



ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY DAN VAN SCHAIK

EVALUATING WINTER FORAGES

GREEN OPENINGS "Early greens" planted in forest openings are highly beneficial to all wildlife during winter.

After hunting season has ended, it's easy to put wildlife management on the back burner until spring arrives. Throughout preceding months, we work very hard to encourage wildlife visitation and improve habitat on our properties but often neglect such programs in the dead of winter. Ironically, it is during this time that wild birds and animals are most stressed. The mid to late winter period should be a time of recuperation for those strong enough to survive hunting pressure, breeding activities, extreme weather and food shortages. In addition to overcoming cold season energy deficits, wildlife species must now prepare for spring breeding and/or birthing by stockpiling important nutrients.

White-tailed deer struggle to survive late winter in most regions. By now,

agricultural crop residue and hardwood mast are long gone. Nutritionally rich forbs, buds and shoots won't be back until spring. Most grasses have retreated to the dormant stage and tender leaves are absent from shrubs and bushes.

On open ranges, hunting pressure and weather conditions have probably pushed the animals well beyond their familiar territories. Bred does are reassembling and post-rut bucks are forming bachelor groups. In colder regions, deer "herd up" after breeding season in order to conserve energy and fight off predation (safety in numbers). Unfortunately, congregating in groups accelerates forage requirements within more concentrated areas and can soon lead to mass depletion.

On ranches or leases that combine

livestock grazing with intense deer management, late winter is more critical. Deer compete with goats for many browse plants and for mast. They compete with sheep for forbs and succulent grasses. Although there is less forage competition between deer and cattle because of wider differences in preferred foods, cattle trample more plants than smaller grazers. When forage utilization increases, competition becomes more intense as each kind of grazing animal is forced to consume plants that are normally less attractive. As each layer of preferred ground vegetation is depleted, animals browse higher foliage within maximum reach. This usually results in a distinctive vertical "browse line" that indicates overgrazing within high-density populations. In overstocked conditions, com-



WINTER FOOD PLOT & FEEDERS Stands out within depleted winter environment.



FEEDERS-FOOD STRIPS Offers variety of forages in close proximity.

petition between *all* grazing animals for the same forage plants is almost certain. When competition becomes severe, deer will always lose out.

Whitetails prefer hardwood mast, forbs, and the fresh green growth of woody plants. An adult deer will utilize 5 to 6 pounds of total forage per day. Formal food preference studies in Texas and Oklahoma yielded overall forage

class uses of: 44% forbs, 42% browse (10% of browse is acorns), 13% grasses and 1% others. Native browse that reflects this usage pattern includes woody plants that are most utilized from January through March. Coma, granjeno, acacia and prickly pear pads are eaten this time of year in South Texas, while cedar elm, willow, live oak and sumac are browsed further north.

Well beyond dietary considerations is the fact that these deer have just completed a very strenuous two-month breeding/rutting season. From our experience with captive whitetails that are offered unlimited high-power rations (adequate nutrition is not an issue), it is evident that simply surviving rut behavior is a major accomplishment for any breeding age buck. Rut-

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ting activity, with all of its hormonal and physical implications, is the hardest thing that can happen to a wild deer. Aside from fatal wounds and battle scars, more deer die from pure exhaustion than most realize. Latest telemetry studies reveal bucks in rut will double normal distance traveled each day while greatly restricting time spent feeding. As much as 80% of all non-hunting mortality in mature bucks occurs from December through March. Late winter should be a time for bucks to repair wounds, replace energy deficits and prepare for upcoming antler growth.

All considered, we quickly realize impact of this critical time to our total deer management program; what can we do to make it easier?

Eliminating disturbance to recovering bucks during post-rut period will reduce mortalities. Provide “safe ha-

ven” by avoiding excessive activity in management pastures with heavy cover. Plan brush control, road building/maintenance or livestock rotations away from designated refuge areas. This is the time to hit predators hardest; they are also in midwinter food crunch and more likely to fall victim to control methods.

Necessity for supplemental nutrition is most evident in white-tailed deer. Deer require 16% to 22% protein diet and greatest natural protein is available in developing tips of green vegetation. Research has clearly demonstrated that many species of woody plants and forbs common to Texas provide average CP and TDN that meets or exceeds summertime requirements of deer. Obviously, this is no problem during warm growing seasons but after winter depletion, deer need supplemental dry feed and green food plots.

When targeting superior antler production on bucks, quantity and quality of browse available in *previous winter season* is most important to annual antler growth. Likewise, for does nearing end of gestation and preparing for summer lactation, ready access to critical nutrients in winter is imperative. Because vitamins, minerals and other micronutrients are most easily assimilated from fresh greens, it is very important to provide these deer with a green cover crop that is winter hardy in addition to dry feed. This requirement for bucks and does during post-winter period is known as “early greens”.

Most biologists agree that 15-20% of total land acres should be in food plots/feed stations in order to obtain maximum benefit for wildlife production within a defined management area. Select locations that are well connected to other primary components of the



FOOD PLOT-FEED STATION Offers a combination of green forage with dry feeds.



FOOD PLOT-COVER Rectangular food plots near accessible cover work best.

habitat. When choosing what to plant, avoid commercial mixes that advertise spreading by ATV on “scratched” soil, in spotty locations, as they rarely meet your satisfaction. Proven agricultural forage crops and seed producers that do well in your area are always best performers. In cold seasons, a good small grain mix will include wheat, rye, and oats as they have different growth curves, are highly palatable, and are winter hardy.

This doesn't mean we should minimize value of your native vegetation in a normal weather year. After all, if it has stood the test of time by surviving the elements, then it is worth some management effort. You would be surprised how dramatically natives respond to 250-300 pounds/acre of a medium class granular fertilizer (17-17-17). Documented studies demonstrate that deer and other wildlife prefer fertilized plants to unfertilized.

There are many environmental variables contributing to success or failure of native plant communities and food plots, but green vegetation is only part of nutritional equation. The solution is a sensible balance between improved native habitat, well-planned food plots, and all of the supplemental dry feed they can eat. This is best ac-

complished by developing year-round “feeding stations” that combine winter forage crops within native vegetation and permanent free choice feeders—all in close proximity to cover and water sources. This consolidation of forages within ample habitat provides a continuous and dependable food supply throughout the year. With each new generation, deer and other wildlife learn to incorporate feeding stations into daily routines and their movement becomes much more predictable.

In conclusion, we must recognize importance of supplemental feed sources with protected refuge for deer and all wildlife in winter. Intense trophy deer management means going way beyond the capability of native nutrition within natural environment. This is no time to neglect wildlife management duties, but in fact, give them more attention. All of our brush control, habitat improvement and summer food plot efforts are useless if deer can't make it through late winter.

On low-fenced ranges, I view mid-winter as greatest opportunity to attract deer in from adjacent properties and reshuffle population characteristics. In high-fenced enclosures, I view this season as an opportunity to improve deer quality for next summer. •



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