



Creating a Habitat for **DEER**

White-tailed deer live in every county in Michigan and use many different habitats across the state. Their ability to use a variety of habitats was one of the factors that allowed the deer herd to grow from a half million animals in 1972 to nearly two million in 1989. To outdoor enthusiasts who watch or hunt deer, this is exciting. However, to others, deer are considered to be a management problem. For instance, many areas of the state are overpopulated with white-tailed deer and for some farmers, fruit growers, and rural landowners, high numbers of white-tails pose an economic problem. They may also have a tremendous negative impact on our plant communities. Therefore, as deer populations increase, there is an inevitable result of habitat deterioration, lowered deer production and health, and frequent deer die-off. Too many deer also make for unsafe driving conditions. Thus, consider these negative impacts before deciding to manage for deer. Remember that your decisions will affect not only yourself, but also your neighbors. To effectively manage the entire population of white-tailed deer in your area, you would need 600 to 3000 acres. However, if you would like to attract deer to your area you can do this with a minimum of 10 to 20 acres. The number of deer in an area depends on the kind and quality of habitat available, and the rate of deer loss. Currently, there is an annual surplus of deer because there is a large amount of quality habitat.

Since adult deer have few natural predators, harvesting deer through hunting helps to keep the herd in balance. A deer herd can increase rapidly, therefore, it is necessary to remove at least one-quarter of the deer herd each year to maintain a healthy and stable population. In most cases, half of these deer are antlerless. In addition, managing mature forests and discouraging fragmentation will help control or decrease deer numbers in your area. If deer are a problem, you may want to consider these management options. You may also wish to consult with a wildlife biologist who can provide guidance with this problem.

Deer Habitat

Deer thrive best in areas with young forests and brush where they feed on buds, branches, fresh grass, and green leaves that are close to the ground. In an older forest, these resources are not within their reach. If a forest stand is too old to support deer, quality habitat can be created by logging and developing forest openings. If existing habitat is fields, croplands, marshes, or other young cover types, deer habitat improvement may involve the planting of grasses, trees, shrubs, or annual food plots.

It is important to note that habitat needs for whitetails vary by season and area of the state. Deer, in different parts of Michigan, use different types of cover. In northern Michigan, deer may use a conifer swamp during cold winter days and venture out to feed on brush and young trees during milder days. Farmland deer may bed in woodlots, protect their fawns in cattail marshes, and feed in corn fields. Suburban deer may bed in cemeteries, graze on golf courses, and seek cover on a brushy hillside behind a shopping center.

Spring and Summer

When spring arrives, deer are looking for green growth to help them recover from limited and low-quality winter food. During spring and summer, it is important to have fields that green up early. They favor early growing grasses and legumes such as Canada wild-rye, June grass, orchard grass, blue grass, timothy, and clovers like medium-red, alsike, and ladino. Because of the lower nutrient value of winter foods, it is important for does to increase their nutrient intake in spring to prepare for fawning. Mineral blocks placed near field edges can be beneficial only if quality spring food is available.

During summer, food is much more abundant than at other times of the year. Summer foods include leaves of select trees and shrubs such as aspen, red maple, white ash, blackberries, dogwoods and sassafras. Important grasses for food include orchard grass, timothy, blue grass, redtop, wheat, and oats. Deer also eat agricultural crops of corn, soybeans, buckwheat, clovers, and alfalfa. Common ragweed, lamb's quarter, jewelweed, orchids, garden vegetables, and ornamentals are also heavily grazed.

Autumn

The major activity for deer in autumn is breeding. During this time deer move considerable distances as part of their breeding behavior and in response to changes in food supplies. Autumn nutrition is important to deer since their physical condition as they approach winter has a strong bearing on their survival. During this period, deer must build fat reserves to help them survive. Fall foods must be abundant and high in nutritional value. Important foods include acorns, beech nuts, crabapples, maple and dogwood leaves, willow, and brambles. Preferred agricultural crops include corn, soybeans, apples, and fall-planted grains such as wheat.

Vegetative cover used during autumn is similar to that used during summer months. Open areas are used during the night, while in daytime brushy areas are preferred. Standing corn is not only a high quality food source, but is also often used during the fall as escape cover, as well as travel and resting sites. Quality fall cover includes cattail swales, standing corn, switchgrass fields, and plantations of young pines.

Winter

Winter is the most critical season of the year. Deer mortality can be excessive if food and thermal cover are inadequate. Winter losses in local areas can range from as low as five percent in quality food areas to 50 percent where food resources are severely restricted. Winter mortality depends on winter severity, and quality and quantity of available food. During winter, protection from the cold and wind is important. Cover can be provided by hardwood and conifer swamps, brushy areas, and dense switchgrass or pines. Swamp conifers and hemlock are important because they help slow the wind and serve as thermal cover. Three to 10 acre dense plantations of spruce or Jack pine also provide beneficial winter cover.

Important winter food sources include white pine, white cedar, red maple, yellow birch, dogwood, viburnum, sumac, and aspen. Since the major food during this season is woody browse, branches, buds, and leaves must be within reach to provide benefits. These foods are abundant in wooded areas that have had recent logging activity.

Deer movements during the winter months decrease and they may spend most of their time near winter cover. It is important that they find food within one-quarter mile of this cover. In areas of adequate soil quality and growing season length, agricultural crops planted near winter cover are of considerable value.