

OHIO: BEST OF THE BEST?

ALL THINGS CONSIDERED, THE BUCKEYE STATE MIGHT BE A CUT ABOVE ALL OTHERS IN WHITETAIL MANAGEMENT. OHIO HAS BEEN DOING THINGS RIGHT FOR YEARS, AND IT SHOWS. ■ BY LES DAVENPORT

Many states could lay claim to the best deer management program in the country. My choice, however, might surprise you: Ohio. Skeptical? Consider the evidence.

QDMA's Take

The 2010 Whitetail Report by the Quality Deer Management Association ranked Midwestern states on meeting four imperative quality deer management principles during the 2008 deer season:

- Percentage of the state's wildlife management units that met goals.
- Percentage of harvested antlered bucks that were 1½ years old.
- Percentage of harvested antlered bucks that were 3½ or older.
- Percentage of antlerless deer in the total harvest.

The organization's top five picks, in descending order, were Kansas, Missouri, Indiana, Nebraska and Wisconsin.

Frankly, ranking whitetail management by state-supplied harvest data can be skewed, because some states use broad parameters and non-professional gathering methods. The error margins are wider than some deer managers will admit. For example, in my home state of Illinois, bow and gun harvests are reported via phone or computer. A 1½-year-old buck with antlers shorter than 3 inches — a spike — is reported as an antlerless deer. Ages of does are determined by measuring from

the back of a nostril to the front of the eye. I've killed old does with short muzzles and young does with long ones, so how can that be an accurate measure of age? Further, the ages of bucks killed in Illinois are determined by tine count and antler mass, so many older bucks with waning racks are categorized as younger than 3½. By using that method, strong 2-year-olds are frequently classified as 3½-year-olds, especially if excited hunters exaggerate the mass measurements.

In Wisconsin, any authorized sport shop or convenience store willing to post hunter kills can be a check station, except in chronic wasting disease zones. The state's check-in tag has only two categories: antlered buck (3 inches or longer) and antlerless. Indiana hunters must still use an authorized check station to register deer. Non-professional check-in clerks register bucks with antlers longer than 3 inches as antlered. Everything else is considered antlerless. The Indiana DNR wildlife biologists and trained assistants perform a random sampling of deer at specified locations during the opening weekend of gun season.

Missouri offers no-appearance check-ins by phone or computer. All age classes of does are categorized as antlerless, buck fawns are classified as button bucks, and antlered bucks of any age are reported by tine count. Iowa's method is the same, except all bucks are classified as antlered or button bucks. Both states offer a category for shed bucks.



Rodney Stumbo shot this 216-inch nontypical after a successful stalk with bow and arrow on Nov. 5, 2009.

When determining age structure and sex ratio within regional populations, most state harvest data exhibits little more than an approximation — and several are mediocre. Even with the blurred age-reporting parameters in Midwestern states, that data might mean something if it were accurately gathered by professionals.

However, wildlife budgets are so tweaked that many states have gone to no-appearance reporting systems that use hunter-presumed age and sex information. That replaces the wildlife biologists and their trained assistants, who are supposed to be paid by our license fees. Decreasing state budgets mean many deer managers are little more than figureheads who have nominal knowledge of deer herds.

Do Record-Book Statistics Conclude Good Deer Management?

If harvest data does not give true insight into good deer management, what does? Do the record books help determine who's doing things right? Do more mature bucks compute to regional herd health? You would be surprised how many deer hunters believe that's true.

If you combine Boone and Crockett and Pope and Young record-book totals for determining the best-managed Midwestern state, Wisconsin would win. It would be followed by Illinois, Iowa, Ohio and Missouri. Only two of those states made the top five in

QDMA's 2010 Midwest rating: Wisconsin and Missouri.

Here are the fallacies of believing that more record-book entries equates to good deer management.

First, state whitetail populations

mean Illinois is twice as well-managed as Wisconsin? Hardly.

Record-book entries are an accumulation of harvests from the past 10-plus years. Many formerly well-balanced regional herds are now strug-

DEER HUNTERS ARE NO LESS ACCOUNTABLE FOR A STATE'S HERD-HEALTH EQUATION THAN THE WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AGENCY. ONLY THROUGH BIPARTISANSHIP CAN WE PRESERVE OUR DEER HUNTING HERITAGE.

range widely in size throughout the Midwest. Wisconsin's herd estimate of 1.7 million is 4.25 times greater than Nebraska's high-end guesstimate. Therefore, you would need 4.25 times as many Nebraska record-book entries to fairly compare it to Wisconsin for trophy quality. If you perform that math, you'll discover that Nebraska moves up from 14th to sixth.

Using the same thinking, Illinois' estimated herd of 800,000 is half of Wisconsin's, but the Badger State barely outranks the Prairie State for total record-book entries. Does that

glings because of a decade or more of permit allocations that weren't in the best interest of whitetails. Ironically, the states with the most qualifying trophies — Wisconsin and Illinois — have had many troubling deer management problems recently. Wisconsin is starting to show signs of improvement, but Illinois' DNR just doesn't seem to get it.

Resident and nonresident Illinois hunters can kill two bucks without tagging a doe. Buck tags in the northern CWD zone are unlimited and require no prior doe kill. State sharpshooters have waylaid that area's herd to extremely low numbers. Proper deer management would never have allowed that zone to become overpopulated, which further fueled the disease. I've said this before, and it's spot on: If not for a handful of conscientious outfitters and thousands of principled deer hunters, Illinois' deer herd would be worse off than it is now. Ironically, Illinois has one of the most costly nonresident archery deer permits.

Reality of Sound Management

Would you agree that high-quality deer management satisfies these goals?

- Sustain a deer population that complements habitat, herd health and age structure.
- Maintain annual harvests that satisfy meat and trophy hunters.
- Control county- or zone-based populations with adequate consideration to agricultural profits and insurance rates.

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Ohio's unique and original Buckeye Big Buck Club was founded in 1957 to bring quality trophies to public attention. Among the most active BBBC members are the Jon and Lori Byers family, who have combined to register more than a dozen trophies in the program. Jon's best buck was this 211³/₈ nontypical from 2004. While Lori, below, shot her 152²/₈-inch buck while bow-hunting. To view more photos of Ohio bucks taken during recent seasons, visit www.buckeyebigbuckclub.org.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF JON & LORI BYERS

- Encourage hunter recruitment by creating harmony between wildlife managers and deer hunters of all weapon choices? This goal might be the most important for deer hunting's future.

If your answer to those is a firm no, let me tell you that one-sidedness is part of the problem with current deer management.

Deer management has no chance to become an exact science because of our changing environment, society's ever-evolving mentality about hunting and the lack of legislative concern for wildlife. That said, wildlife managers and deer hunters must constantly consider those five goals if preserving the resource and heritage of hunting are the ultimate objectives.

Yes, that's right. Deer hunters are no less accountable for a state's herd-health equation than the wildlife management agency. Only through bipartisanship can we preserve our deer hunting heritage. For many years, at least one Midwestern state seems to have been headed toward sound deer management. That state's Department of Natural Resources has listened to hunters from the beginning and has proactively

made changes that steadily improved the deer herd and sociability within the deer-hunter ranks.

Hands down, Ohio gets my best state deer management award. Here's my case.

First, few wildlife divisions have monitored their state's deer hunting population better than Ohio's. The agency has micro-managed the state's whitetails and hunter expectations. At its 2009 convention, QDMA recognized the Ohio Department of Natural Resources as its agency of the year.

"The ODNR does a fantastic job establishing hunting seasons to maintain the health and quality of their deer herd," said Kip Adams, QDMA's director of education and outreach in the Northern Region. "As the department's deer project leader, Mike Tonkovich routinely interacts with the state's sportsmen and women to keep them informed of issues. Mike's work demonstrates that by being on top of the state's concerns, an agency can become a perfect partner of both the public and the wildlife entrusted to them."

Critical Components

QDMA noted two critical examples of Ohio's continuing deer program improvements. The first was making a reduced-cost permit available during archery season. That resulted in the harvest of more antlerless deer earlier in the season and the harvest of fewer bucks than the previous year. The second was that Ohio offered numerous controlled deer hunts, including ones designated for youth, women and people with mobility impairments. The special hunts also provided access to hunting land, which is one of the biggest inhibitors for recruiting new hunters.

Tonkovich said the wildlife division's philosophy of effectively managing its deer herd goes into its past. As an observer for 40-plus years, it seems the Buckeye State's deer managers long ago forecast the problems most whitetail herds are currently experiencing.

Ohio implemented crossbow hunting during the 1976 archery season, and it became concurrent with vertical bows in 1982. That early acceptance of the crossbow avoided two major dilemmas: fighting an increasing group of vertical bow-hunters who disapprove of sharing the woods with crossbow hunters, and having fewer hunters to keep the herd in check because crossbow use is prohibited.

For more than three decades, Ohio has been the go-to state for others considering legalizing crossbows. Tonkovich regularly receives calls asking about the effect of crossbows on the deer program.

"That's a \$64,000 question," he said.

Tonkovich admits it's tough to answer that with exactness. Though he sends charts and statistics to other state agencies, his best answer is, "Why withhold a hunter's weapon choice?"

"Hunter weapon choice is needed in today's busy world," he said.

Anything that keeps deer hunters engaged in the sport will help recruitment in our shrinking ranks. That includes liberal access to hunter safety courses, ease of obtaining a permit and simplicity of checking in a deer.

"We're losing deer hunters faster than we can create them," Tonkovich said. "Allowing the crossbow promotes hunting with youths, the elderly, women and the handicapped during liberal archery seasons."

As hunter numbers decrease, he said,

so does wildlife funding, which reduces wildlife services. When given three to four months to fill a tag with a weapon that requires less practice, hunters with limited time are more likely to stick with the sport or try it for the first time.

Tonkovich, an avid bow-hunter, spoke at the Archery Trade Association Summit last December and provided data that demonstrated the benefits of crossbows. Ohio has set record bow harvests 10 of the past 11 years.

"Why would you enter a single horse in the race when the stakes are so high?" he asked ATA members.

4) The Ohio Branch of QDMA promoted quality deer management in the state's Amish community, instilling good harvest practices in much of the state's deer hunting population.

5) The Buckeye Big Buck Club was formed in 1957. Its goals are to encourage trophy hunting by Ohio hunters, foster wise management of the valuable resource, establish and maintain a permanent record of Ohio's trophy deer taken in fair chase, and promote a positive relationship between hunters and landowners.

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— MIKE TONKOVICH, OHIO DEER PROJECT LEADER

The bottom line is that if vertical bow-hunters refuse to share the woods with crossbow hunters, they will soon be sharing it with sharpshooters.

More Elements

There's a long list of things Ohio's DNR and deer hunters are doing right. Here are some highlights:

1. Residents and nonresidents are allowed only one buck. That encourages avid deer hunters to kill more does.

2. The firearms seasons are held after the rut, so fewer mature bucks are killed by hunters who would otherwise be satisfied with an antlerless deer.

3. During the firearms season, 25 check stations across the state are managed by trained DNR personnel to gather accurate samplings, which provide insight into adult buck mortality, adult sex ratios, fawn ratio per adult doe harvested and overall age structure within regional and statewide deer populations. About 6,000 to 8,000 deer are documented each season. Antler measurements taken from bucks, including yearlings, provide an annual snapshot of the relative condition of Ohio's deer herd.

ing population is a direct reflection of its deer managers," Tonkovich said. "Our goal is to provide enough deer to hunt and enjoy, but not so many that they cause undue economic hardship. I believe the limited success that our agency's deer program has enjoyed is due entirely to the very productive, open relationship that we have with our hunting public. By and large, our hunters have always supported us, and we in turn have always been up front with them. Our hunters know us from check stations, talks and open houses. They know we hunt deer, too, but at the same time understand that we work for all Ohioans. When we make mistakes, we tell them. They trust us, and they let us do our job. And for that reason, I personally wouldn't trade our hunters for anyone's."

I rest my case.

— D&DH Field Editor Les Davenport is a veteran whitetail hunter from Illinois.

