**Week 22- Gun Deer Hunting Season- One of Wisconsin’s Greatest Conservation Activities**

**Conservation Corner**

***Conservation Corner is a weekly article produced by the Forest County Land Conservation-Land Information Department. For more information contact Al Murray, County Conservationist-Land Information/GIS Director at 715-478-1387 or by e-mail at*** [***lcc@co.forest.wi.us***](mailto:lcc@co.forest.wi.us)***.***

Saturday, November 17th will mark the start of the Wisconsin gun deer season. This deer season will mark 45 years of “deer season” for me, having started going into the woods with my father at the ripe old age of 5. For many, deer season and deer camp is the primary force that introduces them to the “outdoor” world and the thousands of hours of time spent observing deer and more often than not, the many other wildlife species which frequent deer hunting areas.

To be successful, deer season means getting cold in spite of your ability to stay where it is warm. Deer season means going out before dark to get to your destination and staying through the day until it is dark again. Deer season builds teamwork for those that help others and those who prefer to “drive” deer. Most importantly, deer season means memories, memories of friends and family doing a common activity with a common goal and putting in the time and effort it takes to be successful.

Why do we hunt deer? In early times, venison was a primary source of meat for settlers of Forest County. To some, venison is still a primary food that they depend on. Many people in this world hunt to provide food to survive.

Many non-hunters and anti-hunting groups view hunting as purely “a sport” that is cruel and in-humane. In fact, humans are part of the ecosystem and they are an “apex” predator. In Wisconsin, deer are prey for many predators including humans, wolves, bear, coyote, bobcat, and the occasional cougar. They are secondary food sources by scavenging for many species including the bald eagle, crows, ravens, and many bird species.

Deer are a critical food source for many species. Some studies on black bear show that over 90% of bear scat has a component of deer hair when the bears leave their dens in the spring. It is also noted that bear den sites are commonly found in areas that deer frequent for birth of fawns. It is assumed that bears, over time, have evolved to den in areas where spring fawns provide for critical food sources.

Many people do not understand that while deer are a critical food source to many species, the number of deer that an area can sustain is limited based upon the amount of browse available to the deer population. Browse availability along with winter thermal cover provide the “carrying capacity” of a piece of land.

Deer browse and what deer eat varies throughout the year. In Forest County, spring into summer brings grasses and succulent plants which provide a great amount of food for deer during these times. Fall brings an end to summer browse the deer progress to utilizing woody twigs as their major food source. Woody twigs are produced by shrubs and young tree seedlings. Woody twig availability is the limiting factor for deer in Forest County because they provide critical food sources during the winter, when survival for deer is difficult.

The amount of woody twigs available for deer is dependent upon the amount of light which reaches the ground or forest floor. Light to the ground in a forest is controlled by natural components including wind, disease, and fire and man-made components including development of openings and roads or by forest management including timber harvesting. Timber harvesting debris including tops and limbs, especially in the winter months, provides extra sources of deer browse.

National Forest cover over 50% of the land in Forest County. Over the last 20-40 years, timber harvesting of National Forest Lands in Forest County has changed to promote larger areas with older growth forest identified as the preferred USFS future condition goals. This change in management increases the shade on the forest floor. This increase in shade has resulted in loss of twig production across the landscape and has resulted in a lower “carrying capacity” for deer in a large part Forest County. The reduced management activity on the National Forest has resulted in increased over-browsing of tree species in Forest County, including private lands. Reduced twig production in the forest is also likely the reason that deer frequent highway and road openings, increasing the car deer collisions.

Deer hunting is utilized by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to reduce deer populations to goals established to meet the “carrying capacity” of the lands in each management unit. Deer hunting is a conservation activity to manage not only the deer population but also to protect the forest that deer affect.

Just as a note, in Forest County we can continue to accept goals of future forest conditions which require lower deer populations to meet goals. We as hunters could become active to promote change in forest management to establish USFS forest management goals to promote higher age class diversity which will provide additional deer browse and reduce negative effects of high deer populations on the forest. This change would allow for increased deer populations.

Deer hunting brings a force of over 300,000 conservation participants (hunters) to the woods each year. Deer hunting is truly Wisconsin’s greatest conservation activity. As a deer hunter what would you like to see for the future, become active and promote forest management to increase deer numbers of forested areas!