last year.

But other than a little wind during the hunting season, Petersen said it was a pretty reasonable deer hunt.

"It was later than normal and that can sometimes lead to a little worse weather conditions, but for the later opener, it was pretty

decent weather across the days," he said.

He said this season's weather did not play a role in the decline in deer harvest.

"We have fewer deer and that is why harvest is down," he said.

Petersen said the DNR considers trends when it looks at how to proceed with setting harvest goals for the next season's hunt.

This season's harvest represents a 29-percent decline from the harvest in 2010, he said. The deer population in the north central part of the state, and he said probably farther to the northeast, have consistently declined over the past several years.

Petersen said the DNR establishes a population goal for each permit area. "That is the foundation we try to target," he said. "But we look at trends and one of our indicators is harvest trends, and then there are reports from people and what we see ourselves in the field."

The DNR also considers the severity of winters — whether the winters are stressing the deer and if people are finding dead

deer in the wintertime. Information about the number of wolf kills and the condition of the deer carcass of wolf kills are also considered, he said.

"All those add information to help us make decisions on the upcoming season," he said. "This helps us decide what sort of season to have — do we offer antlerless harvest? How many? Or do we be more conservative or go as far as bucks only?"

If the deer population is above the DNR's goal, it may cause a change in harvest strategy to a more liberal season, such as offering two deer, or elsewhere in the state where intensive harvest seasons are conducted.

Another factor in the deer population is the number of fawns born. But, timing plays a role in the harvest targets set.

"It would always be nice to have more information," said Petersen. "We make the decision (about harvest goals) in the spring for the upcoming season, but don't know what the fawn crop is until after that. That information would be nice, but we can't tell how many

fawns there are until it's summer when we see fawns running around with their moms."

Petersen said the DNR wants to offer as much opportunity to hunters as possible.

The vast tracts of public land and the normally lower deer population density in northern Minnesota has led to the longer 16-day season, compared to much of the state which has a nine-day season.

He said a shorter season in places with more people, more private property and more deer offers harvest opportunity, with less conflict.

In addition, he said northern Minnesota's hunting season can be limited by weather, such as it's experienced this week, which can crimp opportunity.

"There are always social considerations and biological considerations and things like tradition also play a role" in deciding harvest seasons.

This winter's severity will play a role in next year's hunting season, said Petersen.

"The next piece of information to get is how bad this winter will be and what effect that will have on the population," he said. "We already have an indicator with the lower harvest this year and four-year downward trend in the local permit areas. How our estimate of what the population is at versus the goal level will influence to what degree we do things."

He said last spring the DNR decided to keep the harvest number in the permit areas the same as the year before, which he said was quite conservative.

"We wanted the opportunity for youth to kill a buck or doe, and then offer a few more permits that everyone else can apply for and get, and then offer a certain number of opportunities to harvest antlerless deer," he said.

He said keeping the same harvest opportunity in the successive years provides information about the population.

"Then we have a 14-percent decline in harvest," he said. "It helps point to a



FILE PHOTO

real decline in the population, which we sensed from other things."

An average winter for an obviously suppressed population will not lead to a more liberal hunting opportunity with antlerless permits. "It just won't be in the cards," he said. "But we still have to evaluate all things to try to come up with the best kind of season."

He said no strategy can quickly counteract a major factor — like a severe winter — acting on the population, he said. "That's a trump card," he said.

Successive bad winters effect beyond what management strategies can accomplish.

Despite this week's snow and cold, Petersen said it's too early to tell if the winter will impact the deer population.

"The accumulating effect of winter plays on deer," he said. Should the snow that's fallen this week end with little more for the rest of the year the winter could be a non-factor on the population, he said.

"But if this harbinger of things that will continue, it could be a bad thing," he said.

The biggest effect of winter on deer is an extended period of deep snow. Cold weather plays a role, but not as much as deep snow, he said.

Petersen said deep snow

and 10 degrees above zero is harder on deer than not much snow and 20-below zero temperatures, which deer can tolerate.

The agency tracks the winter through the winter severity index, creating a formula of points for snow depth and cold. Petersen will report to The Journal the winter severity index as the winter moves forward.

Petersen said he didn't harvest a deer but family members did. While he said he had a couple chances, he's OK without taking a deer this year.

"Sitting still and letting things happen around you, you see so much," he said of his time in the stand.

WOLF SEASON

Meanwhile, the wolf season in the northwest zone closed the same day as the northern deer hunting season. The northwest zone harvest goal for that season was 73.

The current wolf hunting and trapping season opened Nov. 30 and, as of Thursday, 13 of the 89 harvest target had been killed. The season will close earlier than the Jan. 31 closure date if the harvest target is reached.

Wolf may be taken by permitted hunters with firearm or bow and arrow legal for big game. Traps and snares are allowed for licensed, late-season wolf trappers only. The statewide bag limit is one wolf.



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