



DEER HUNTING PUBLIC LAND IN MISSISSIPPI

BY GREG VIRDEN

George Santayana's popular aphorism "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it," apparently is preached much more than practiced, especially amongst deer hunters. Along that thought, an article on deer hunting on public land in Mississippi is an oxymoron of sorts, to those in the know. Although the intention is good, the results are predictable and usually less than favorable to the wildlife and hunter alike. Please bear (no pun intended) with me a moment, pour yourself a cup of coffee, or a tumbler of bourbon, whichever you may prefer,

and allow me to elaborate. The first lesson: Be careful of what you say and whom you tell.

By the time Theodore Roosevelt made it to Onward, Mississippi, on his first—and now famous—bear hunt in 1902, the Mississippi wilderness was already well down a path from which it would never recover, taking with it certain species that are now forever gone. Roosevelt wrote a stellar account of his of his second bear hunt in 1907, entitled *In The Louisiana Canebrakes*, taking place just across the river in Tallulah, Louisiana.

From a hunter's perspective, *In The*



Louisiana Canebrakes reads like a fabled magical place where panthers leap on the backs of deer, wolves kill bear hounds, and great ivory-billed woodpeckers squawk from towering cypress breaks... just to whet your appetite. Not to mention the recount of the 640 lb. bruin that took the life of a bear hunter at Lake George. Roosevelt did manage to get his bear, even though market hunting and poaching was already taking its toll on the population.

They had killed many deer and wild-cat [bobcats], and now and then a panther; but their favorite game was the

black bear, which, until within a very few years, was extraordinarily plentiful in the swamps and canebrakes on both sides of the lower Mississippi, and which is still found here and there, although in greatly diminished numbers.

Outdoor journals and journalists proliferated around the turn of the century, having a similar affect as the present-day social media craze to which sportsmen have acquired an insatiable appetite. It's coined internet scouting — particularly in the Delta — which, if anything, has only compounded the “gold

Photo by Michael A. Kelly

rush” issue with hunting exponentially. Below, in an exceptional and well-documented book, *The Bear Hunter*, James T. McCafferty explains this phenomenon.

As surely as the discovery of precious metal in the Klondike would launch the Yukon Gold Rush in 1897, Hough’s Forest and Stream coverage of his bear hunts with Bobo would precipitate something of a Mississippi Delta bear rush in 1895. [...] Then, Hough said the game was done for. He had seen it before.

Bobo was deluged with letters from would-be bear hunters from all over the U.S. and almost every county in Europe, after Hough’s articles appeared.

Many Mississippi counties at that time, in fact, prohibited non-residents from hunting except on the invitation of a landowner.

Nevertheless, trespassing non-resident hunters showed up in Coahoma County in droves after Hough’s piece went to press. In making a pre-hunting trip scout of the Sunflower country he had hunted with Hough the preceding fall, Bobo found more than 100 non-Mississippi hunters camped in the woods. [...] Also, as Bobo had feared, they had driven the bears almost completely out of the vicinity. In a part of the Delta once teeming with the big predators. Bobo found neither bear or bear sign.

Without laws to protect wildlife and to regulate market and unethical hunters, combined with the unprecedented land clearing, the situation was going from bad to

catastrophic. In 1928, biologist Aldo Leopold, considered the father of conservation in the United States, made a tour of Mississippi and estimated that there were only 1,200 deer left in the entire state. Francis ‘Fanny’ Cook led a statewide grass roots effort during this time, which would be the start of the Game and Fish Commission. The Commission was established by the legislature in 1932, and Ms. Cook subsequently wrote the state’s first game laws.

Within a few decades, the deer herd had made a substantial recovery. Over this period, Mississippi had accumulated a total of six national forests comprising over one million acres. Additionally, beginning in the 1930s, a network of national wildlife refuges and state wildlife management areas were ever-expanding. Corp of Engineers land was added to the mix to eventually sum total another million acres. That’s over 1,050 square miles of public deer hunting opportunity in Mississippi!

NOTE: Dr. Sam Polles, in the October Mississippi Department of Wildlife Fisheries and Parks (MDWFP) commission minutes, “discussed a large acquisition of lands in the Delta that Anderson-Tully was looking to sell.” The MDWFP is also looking at Halpino and other properties across the state. Get on the phone with your MDWFP commissioner and state legislators! Do your part to make this happen!

By the 1970s, deer herds had begun to exceed carrying capacity in many areas. The buck-to-doe ratio and the herd age structure were a mess. Doe harvest was prohibited. Over seventy-five percent of the buck harvest was comprised of 1.5 year olds or less. Deer hunters were not happy. This is when

I made my debut into Mississippi’s deer hunter culture. What follows is a short personal account of a typical first day of gun season back then.

Aaah-oooooh...aaah-oooooooooooooh.
The hounds had been let out! And they were moving quickly, headed our way, sounding a chorus that only a pack of Walkers can make hot on the trail. We had climbed up a couple of dozen recycled two-by-fours nailed into an old crooked tree that led up to a small wooden platform built into the first tree fork. It was a tight fit for two, tricky to get into, and listed heavily to one side, but it gave a commanding view of the massive virgin oak forest surrounding us. They called this place the government woods; it was eerily vast and seemingly endless. I called it the big woods, and they were huge. Vines as big as a man’s thigh dangled from the canopy. Little did I know at the time, but I was only a stone’s throw away from where Holt Collier had tied up a bear for Theodore Roosevelt to shoot some seventy years earlier near the Little Sunflower River.

I was a little fellow — probably easily could have passed as Alfalfa’s twin — wearing my Sears and Roebuck green steel shank rubber boots, the ones with the bright yellow soles and matching yellow laces. My corduroy coat came from the original Stein-Mart, back when they only sold name brands with minor defects at unheard of prices. Fancy camouflage didn’t exist back then. My birthday present that year was an L.C. Smith double-barrel 20 gauge, which I had in hand, loaded with a pair of slugs. I was well on my way to becoming the next Great Hunter.

That first doe was the lead deer of a herd numbering about twenty to thirty that were running around everywhere, with the hounds in close pursuit. All I needed was to find a buck

with a minimum of 4" spikes; that was the law, no does. All I could see were slickheads, best I could tell, and that was no easy feat. The herd came under and around our tree and went. I was heartbroken, but as I started to tear up, my father said, "BUCK!" There he was, a fork horn, maybe a basket six, well beyond my personal expectations and a dream come true. He was slipping around behind us on the edge of a cane brake, cleverly throwing the dogs off his scent and on the does trail.

Well, I didn't get my buck, but I did get buck fever, both kinds. Shortly thereafter, the Mississippi Bowhunters Association (MBA) successfully convinced the state legislature to extend archery season. I immediately got myself a Ben Pearson recurve (compounds hadn't been invented yet), and started putting the laydown on some does. Does were legal with a bow, and bucks were almost

impossible to kill back then, rifle or bow. If someone got lucky and brought a basket eight back to camp, well, he was viewed as a "shaw nuff goodern."

In 1977, dissatisfied deer hunters on a Mississippi River hunting club named Davis Island, called in Dr. Harry Jacobson from Mississippi State University, to consult on how to grow big-antlered bucks on the property. This project turned into a ten-year groundbreaking study entitled, *Deer Condition Response to Changing Harvest Strategy, Davis Island, Mississippi*.

In essence, Jacobson put Davis Island on the MDWFP deer harvest collection data program within the Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP). He initiated the then unheard of practice of shooting does, and he implemented antler restricted harvest requirements. The rest is history, so to speak. The results were impressive and dramatic. All deer

body weights went up, antler base and beam lengths increased, average doe-fetus ratios went from 1 to 2.2, and, lactation rates increased. The yearling buck harvest gradually reduced to less than 15% from over 75% of the antlered harvest. Peak rut moved two to three weeks earlier in association with change in buck harvest strategy.

We had come from plentiful deer at the turn of the century, to no deer in 1930, to maybe too plentiful deer by 1980. Everybody was getting into buck age management and busting some does. "Don't shoot that young buck, he'll be a good one next year, take the doe instead," became the common mantra.

Today, it appears we are coming around full circle and back to reducing bag limits and protecting does. The Roman poet Phaedrus once said, "Things are not always what they seem; the first appearance deceives



Lelan Wil Life Museum. Photo by Greg Virden.

many; the intelligence of a few perceives what has been carefully hidden." I'm not being condescending to anyone, in any manner, and I do not purport to be a biologist. I'll leave deer management with the experts. I will, however, point out, and I won't even quote this one... doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results...

According to the March, April, and May MDWFP commission minutes, Larry Castle, Director of Technical Programs, specifically addresses the "lack of deer being seen" across the state, and the changes made in response. See *2016-2017 Deer Hunter Survey Results*. The changes include reducing bag limits in some cases, and according to the May minutes, "suspend[ing] antlerless opportunity except during archery only and youth gun seasons" on public lands.

In early September, Brian Broom published a short summation in the *Clarion-Leager* concerning deer hunter dissatisfaction. He wrote, "Mississippi hunters complained more loudly about low numbers of deer in the 2016 season than in any year most can remember. Hunters in some areas cited low sightings, less deer sign and fewer pictures of deer on game cameras as indicators of a declining population. The latest hunter survey estimates mirror what hunters are claiming with an estimate of 244,795 deer taken. That is roughly 10,000 fewer deer than the 2015 estimate and the lowest in 31 years."

"This is the lowest total harvest since 1985," said William McKinley, MDWFP Deer Program coordinator. "The primary drop over the last five years is buck harvests."

Maybe there is an overlooked explanation, or, at the very least, a significant contributing factor to this malady. Read on.

Referring back to the *2016-2017 Deer Hunter Survey Reports*, specifically, the question, "Has deer behavior changed in the area you hunt – for example, are deer only moving at night?" Of the total respondents, 68% said yes and 21% said no. What are the biological ramifications of changes of deer behavior? How can you harvest deer if you can't see them? Hmmmm...

Current technology, GPS in particular (which allows the 24/7 tracking of an animal from the comfort of an air-conditioned office), is providing a whole new perspective on deer behavior, deserving a fresh new look at current management strategies. Especially, to rifle hunter pressure; it's counterintuitive. The longer the rifle season, the less deer hunters are going to see.

All of the studies cited below are must-reads, and are beyond the scope of the article. But, one thing is clear. Once rifle season opens, deer become scarce and the longer the season lasts, then they become even more scarce. With our recent weapon of choice laws extending through January, and in south Mississippi through mid-February, the question remains: is this a major contributing factor to the recent "lack of deer being seen?" Granted, some areas really are suffering from low populations and/or over harvesting.

Clint McCoy, a graduate student at Auburn University, conducted a three-year study on a 6,400-acre tract in South Carolina where he placed GPS collars on thirty-seven bucks. He found that after just 12 hours of hunting pressure in one location, the odds of a buck showing up within "killing range" of a stand was cut in half.

Penn State performed a five-year study which involved forty radio-collared deer, both bucks and does, on

four vast tracts of land in three state forests. During the firearms season, researchers received deer-movement transmissions every 20 minutes. As for their "behaviors in archery season, there's nothing to suggest these deer are being impacted by the hunting that's going on to any great extent," said Duane Diefenbach, leader of the Pennsylvania Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, and one of the study's leaders. "But once the rifle season begins, we see some pretty dramatic differences. Some of these bucks will leave their home range and go places we've never seen them in the previous 10 months. It's pretty amazing."

From the Nobles Institute Study: "We found that collared buck observations were greatest during the first weekend of the Oklahoma deer rifle season. Observations of collared bucks declined eighty-three percent from the first to the third weekend in the low-density unit. In the high-density unit, buck observations declined sixty-four percent from the first to second weekend. Despite more hunters in the high-density unit, hunters did not observe any collared bucks on the last weekend. The GPS collars showed the bucks were still in the high-density unit but successfully evaded the hunters."

With this in mind, I imported some WMA harvest data off the MDWFP website for the last two years and dropped it into some sortable data grids. The top five WMA's had an interesting correlation. By "top," I mean best producing, or the average number of acres required per harvested deer, average number of man-days per harvest, and the number of +=4.5 old bucks taken. Four of the five had limited gun seasons. They are also more intensely managed, but that did not correlate as strongly. You can

find those grids on the MBA website. I'm no statistician, and it could be purely coincidental, but I thought it was noteworthy. Unfortunately, NWR's do not publish harvest data.

Furthermore, in the *Fiel and Steam* October 1988 issue is an article that further highlights the results of a limited rifle season. The centerpiece of the article was an interview with Tim Wilkins, the manager of the NWR complex at the time. According to the author James McCafferty, "[the refuge]... consistently produces bucks

unlike any other in the Magnolia state."

I contacted Wilkins and inquired about his management strategy at the time. He said, "My goal was to maximize hunter opportunities and deer harvest while maintaining an older buck component. This was accomplished by limiting gun hunting and maximizing archery hunting. This method resulted in the deer harvest being split almost 50/50 between gun and archery hunters. The hunting season began with archery, followed

by two one-day youth hunts, a two-day senior citizen hunt, three two-day muzzleloader hunts, and then archery again. All gun hunting was over by mid-December, the peak of the rut. I did not limit what was harvested, but recommended that hunters not shoot young bucks that had four or more points. This method worked very well on this NWR and resulted in the harvest of some excellent older class bucks and a balanced deer herd structure."

The results were amazing.



Some of Mississippi's optimally managed WMAs offer something for everyone. A quality hunting experience, great chance to see deer, and an opportunity to harvest a mature buck. Photo by Josh Clark.

Reference the Leland Wildlife Museum photo. All of those mounts are Pope and Young (P & Y) and came off the complex, with the exception of two, while managed by Wilkins. They were donated to the museum by MBA lifetime member Bobby Woods. Woods does not discuss deer hunting publicly much anymore. I did manage to track him down though. He was out of state bow hunting. Apparently more hunters than ever are now pursuing whitetails out of state. Understandably so, because it's hard to enjoy the hunt when you are dodging flashlights going in, and then having to watch people walk all under your stand while attempting to hunt. He said he rarely hunts it now because it's just not the same, so let's just leave it at that. He feels partly to blame for the crowds and said, "at the time I enjoyed being written about and published and all, and I really thought I was helping hunters in general and recruiting a lot of bow hunters to the sport. But after a while I couldn't get away from the telephone calls and 'friends' wanting to know where to go."

The amount of hunters showing up to hunt that place was off the charts. According to Wilkins, "we had hunters from twenty-six different states." Imagine all of these hunters on one relatively small piece of property.

Two very important distinctions need further clarification in grasping the different management styles between state and federal land. One needs a basic understanding of how Mississippi's wildlife laws are created and how the MDWFP is funded.

All public land in Mississippi is bound by state wildlife law. Within the framework of state law is tremendous latitude on weapon type, season length and type, sex taken and bag limits by type. The MDWFP Commission sets this on Wildlife Management Areas

and for the most part, individual complex managers on National Wildlife Refuges.

MBA life member Mark Livingston, probably one of the most knowledgeable on the subject within the association, said, "I truly believe that each governmental authority that regulates these different types of properties believe that they are managing for the wildlife first; *but within the context of user desire.*" The big difference between the two is how they are funded. State land is funded, according to the MDWFP's website;

... The majority of its [MDWFP] operating funds come from hunters and anglers. Our hunters and anglers pay, as they have for many years, nearly all the bills for on-the-ground wildlife conservation and support them, not to benefit themselves, but to benefit all Mississippians.

Additionally, the MDWFP receives funds from the Pittman-Robertson Act.

... The number of individual hunting license holders increases our state's share of the total P-R apportionment. Mississippi's apportionment is directly related to the number of hunters we have. Thus, if the number of license holders in Mississippi declines, other states may receive our share of funding.

So, any change in WMA wildlife management hunting strategy, continues Livingston, "could potentially reduce hunter participation [...] as that is a source of revenue that they can't afford to lose." Obviously, the state is going to be much more sensitive toward hunter participation. Even with that it is still a tremendous squeeze and has its implications.

For instance, I was able to run

down Roger Tankesly, the MDWFP regional area biologist for our largest—and probably most hunted—national forest. Tankesly believes the lack of funding for timber management, prescribed burns, and the equipment and access needed for planting and maintaining food plots, limits his ability to bring and keep the habitat at its full potential. As a result, the deer carrying capacity is lower than it should be.

Wilkins, now a retired NWF complex manager, who is currently a consultant and certified biologist with Wildlife Strategies, Inc., further expounds:

Carrying capacity generally is defined as the number of deer that can utilize an area without causing habitat degradation. A biologist who checks an area for over browsing by deer will first determine if a browse line exists. A browse line is generally defined as the lack of browse from the ground to the level a deer can reach. In severe cases, there is no understory vegetation giving the appearance that a flood or some other natural occurrence has killed the lower level vegetation. In less severe cases, the biologist would look for the presence of preferred browse species. If these species are heavily browsed or missing, the deer population is exceeding the carrying capacity. If there is an abundance of these species and deer browsing is not having a significant impact, then the area is likely at carrying capacity.

Data collection is an important component of determining carrying capacity. Deer weights, lactation rates, ages, antler measurements,

etc., help to determine harvest recommendations. Cameras can be used to estimate deer populations (buck & doe), herd health, fawn recruitment, and antler size. The MDWFP has developed a survey plan using bait at camera sites

Once carrying capacity is determined, the objective is to harvest enough deer each year to reduce the population to a level below that capacity.

Once you determine the harvest goal, the objective should be to remove the surplus as quickly as possible. The food these deer would have consumed will be available to keep the remaining deer healthy.

He also added, "Scheduling hunting dates should have two primary components.

First is to determine the number

of deer to be harvested each year.

This number is influenced by many factors and includes herd health, recruitment, habitat carrying capacity (availability of agricultural crops, food plots, browse/cover, mast production, hunting pressure on lands adjacent to the public hunting area, access to water, etc.) and the attitude of adjacent land owners who could be negatively impacted by deer utilizing their agricultural crops.

Second is to determine the desired age structure of the deer herd."

With all that said, Mississippi arguably has some of the best white-tailed deer hunting in the country, and the best wildlife biologists to boot. Armed with more deer data than any other state, Mississippi leads the nation in the percentage of 3.5 years and older bucks in the harvest. We also have the premier deer research facility in the nation, MSU Deer Lab, who, by the

way, have just started a GPS collared deer study in Madison County. I am on top of this study with veteran deer biologist William T. McKinley, MDWFP Deer Program Coordinator. Don't let your membership expire! We will be following this one closely.

In closing, I would like to suggest that the biggest obstacle to optimal deer management are deer hunters collectively, and we may want to modify our culture and behavior a bit. It's counterproductive to squabble among ourselves. Our focus should be on the resource first and hunting opportunity second. Let's come together on the same page and get it done. The state can not afford to lose any hunters, and we certainly cannot afford to desecrate *our* deer, for personal benefit or any other reason.

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