



Stage set for big firearm deer hunt

by Lee Keck

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Area deer hunters are sighting-in shotguns, gathering hunting gear and anxiously preparing for the biggest event on the Illinois hunting calendar - the annual season opener of the firearm deer hunt. The first segment (three days) of the seven-day hunt begins Nov. 17 in Illinois counties open to firearm deer hunting.

According to biologists, local hunters can look forward to another superb deer season. Data suggests that local hunters should find plenty of whitetails when the season opens on Friday.

The reports indicate that whitetail deer numbers remain good throughout the entire state, particularly here in the west-central portion of Illinois. Most experts feel there is no reason to expect anything less than an excellent firearm deer season.

Biologists say the statewide deer population has remained relatively stable the past few years. In many cases, the IDNR permit office uses the previous year's permit sales as a guideline for establishing a ceiling on the number of available county and special hunt area firearm permits. Based upon the current information, experts look for this year's statewide firearm harvest to total somewhere between 95,000 and 110,00 whitetails. Certain counties are likely see some increase or decrease in total harvest, and much of that can be attributed to weather.

"Though slow in getting started, most all of the corn is expected to be removed from the fields by the season opener," said retired area wildlife biologist Deck Major. "Locally, the corn harvest is well underway."

As always, hunting success always boils down to three major factors - the corn harvest, number of permits sold and the weather.

And, the outlook appears exceptionally bright for local hunters. Deer numbers remain good throughout this portion of the state.

Things are looking very good for hunters in our local counties (including Calhoun, Greene, Jersey, Macoupin, Madison and Morgan counties). Most of the crops are being removed and our local deer populations are healthy and in excellent shape."

Best of all, it appears that the rut will be in full swing when hunters head to their stands on next month. This, may actually prove beneficial to hunters participating in the firearm season.

According to wildlife biologists, the timing (of the rut) could prove almost perfect for the shotgun hunt. Now, the only concern is weather during the first three days of the season.

Wet, cold and windy weather can reduce the number of hunters in the field and the amount of time they are willing to hunt. The majority of the deer harvest always occurs during the first three days of the annual hunt. In addition, unsuccessful young hunters in the special October Youth Deer Hunt may also hunt during this segment of the season.

Though deer populations are still well short of the state's carrying capacity, other important issues like landowner tolerance must also be considered when managing whitetail numbers. White-tailed deer often cause significant damage to crops, orchards and nurseries.

Relatively few full-season either-sex permits were available when over-the-counter sales began for the remaining permits on Oct. 18. Most counties did have a limited number of permits available.

By this time, however, most active firearm hunters had already purchased one or two. Past experience shows that relatively few Illinois firearm deer hunters purchase more than two permits.

The latest results from the archery season also indicate good numbers of deer await firearm hunters.

Through the end of the day on Oct. 9, the archery harvest stood at 5,281 deer. This was down only slightly from the 5,413 during the same period last year.

At that point, the total harvest of female deer (does) occupied some 70 percent of the total. However, the percentage of bucks is certain to climb as the rut approaches.

Wildlife experts expect a buck-dominated harvest to be the rule for the two- to three-weeks prior to the the firearm season getting underway.

Current results for local counties show Calhoun County archers bagging 34 deer, down from 66 last year. The Madison County archery harvest stands at 74, some 12 less than in 2016. Greene County hunters harvested 64 - one more than the same period a year ago. Archers in Macoupin County have recorded 81 whitetails - some five fewer, while Morgan County hunters tagged 51 deer, down by four from last year.

The archery harvest in Jersey County through Oct. 9 was 35, compared to 43 a year ago. Hunters in Montgomery County had bagged 61 whitetails, down by 14 from 2017.

As in the past, Illinois shotgun hunters will have two long weekends to pursue deer. The first half of the season is scheduled for Nov. 17-19. The season reopens Nov. 30 and continues through Dec. 3. Hunters are permitted to harvest one deer per permit.

The archery deer season opened Oct. 1 and continues through January 14. In most Illinois counties, the archery season temporarily closes during both segments of the firearm deer hunt.