

Wildlife & Nature
When Deer Disappear

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Many gun hunters are convinced that deer watch the calendar as closely as we do, that deer are as keenly aware of the opening day of the hunting season as we are.

In autumn, and perhaps even in the summer, hunters scout out their hunting territories and often see lots of deer. Hunters will come back to check on the deer, their movements, their patterns, their food sources, etc. But when opening day arrives, it's a different ball game. The deer disappear. It's only logical. The deer are reacting to hunting pressure.

For 21 years I was chief gamekeeper for the Coventry Hunt Club. Totaling 6,800 acres, it was the largest private hunt club in New Jersey. I know those acres intimately because I walked them, I posted their borders, I patrolled them, and I hunted them. Based on personal observations and frequent nighttime spotlighting censuses, I estimated that we had 300 to 400 deer on the property, or about 30 deer to the square mile. That was far too many deer for the land to support, but that was before we were allowed to hunt does.

The land was bordered on the west by the Delaware River and on the east by the Blue Ridge section of the Appalachian Mountains. Only one road ran the full length of the valley. A much shorter second road paralleled the main road at the northern end of the property. Almost half of the length of the property between the main road and the river contained extremely productive cornfields. Most of our deer would come down from the mountains to feed on the corn every afternoon and then retire to the nearby knolls in the early morning to spend the day. They didn't go up on the mountain (except in late September to feed upon the acorns) because they didn't have to. Only 63 people lived in the entire township, with only about forty on the area embraced by the club. It was a quiet, peaceful, tranquil area.

Until deer season.

During deer season the club tried to reduce the herd by allowing up to 200 hunters in the valley. That worked out to about one hunter every 34 acres. Counting the no-hunting areas around the homes, around the three camps, and on the one refuge, which deducted perhaps 500 acres, it still worked out to one hunter every 31 acres. That's still a lot of land per person. And that is assuming that the hunters were spread out all over the land which, of course, they weren't.

All year long, traffic along the main road was minimal. On opening day, in addition to the regular traffic, an additional 100 cars, more or less, would suddenly pile into the valley. The tremendous increase in traffic noise, the slamming of car doors, the loud talking and bantering, and the night-piercing flashlights scared the living bejesus out of the deer, and they promptly took off for the top of the mountain or the refuge. Those deer didn't need a calendar--they were reacting to hunting pressure. Most successful hunters quietly slipped into the mountain before the hordes arrived, and were in position to intercept the deer on their way to the top.

Deer are no different than we are. If at all possible, they follow trails to the top. So knowledgeable hunters use the same stands year after year, because deer use the same trails. Then, by driving the ridges, hunters can push some of the deer back down to the lowland.

Our buckshot gun season used to be six days long, starting on a Monday morning. Monday saw the heaviest hunting pressure. Tuesday had less than one-half the pressure of Monday. Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday mornings were usually very quiet, but the action would pick up on Friday afternoon. Saturday was about as busy as Monday, except that hunters who had already taken their bucks were not there.

On Monday night none of the deer came off the mountain to feed. They stayed hidden in the rhododendron swamps during daylight

hours and fed on the mountain at night. On Tuesday and Wednesday nights some deer would sneak into the cornfields about 9 p.m. to feed, but they would move back after midnight. On Thursday some of the deer were bold enough to come down at dusk. The increased hunting pressure on Friday and Saturday kept all the deer on the mountain, and it wasn't until midweek, when there was no pressure at all, that they resumed pre-hunt patterns.

Bow hunting was not nearly as popular then as it is now, and there were only 30 to 35 bowhunters in the club. The bowhunters were scattered more widely, came and went more quietly, and, in general, did not disturb the deer to any noticeable extent.

Al Hofacker and his associates at Deer and Deer Hunting corroborated my observations in an in-depth study for that magazine in 1983. Hunters participating in the survey logged a grand total of 33,027 hours of field observations. They turned up much good factual data, but of interest here is the fact that bowhunters saw nearly three times as many deer as did gun hunters. Actually, bowhunters observed 35.14 deer per 100 hours in the field while gun hunters saw only 17.59 deer per 100 hours. Which all means that although bowhunters spent more time in the field, they disturbed the deer far less and they saw more deer, because the deer were not feeling hunting pressure.

I mentioned that a number of deer retired to our one refuge at the first disturbance. I must also mention that many deer never, or very seldom, left the refuge, in which there was a 60- to 70-acre piece of grassland and woodland in the center of two very long cornfields. The woodland patch was about 50 feet higher than the lower cornfield, so any deer lying in the woods could watch the entire field below. There was no reason for deer to leave this area, but some did anyway.

Kathy Etling, in a recent issue of Outdoor Life, reported on a research project just completed by the Missouri Department of Conservation dealing with deer usage on a refuge. Using telemetry, they followed the activity of 24 deer over a two-year period. They

found that bucks traveled an average of five miles a day before hunting season, but cut it to four miles per day during hunting season.

It has long been known that more deer escape by lying still and letting a hunter walk by them than by running off. Depending on the amount of pressure, bucks might only move under the cover of darkness. And I am firmly convinced that the really big trophy bucks I only move in the dark, even during the rut, whether it is hunting season or not. Those big bucks avoid encountering humans at any time, and they won't move during the day unless pushed.

The researchers found that bucks whose home range included parts of a refuge would move into the refuge at the first sign of disturbance, leaving it only at night. The big difference with our bucks is that those who entered the refuge usually stayed there for the week. I must also add that our hunting season opened between December 5 and 12, so the bulk of the breeding season was over and there was little reason for them to leave the safety of the refuge.

The Missouri study concluded that most deer stayed in their home range areas, particularly the does. That is to be expected, because does have an average home range of only one to two square miles. If the does' range does not include part of a refuge, they won't even know that it's there. And the last thing a deer wants to do is leave the familiarity of its home range. If a deer is driven from its home range during the daytime, you can bet it will return after dark. Only on its home range does a deer feel safe. And it is safer there, despite hunting pressure, because it intimately knows the areas in which it can hide.

I have always said that you don't drive deer, you just stir them up. They go where they want to. Most deer can't be driven from their home range. They stay hidden, allowing drivers to walk by. Or they will wait until the last moment and run back through the drivers.

I have always preferred to stand hunt for deer. But I believe silent drivers have the best success. When drivers make a lot of

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noise, deer know exactly where the drivers are.

How do deer respond to hunting pressure? By doing whatever it takes to avoid hunters.