

Are you the majority or the minority when it comes to your opinions on deer management? Part 2

by
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In the last edition of BWA WHITETAIL NEWS, we took an in-depth look at responses to questions from the 2013 SE Minnesota Landowner Survey to see how property owners perceive our present deer population and to examine what strategies they prefer when it comes to deer management. That article can be read at http://www.blufflandwhitetails.org/BWAnews_Fall2014.pdf.

In this article, we are going to break down many of the responses from the 3A and 3B hunter survey which was conducted following the 2012 hunting season. This survey specifically polled the hunters themselves to gather their perspectives on population density and deer management in zone 3. Both surveys and the reports can be viewed on the DNR website at the following locations:

<http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/recreation/hunting/deer/se-landowner-survey-report.pdf>

and

<http://files.dnr.state.mn.us/recreation/hunting/deer/2012-zone-3-deer-report.pdf>.

As with the landowner article, this is not meant to challenge your opinion (right, wrong, successful or not) when discussing the social aspects of deer management. It simply shows how the majority of hunters and landowners feel about issues related to deer population and management. Those not agreeing with the figures will always try to discredit the validity of the surveys or their results, but the reality is that these were completely random, linked to no groups or agendas and offer the most accurate representation of what landowner and hunter opinion is in southeast Minnesota. Percentages definitely accentuate this article but try to look beyond those figures to what hunters are indirectly telling us about how they value and approach deer hunting. That might be the information that will hold greater value to success with management strategies in the future.

The Survey

Surveys were randomly sent to 4,000 individuals, half who had purchased a license to hunt the 2012 3A firearms deer season and the other half who purchased a tag for the 3B season. Survey participation was not limited to zone 3 residents, but did require that the hunt be within those permit areas. Those who exclusively bow or muzzleloader hunt deer were not identified as potential participants in this survey. Of the 3A surveys reaching their destination (1,950), 1,225 (63.1 percent) were returned, while 3B responses were 1,137 (58.6 percent) with 56 being undeliverable. Nearly all (98.5 percent) respondents participated in the 2012 firearms season while averaging 4.8 days afield. Just over half of the hunters (53.4 percent) did all their hunting on private land that they did not own or lease. Only 15.3 percent hunted on land that they owned and 6.7 percent of respondents reported hunting exclusively on public land. Two percent of hunters noted that they only hunt on land that they lease. The average age of all respondents was just over

47 years old with the average hunting experience reported at over 24 years. This survey also allowed us to explore the differences between 3A and 3B hunters and break down many responses by permit area which gives a clearer picture of hunter perception versus actual aerial survey population results.

Techniques used and deer harvested

Hunters were asked to indicate how much they used various hunting techniques (ground blinds, elevated stands, stalking and deer drives) and the amount and types of deer they had harvested.

- **3A** hunters preferred to hunt from elevated stands (*56.6 percent) over ground blinds (*32.6 percent). They seldom participate in deer drives (*4.3 percent) with a small percentage (*3.6 percent) preferring to stalk deer. (* “most or all of the time.”)
- **3B** hunting techniques were more evenly distributed with *35.6 percent hunting from elevated tree stands, *27.5 percent preferring ground blinds, *8.4 percent stalking deer and a hefty *23.1 percent utilizing deer drives. (* “most or all of the time.”)
- **3A** hunter success consisted of 26.4 percent of hunters harvesting a buck and 23.4 percent harvesting a doe. 6.6 percent of 3A hunters reported not seeing a deer.
- **3B** hunter success consisted of 12.8 percent of hunters harvesting a buck and 37.4 percent harvesting a doe. 12 percent of 3B hunters reported not seeing a deer.
- Significantly more 3A hunters also archery hunted (30.5 percent) than 3B hunters (20.5 percent) and over twice as many 3A hunters (22.6 percent) than 3B hunters (10.3 percent) also muzzle loaded.
- Interestingly when asked why they did not kill an antlerless deer during the 2012 season, 29.2 percent of 3A hunters said they “do not shoot antlerless deer” whereas only 7 percent of 3B hunters noted that. Through both seasons about 13.7 percent did not see an antlerless deer and an alarming 24.3 percent of 3B hunters said they “shot and missed the deer” (11.2 percent of 3A hunters said they missed).
- When asked why they did not kill an antlered deer, 20.8 percent of 3A hunters said: “It was legal, but not big enough.” (9.6 percent of 3B hunters said the same). On average, 37.6 percent of all survey respondents said they did not see a legal buck, 11.1 percent said the buck did not meet the minimum number of points, 10.3 percent said they were unsure if the deer was legal to shoot, and 8 percent said they shot and missed.

Perception and satisfaction of deer population

Respondents were asked about past, present and future deer densities and to indicate their satisfaction with the number of legal bucks, quality of bucks, total number of antlerless deer and total number of deer.

- 3A hunters (49.9 percent) were slightly more satisfied with their perception of the present deer densities than 3B hunters (47.7 percent). But even considering neutral respondents, more hunters than not are satisfied with zone 3 populations.
- On average 52.7 percent of all respondents were satisfied with the present number of antlerless deer (36.4 percent were not satisfied).
- Interestingly, 3B hunters seem to be more dissatisfied than 3A hunters with the number of legal bucks (3B=52.9 percent, 3A=45 percent) and the buck quality (3B=44.2 percent, 3A=34.7 percent). Perhaps explained by the next bullet point.
- More 3A hunters (65.2 percent) reported seeing a legal buck than 3B hunters (55.3 percent).

- Overall, respondents were more satisfied (45.9 percent) with the quality of legal bucks than not (38 percent), but more were dissatisfied (47.7 percent) with the total number of legal bucks than not (39.5 percent).
- Satisfaction varied greatly by where respondents hunted. 56 percent of those who hunted private land were satisfied by total deer numbers but only 28 percent of those who always hunt on public land were satisfied.
- Overall, 49 percent of respondents were satisfied with deer numbers seen during the 2012 firearms season.

This is the point in the article where things might get a little awkward, and I have no interest in fueling an already contentious subject, but the reality is that the perceptions we hunters have regarding deer densities are at best a semblance to fact. Let me explain. Up until now respondents in these surveys have reported what they do, what they see and how they feel about things. Basically, it's all subjective data that is specific to whoever takes the survey and at no point could these answers ever be questioned or confirmed. The survey also asked hunters about their perception as to deer population trends in their permit area, which is something that can be confirmed through aerial surveying. This is what they said:

- Throughout all surveyed zone 3 hunters, 46.1 percent felt that the population is less than it was five years ago with 11.2 percent believing the densities were up. 35.8 percent thought it was about the same. Maybe, but until all permit areas are flown, we will never know.
- On average, 8.5 percent of respondents from permit areas 346 and 349 thought the population was more than five years ago with a whopping 54 percent thinking it is less. 37.5 percent thought it was about the same. Here's the problem. Recent aerial surveys have confirmed an over 30 percent increase in density in both of those areas over the last five years. Ouch! More on that later.
- Some good news is that in those two permit areas (on average) 54.5 percent of respondents think the population is "about right" with 8.5 percent thinking it is too high and 35 percent still believing it is too low. When asked of a desired population trend, 35 percent of permit area 346 and 349 hunters wished for no change while 17 percent wanted it decreased and 48 percent wanted density trends to increase.
- Zone wide, 48.6 percent of respondents thought the population was "about right," with 6 percent thinking it is too high and 40.2 percent thinking densities are too low. Desired population trends through all of zone 3 were similar to those in permit areas 346 and 349.
- Significantly more public land hunters (58 percent) desire a population increase than those who hunt most or all of the time on private lands (45 percent). More private land hunters (40 percent) desire no change in deer densities than public land hunters (29 percent) with about 15 percent of both desiring a decrease.

Support for regulations to increase proportion of antlered deer

Respondents were asked about their support for regulations to increase the proportion of antlered deer and of changes to that support since the 2010 implementation of antler point restrictions.

- Throughout all survey respondents, 56 percent supported regulations to increase the proportion of antlered deer in southeast Minnesota. 22.1 percent opposed regulation with the rest undecided. Prior to 2010, support for regulation was at 46.4 percent with opposition at 33.6 percent.

- The majority of hunters (34.7 percent) noted an increase in mature bucks over the last five years while 18.2 percent believe buck numbers have decreased. 30.5 percent think mature buck numbers are about the same as five years ago.
- Since implementing point restrictions, 45.1 percent of respondents are more supportive of regulation and 30.7 percent are less supportive with 24.1 percent reporting no change. 40.1 percent of respondents noted an increase with hunting experience satisfaction since APRs, while 37.7 percent noted their hunting experience is less satisfying. 22.2 percent reported no change.
- Alternative management strategies like delaying the season, consolidating seasons etc. were opposed by the clear majority of respondents. In fact, 37.2 percent of respondents felt they would likely lose access to the property they currently hunt if 3A and 3B were combined.
- As no surprise, the majority of respondents unanimously agreed that hunting regulations should: increase hunting opportunity, encourage new hunters, lead to better public image of hunters, protect the interests of farmers, protect the forests, reduce crowding on public lands and not result in decreased access to private lands.
- Respondents also agreed that regulations are important to increase chances of taking a deer. The interesting part is that hunters placed a higher level of importance on taking a large antlered deer (57.3 percent) than taking an antlered deer (49.9 percent) or an antlerless deer (43.4 percent).
- Support for other regulations were as follows:
 - Keeping 3A at 9 days: (support = 71.3 percent, opposition = 17.4 percent)
 - No cross tagging bucks: (support = 42.4 percent, opposition = 30.9 percent)
 - Exempt youth from APR rules: (support = 69.4 percent, opposition = 18.1 percent)
 - To continue point restrictions: (support = 59.8 percent, opposition = 34 percent)

Ideal season structure

Respondents were asked seven questions addressing their perceptions of an “ideal” deer season structure for southeast Minnesota.

- The majority of both the 3A and 3B samples indicated that the ideal time would be early November (62.5 percent) and 2/3 of respondents preferred a 9-day season.
- Support for banning the cross-tagging of bucks was 43.3 percent, while 56.7 percent were not in favor of the ban. Interestingly, actual support for banning cross tagging of bucks was higher (42.4 percent) than not (30.9 percent). That may indicate hunters recognizing the difference between ideals and reality?
- The vast majority (67.5 percent) believed in having an MEA youth hunt in mid-October.
- When all respondents were asked specifically, “Should implement an antler point restriction to protect yearling bucks,” 67.5 percent agreed while 32.5 percent did not. (3A =71.3 percent) (3B = 60.3 percent)

DNR satisfaction and Agency trust

Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with several statements about the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.

- Twice as many hunters agreed than not with the statements that our DNR does a good job, is honest, is fair and can be trusted.
- When asked if our DNR was well trained, 47.5 percent of respondents agreed with only 8.9 percent disagreeing (43.7 percent remained neutral).

- Significantly more respondents agreed (42.5 percent) that the DNR listens to hunters than disagreed (22.9 percent).

Summary

The longer we debate deer management the more I wonder if answers are what anyone is even looking for. Biology aside, hunter and landowner perspectives and preferences toward the social aspects of deer management have been as clearly defined as possible through these two surveys yet some factions still refuse to acknowledge or respect what the majority of people have had to say. With a healthy deer herd in zone 3, managers are fortunate enough to be able to allow the stakeholders (hunters, landowners etc.) significant input into regulation and the way the herd is managed. We should feel privileged to have that luxury and honored to be asked for our opinion. But with participation in the deer management process comes responsibility in offering appropriate and realistic recommendations and not just idealistic dreams. We as landowners and hunters need to think foremost of the biological repercussions of our social hunting behavior and be sure that today's actions are in the best interest of our children's hunting future. When considering appropriate densities, we need to realize that over 85 percent of Minnesotans don't hunt but are equally impacted by the deer population. We need to be cognizant of the fact that the 40 we hunt is a very small portion of our permit area, and that regulations are set up to address issues for the entire area and not just what you see from your tree stand. And finally, we need to respect and accept what the majority of stakeholders prefer when deciding how to socially manage our deer herds.

Contrary to social media rumors throughout this state, our DNR has been very receptive to the opinions and wishes of zone 3 stakeholders. All too often what we hunters want from our hunting adventure is not in the best interest of biological herd management, so thankfully our deer managers keep us in check by denying some of those unrealistic requests. But as evidenced in zone 3, when the majority of hunters and landowners petition and support change to a basic deer management philosophy, like protecting antlered deer, the DNR reacted accordingly by researching and implementing what (again) the majority of hunters asked for, antler point restrictions. Are season structures perfect and is everyone happy? No, not by a longshot, but as evidenced by the results of these two surveys, changes in the deer management philosophy of southeast Minnesota have been undeniably fair in representing the wishes of the majority of us hunters and landowners.