

2020-2021 Deer Season Report

Fort Benning, Georgia

Prepared by: Natural Resources Management Branch, AMIM-BEP-EN

23 March 2021

Harvest

Post-wide Quality Deer Management (QDM) continues to facilitate the primary objective of ensuring a healthy and sustainable population of white-tailed deer for all future generations of hunters to pursue. Data collected prior to and during this sixth consecutive season of Post-wide QDM continues to indicate that QDM is the solution for achieving the primary objective.

Reported harvest of 1,206 deer this season is down 2.2% from the 10 year average harvest. Total buck harvest of 484 increased 1.8% over the 10 year average, and the doe harvest of 722 decreased by 5.3% from the 10 year average. This season yielded a 1.49:1 doe to buck harvest ratio, which is more balanced than the average Pre-QDM ratios of around 2:1.

Average total deer harvest across the Installation this season was 4.9 deer/sq.mi. Average doe harvest was 2.9 does/sq.mi while average buck harvest was 2.0 bucks/sq. mi. These numbers are slightly lower than the exceptionally high per square mile harvests observed in 2019. The relatively consistent harvest rates over the past 10 years suggest that the deer herd is able to sustain the current level of harvest. Harvest numbers across age classes also appear to be stable.

Cantonment Area Archery Hunt

A total of 96 participants successfully qualified and harvested 50 deer (30 does and 20 bucks). Total harvest was up 47% compared to the 2019-20 season. Doe harvest increased from 21 last season to 30 this season. Buck harvest increased from 15 last season to 20 this season. Harvest levels seem to indicate that the deer density is remaining consistent in the area. It will be important to continue to track Cantonment Area deer to vehicle collisions to attempt to determine if this initiative is effectively lowering deer density in this area. If reduced deer density is not sustained, deer to vehicle collisions are likely to increase.

Discussion/Summary/Conclusion

Due to COVID19 and the subsequent Installation restrictions, no deer check stations were conducted during the 2020-2021 deer season. Without deer check station data, many analyses examined each year are not available for this report. The Natural Resources Management Branch will resume scheduled mandatory deer check stations during the 2021-2022 deer season to monitor the population status of Fort Benning's deer herd.

With respect to white-tailed deer management on Fort Benning, the most important consideration is ensuring sustainable hunting opportunities remain available for all future generations to enjoy. In order to ensure this objective is met, data must be collected. Application of an adaptive management approach must be based on

a collective and collaborative analysis of the data collected and appropriate considerations for the opinions and desires of users.

One important metric which relates to sustainability is harvest. Overharvest can and has led to declining deer populations on other installations and in other regions and states. Ensuring the Fort Benning hunting community does not overharvest deer remains a primary emphasis in efforts to avoid undermining the primary objective. Analysis of annual data and comparisons against historical trends continues to suggest that overharvest has not and should not be an issue with Fort Benning's QDM strategies as long as adequate recruitment rates are maintained, the hunting population does not increase significantly, and no severe disease outbreaks or other unanticipated excessive mortalities occur. Based on current conditions, maintaining total deer harvest levels below six deer per square mile and doe harvest levels below four does per square mile should be the goal for sustaining current deer densities.

Sex ratios need to continue to be monitored to ensure sufficient does are available to facilitate recruitment. Based on current information, doe density does not appear to be a limiting factor as long as harvest levels remain within the ranges addressed above. Based on current conditions, maintaining doe to buck ratios between 1:1 and 2:1 should be the goal for sustaining densities.

The modern challenges (disease, potential for overharvest, fawn predation, etc.) of managing white-tailed deer demands a commitment to adequately collect and analyze data and requires a willingness to adjust accordingly and adaptively manage as necessary. Transition to the iSportsman system has dramatically improved the quality and reliability of hunter reported harvest data. Analysis of harvest data, pre-season population surveys, and collection of biological data continues to suggest there is not a need to make major adjustments to the harvest and management strategies currently in place on Fort Benning.