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Biologists rely on hunters for fresh data New numbers often come from the field

By KRISTEN FOUNTAIN

Valley News

Paul Munn got up early yesterday to take part in one of the largest annual wildlife studies in New Hampshire, which is to say, he went out hunting and killed a deer.

Since late October, Munn has spent many mornings a week crouched in a tree stand alone in woods near his home in Lyme, silently waiting and watching for the big rack buck he kept glimpsing to wander closer.

In the meantime, he saw a lot of other deer - does and yearlings too young to shoot - and smaller animals pass by. With a week left in the New Hampshire rifle-hunting season, the buck finally showed.

Munn officially registered the 160-pounder and its 10-point antlers with the state Department of Fish and Game by filling out a form at the Lyme Country Store, adding his kill information to the thousands of other sheets of paper collected from other successful hunters. The data provided by Munn and his fellow hunters about the animals they have taken or seen are invaluable for estimating the size of next year's deer population, as well as those of other species, said state wildlife biologists in both New Hampshire and Vermont.

"It's a huge part of what we use," said John Buck, a biologist with the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department.

State biologists use population estimates to set the dates and regulations for upcoming years' hunts. If a population seems stressed or in decline, there will be more restrictions on the age of deer that can be killed and fewer licenses for does, Buck said. Vermont sets these regulations every year, while New Hampshire sets regulations every two years, a public process that will begin this spring in both states.

Besides registration forms, department biologists also staff registration stations across the state on the first weekend of rifle hunting season, which was Nov. 12 and 13 in both Vermont and New Hampshire. The scientists measure the body weight and diameter of the antlers, as well as the amount of wear on the teeth, an accurate measure of deer age, said Mark Ellingwood, biologist with the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department.

For a sense of whether deer numbers are outstripping the available food, biologists focus on the size and health of yearling males, Ellingwood said.

"They are considered to be the flagship of herd health," he said.

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In New Hampshire, hunters are allowed to legally kill both male and female deer that weekend, so biologists can also find out how many females are lactating and estimate the number of their fawns, he said.

Both states' departments also mail out hunter surveys every December asking a range of questions from the number of hours spent out hunting per day to the number of female deer and fawn observed and whether any moose and bear were seen during the hunting season.

New Hampshire surveys are sent out to all successful hunters from the previous season, while Vermont sends surveys out randomly to 5 percent of the people who purchase hunting licenses annually, said the biologists.

While only approximately 25 percent of all the surveys sent out are returned, Munn said he enjoys filling his survey out every year and sharing his observations.

For wildlife departments, hunters are their primary work force, so staff are concerned by the decline in the number of people who hunt, said Buck. The number of hunting licenses issued in Vermont and New Hampshire each declined by around 10 percent between 1998 and 2003, for example.

With 20,000 fewer hunters out hunting in Vermont from 10 years ago, there will necessarily be fewer deer killed, even if the deer population stays roughly the same, he said.

To account for this, the department is developing a new mathematical model: they will start testing this year that is based on the number of deer killed per hour of hunting effort in a particular area, rather than on harvest numbers.

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