

HUNTING & FISHING

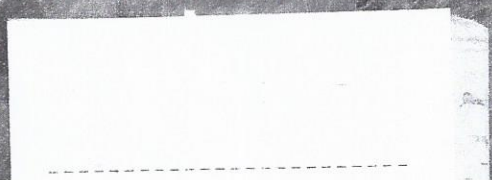
OCTOBER 1953

25 CENTS

**WHITETAIL
DILEMMA!**

**Startling Report on
Deer Management**

NEW HUNTING LAWS



Whitetail dilemma

A startling report on deer management by the Chief of the U. S. Fish and Wildlife's Game Management Division

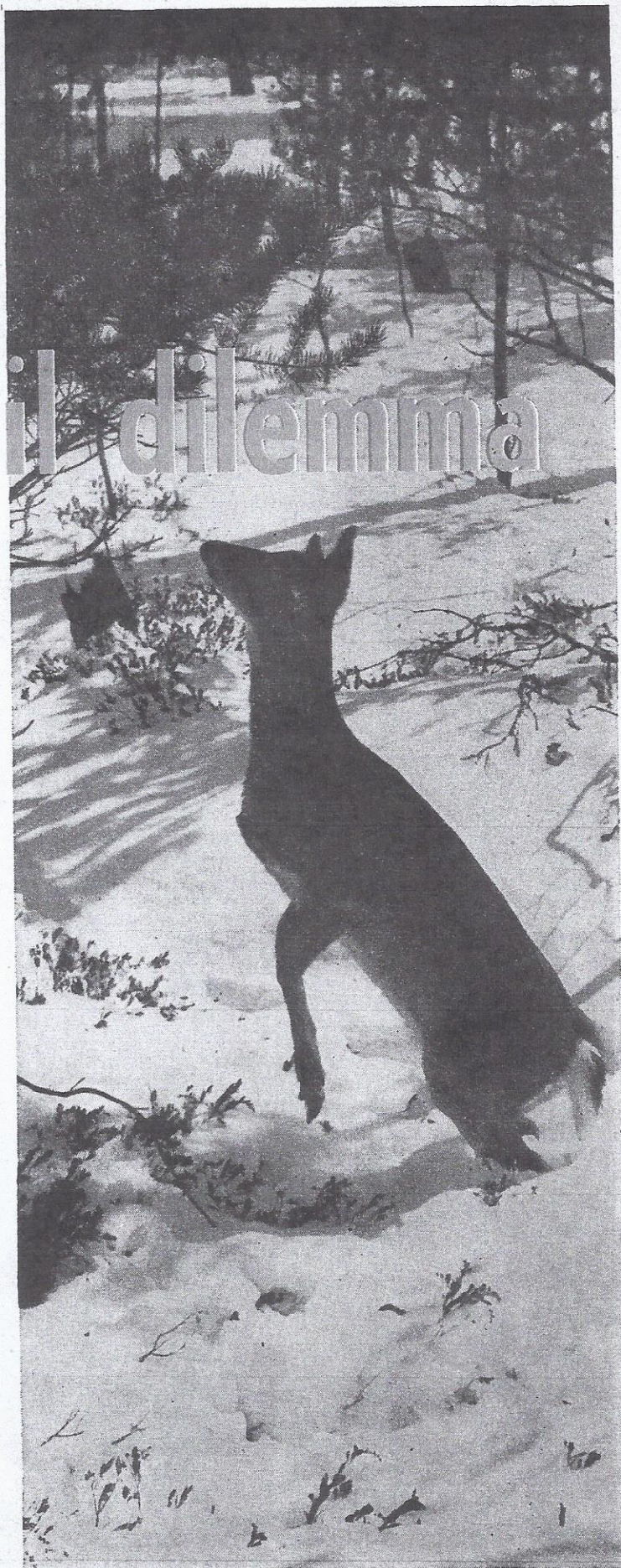
By J. P. Linduska

WE'VE GOT TO shoot more deer!

Deer hunting tomorrow will bear faint resemblance to the lush conditions of today unless we begin now—to kill more deer. We've got to shoot more deer if productive forestry is to continue in many areas. The grouse hunter and even the trout fisherman may well prove the losers unless our deer harvest is stepped up considerably—more than doubled in many states.

That's not one man's opinion—it's the studied verdict of a great majority of big-game administrators across the country. The whitetails are running riot and unless their numbers are curbed we all stand to lose. The problem of too many deer is now common to most states with a deer herd. But as you'd expect, it's most aggravated in states that boast (or bemoan) the biggest herds.

A hungry deer reaches for food in an overpopulated area of Michigan where most of the available browse is gone.



It doesn't make sense, does it? Hunting pressure on deer is increasing annually. In some states the number of hunters has increased tenfold in the past 20 years. The kill has climbed rapidly. Yet the adaptable whitetail has both extended its range and enlarged its numbers. Looking into our recent history it's plain to see what happened. Here's how it started:

Beginnings are inclined to be vague, and we don't know well the deer picture that presented itself to the early American colonists. We do know that they frequently had deer problems—problems of too few deer. Our beaver-trapping forebears met frequent disappointment in their efforts to bring fresh meat to the larder. And the annals of early explorers tell of hunger and privation in areas which today have deer in plague numbers. Contrary to popular notion the primeval forests of 300 years ago did not abound with deer and other big game.

Deer are critters of browsing habits. They can't make a living within the confines of a mature forest where the lowest leaf would be out of reach to a giraffe and where the forest floor has a foot of leaf litter and nothing more. Neither can they make a go of it in pure grasslands. As every deer hunter knows, his quarry is an animal of the "edge." It's the edge of the marsh, the edge of the forest, and the edge of a pond or stream where whitetails find the elements of a good life. For it's such combinations that make the best cover and also produce the greatest profusion of bushes and shrubs basic in the diet of a "browser."

In early colonial times these conditions were far less extensive than today. Along its northern edge the vast Great Plains prairie dovetailed in places with hardwood forests. Through this zone, particularly in the southern portions of Michigan, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, deer were plentiful. But in the northern parts of these same States, as well as others

that were heavily forested, deer found slim pickings.

Then it happened. A mushrooming young America needed elbow room. Prairie grasslands required little conversion to become productive farms. Hardwood forests were burned off to make space for an expanding empire.

And even as today, there was little room for foraging deer in this new area of agriculture. They were persecuted for being a pest, but they were used heavily, too, as a basic source of fresh meat. The cities were a dependable outlet for venison, and market hunting made heavy inroads on their numbers.

The picture was much the same over most of the whitetail range. It varied, of course, in time according to place. With early settlement in New England, some concern for the future of deer was being shown in the early 1700's. By the Civil War era the animals had been about eliminated from their native range in the Lake States.

But building an empire requires more than a thrifty agriculture. Timber was needed in quantity as lumber for homes, schools, and factories. The loggers moved on northern forests and "opened up the country." Dense timber stands that had long kept the forest floor in a dim half-light were cut clean. Cut-over virgin forests grew back to brush land that was almost pure fodder for deer. The loggers created "edge" like it never existed before—and, alas! probably never will again.

The whitetails responded. In the period of a generation as measured by man they had about saturated their new-found environment. But their prosperity was short-lived. The man-made range was kindly in terms of a superbundance of food and cover but it offered hazards as well.

The loggers with their camp hunters were still in full swing. There was the urban demand for venison that sustained market (Continued on page 31)

The end of the road for a Pennsylvania deer. Does and fawns are the first to die from crowded conditions.



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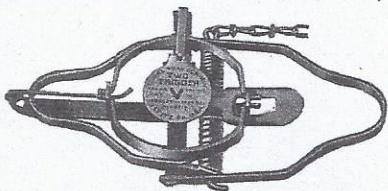


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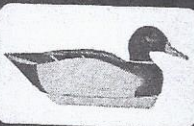


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Whitetail Dilemma

(Continued from page 19)

hunting as a flourishing business. For this trade, 100,000 carcasses were shipped in 1880 from express offices in the northern lower peninsula of Michigan. Additional untold numbers of animals were slaughtered only for the hides.

And there were the fires. Hundreds of fires that consumed millions of acres. Some were unbelievable conflagrations like the Peshtigo (Wisconsin) holocaust of 1871 that cost 1,200 human lives and swept over one and a quarter million acres. These things, in the closing years of the 1800's, again brought many herds to a low point.

About the turn of the century it became apparent that deer were going to need help. They got it: legislative help in endless variety. Market hunting where it was still practiced was outlawed. Seasons and bag limits were imposed for the first time in some states, made more restrictive in others. It was the era, too, that gave birth to the buck laws.

And there were other notable developments. Law enforcement was being applied with a new vigor; and a system of refuges provided year 'round protection. Predators of deer—the wolf, cougar, lynx, and bobcat—were cleaned out or greatly reduced over vast areas.

All of these things were to contribute to the eventual comeback of the herds. But the combined total of their effects was probably still secondary to one additional factor—range recovery. The devastating fires which routinely followed logging and charred the earth were controlled with a far-flung system of fire protection. It meant, in effect, that millions of acres of cut-over lands could now function as a prime producer of whitetails. And there were additional millions of acres being added to the big deer factory—marginal farms in Wisconsin, Michigan, and New England.

The agricultural boom which followed logging of the northern forests was petering out. The abandoned farms of yesterday grew up to a variety of deer foods and cover that excelled even that of the second growth forest. All in all it represented a surprisingly large addition of high capacity range.

In Massachusetts, for instance, two-thirds of the state area was devoted to farming when agriculture was at a peak in 1880. The bubble broke and 1,400,000 acres of this one-time farm land was returned to the deer. Now deer range makes up two-thirds of the total land area of the state.

New Hampshire had an agricultural boom, too. At the peak in 1850-70, the state area was about equally divided between farm and forest. The disillusioned farmers began to pull out in numbers in about 1900. When the exodus had finished, the land-use totals for the state showed only 17 percent remaining in agriculture—83 percent in forestry.

That was the stage setting of 50 years ago. Deer herds were on the verge of extinction over much of their range, but circumstances, both natural and legislated, were favorable to recovery. Once more the deer came back. And how they

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came back—they exploded!

In Pennsylvania, for instance, the Game Commission had tried to bolster their nucleus herd by importing 1,200 animals from a half dozen other states. This was in the early 1900's when you could walk through the woods for days and never sight a deer track in the snow. This was in the years like 1907 when fewer than 200 of these "trophy animals" were killed in the entire state. Yet in 1940, more than 186,000 deer were taken from a state herd already past its peak, which a few years earlier had been estimated at nearly a million animals.

The same thing happened in the big deer states of the midwest. In Wisconsin's biennial report for 1921-22 the chairman of the Conservation Commission gloomily prophesied:

"Deer are destined sooner or later to cease to be a game animal in Wisconsin. . . . We had confidently hoped that the one buck law would safeguard them against serious inroads but the increase of hunters and easy accessibility to their range, together with the encroaching tide of civilization, has brought about a condition that demands a most careful investigation."

Just 20 years later the investigations were under way—but for a different reason—too many deer. Authors of a 1943 deer project report had this to say about the Wisconsin situation:

"Since 1935 overbrowsing of Wisconsin deer yards has been predominant. . . . The trend of overbrowsing has been growing steadily more acute for several years. . . . In other words, the deer herd has increased to the point of starvation, while at the same time the available food supply has been continually retarded and reduced."

Yes, the deer came back, but they brought headaches with them. Farmers and orchardmen were first to feel the effects of too many deer. Then the foresters began to howl—future forests were being consumed wholesale by the plague of "browsers." Grouse and rabbit hunters complained when they saw what the destruction of ground cover was doing to their pet species. In some areas this overutilization was of an intensity to destroy watershed values so that even the fishermen were affected. Erosion and siltation of streams was resulting.

And, of course, the deer, victims of their own pyramiding numbers, were heavy losers, too. Nationally, they starved to death by the hundreds of thousands. That was the situation which made its first appearance 20 years ago and which still exists commonly today.

Game men have watched it in the making for two decades. And through every conceivable medium they have pleaded for public support in the job to be done: "The unregulated growth of our herds is cancerous," the deer doctors said, "and radical surgery—herd control—offers the only hope of saving the 'patient.'" But the response of the barber shop experts was, "Let's try aspirin tablets." And aspirin tablets it's been.

One of the early palliatives was Pennsylvania's Deer-proof Fence Law of 1923. Through this expedient distressed farmers were furnished 8-foot wire fencing to hold back the hungry herds, pro-

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viding they would meet half the cost of construction. Small landowners most in need of help couldn't afford it—and fortunately so for the game department. Because fencing out deer "here" simply puts more of them "there," and followed to its logical end the scheme would bankrupt any game fund.

Wisconsin's legislature tried to hush complaining farmers by appropriating \$40,000 annually to pay deer and bear damage complaints. In the last biennium (1950-52) they shelled out close to \$60,000 in payment of 613 deer-damage claims. If such schemes were merely useless it would be tragic enough, but they encouraged dishonesty among the citizenry as well.

If surveys and studies could have solved the deer problem for the foresters they wouldn't be yelling today. Wisconsin's Chief Forester with a crew of 20 foresters, biologists, and game managers walked 3,000 miles of marked lines to study the effects of deer on 11,000 sample plots. Their findings: Each year deer are crippling one out of every five acres of forest reproduction. The damage to forest reproduction is 100 times more serious than forest fires!

Starving deer are not a pretty sight and misplaced sympathy, so stimulated, has euchred most states into "feed the deer" programs. Of course, you don't have to dig far to see the fallacies in this one. If a feeding program is substantial enough to save starving animals one year, you've simply blackmailed yourself into a bigger feeding program for the next winter. And boy, is it expensive! Here again, Wisconsin has had one of the richest experiences, but you can be sure it wasn't the game department's idea:

The winter of 1942-43 was long and cold in Wisconsin, snow was deep, browse was in short supply, and deer were everywhere. When the snow melted back in the spring the carcasses were there. No one knows how many starved but estimates of the total loss ranged from 50,000 to 200,000. One thing sure, more deer died that winter than had been taken in any previous season by the hunters.

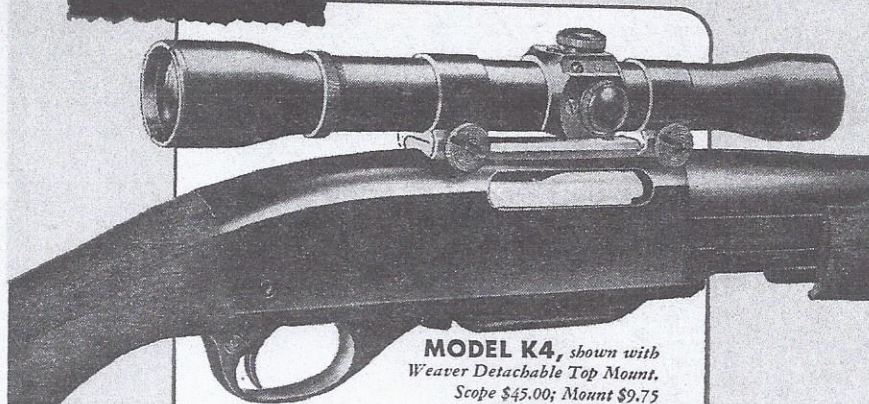
The next meeting of the Legislature earmarked 50 cents from each deer license for use in artificial feeding and the purchase of deer yards. In the 1950-52 biennium, Wisconsin spent \$154,000 from this fund to feed starving deer. While substantial, such an outlay of sportsmen's funds would not be objectionable if favorable results could be claimed. But deer feeding programs have been tried around the country. The unanimous feeling is that, in general, they aggravate the problem.

By now, the deer management expedients—several million dollars' worth—have all been tried and found wanting. In most progressive game states the sportsmen and the public generally are at last ready to buy what the big-game administrators have been trying for 20 years to sell. Herd control through the taking of bucks and does is going to double the deer take in many states and to the advantage of the herds as well as the hunter. Such intensive methods of cropping are the proven way of man-

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aging deer with any success.

Yes, the proven way. A number of our states have been doing it with good results for lo! these many years. New Hampshire, for instance, has never had a buck law. For 300 years, they have had an annual season with both bucks and does being legal game. The season has never been shorter than 30 days and in most recent years they have had a 47-day season. Like every place else their hunting pressure has doubled in the past 10 years, yet their annual kill has increased sixfold since they first started measuring it in 1922.

Massachusetts has never had a buck law. There the annual kill continues to climb in spite of increases in the number of hunters. Maine with a month-long, any-deer season has done a good job of cropping. Yet, with mounting gun pressure the herd has doubled and re-doubled in size each decade since 1920.

Colorado, Idaho, and Wyoming are examples of western states that are making the most of their deer crop by taking bucks and does. Like the New England states mentioned above they figure each year to take off about 20 to 25 percent of the fall population. By comparison the buck law states don't average much over 10 percent of the fall total. In a few states like California and Vermont, the sportsmen are getting only about 5 percent of the population, or one-fifth of what could and should be harvested.

Prospects for doubling the hunter's share of the annual deer crop, in itself, should be a commanding reason for many states to re-examine their harvest regulations. But there are bonus values in realistic cropping, too. Biologists are finding that as herds are reduced and range conditions improve, the deer "co-operate" in surprising ways:

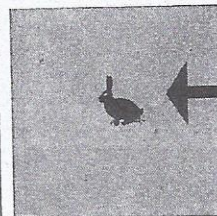
They grow faster. A Massachusetts field study showed that 6-months-old fawns on good range averaged 5 inches taller and weighed 32 pounds more than their brethren of the same age on poor range.

They have better "racks." On browse-deficient range in New York State, only 38 percent of the 18-month-old bucks had two or more points to the antler. But on healthy range, 86 percent of this age group were fork-horns or better.

Their reproductive rate speeds up. On beat-up, over-crowded ranges in several states, does are found to average a single fawn and in some places less than that. Yet does regularly bear twins, even triplets, where conditions of proper nourishment are present. In these states the average is nearer two fawns per doe.

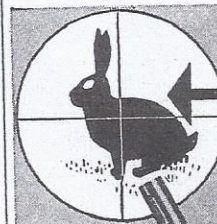
Facts like these are helping the selling job in the "hold-out" states. It's been a slow and painful process for some, but they're beginning to get the message through to their hunters. In 1951, West Virginia tried a "hunter's choice" season, the first of its kind since 1909. Their kill was 3 times what it had been in any previous "buck law" year. Last year they tried it again and it looked equally good. Chances are they'll follow the "any deer" pattern from here on.

Following extremely high starvation losses in 1942, Wisconsin managed to get a 4-day "antlerless" season following 4



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days of "forked horn" hunting. All told, they took 128,000 deer—3 times the kill of any previous year. The "gloomy Guses" pointed their fingers at the conservation department and yelled, "They've ruined our deer herd." They kept on yelling it through subsequent years of "bucks only" hunting, and all the time the facts belied them.

But it took Wisconsin 5 years to break the blister raised by its first doe season in 1943. In 1949 they managed to swing it again and took 159,000. They followed up with two more years of "any deer" shooting for a 3-year total of 450,000—300,000 more than would have been taken by "bucks only" hunting and the equivalent of 10 years' kill under the buck law. And this was mainly a by-product of the basic accomplishment—preservation and recovery of rapidly diminishing range.

Michigan, another "million deer" state, has had difficulties second only to Wisconsin in selling their public on the critical need for herd control. Last hunting season, climaxing a 20-year battle to bring relief to ravaged wintering yards, Michigan got its foot in the door. They had a conservative "any deer" period during the last 3 days of their regular season in the northern Lower Peninsula.

According to preliminary estimates they took 100,000 deer in the 3 days. This was in addition to an estimated 60,000 bucks taken during the regular season. Reports from intensive surveys during and after the hunt say: "... No overshooting, . . . lots of deer left . . . winter food nearly adequate for the herd for the first time in two decades."

The band wagon of progressive deer management is rolling and most states are climbing aboard. Those that don't may preview their future by considering Pennsylvania's experience. For it was Pennsylvania who first could boast a million-deer herd. And it was here, 25 million ago, that the penalties of overpopulation first unfolded. Then as now the department knew and preached the requirement for herd reduction. But their hunter clientele gave only token support. Today, in 1953, they tell this story:

"... We have had too many deer too long. And no amount of human effort can change the facts. Most of our deer range is ruined, partly because of the forest's natural growth, but principally because too many deer have literally eaten it to death, even as they themselves are now starving."

"Because we failed to balance the herd with its available food supply, because it is no longer within human province to provide sufficient additional food economically without destroying other more valuable resources, we will have fewer deer within the foreseeable future."

"... Closing the season entirely would only hasten the process. Shooting the deer down to rock bottom would help but little because now it is too late. There would be no recovery because there is no food for recovery. Much of it is desert—a forest desert with rotting bones of starved deer."

You'll have to admit—this is herd reduction the hard way.

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