



2019 Deer Hunting Prospects - How to Have a Successful Hunt

Ashley Autenrieth, Northern Regions Deer Biologist
Gaylord Operations Service Center
(989) 732-3541 ext. 5044

Chad Stewart, Deer and Elk Program Specialist
Lansing Customer Service Center
(517)284-4745

The 2019 deer season is fast approaching! DNR biologists have been out, observing the deer herds in their areas and looking at the food sources which will sustain deer this fall. Based on their observations, what follows is the forecast for the upcoming hunting season.

Deer Hunting Forecast

Upper Peninsula (UP)

Numbers: Overall, the winter of 2018-2019 was average for the UP. Locally, some communities saw record-breaking snow levels. Luckily, snow melt occurred quickly throughout the region and it appears that few deer succumbed to harsh winter conditions. Observations by staff indicate that deer numbers appear similar to last year.

Food: Most areas are reporting good to great soft mast production, especially apples. A couple of areas in the U.P., especially around Shingleton, are reporting good acorn production as well.

Bucks: With overall deer numbers being low in the U.P., buck sightings have been limited. Those that have been observed look very healthy and antler development appears average for the region.

Northern Lower Peninsula (NLP)

Numbers: It was a mild to average winter for the NLP which allowed deer populations to continue to increase across much of the region. Fawning conditions appear to have been average with observations being similar to last year.

Food: Growing conditions have been very good across the NLP with good rainfall during the early summer months. Thus far, it appears to be an average year for production of both acorns and wild apples. Scouting to find these areas will be crucial.

Bucks: Observations of bucks have been similar to last year across the entire NLP. With the average winter this year and previous winters not taking a major toll on the herd, deer numbers have been increasing. Nutrition has been good leading to healthy deer body conditions and good numbers of bucks.

Southern Lower Peninsula (SLP)

Numbers: Winters generally have little impact on deer in the SLP, and this past winter was no exception. Deer numbers appear to be similar or higher than last year, and there seems to be excellent fawn production. The deer are in great shape.

Food: Rainfall totals were high for nearly all of Southern Michigan causing many crops to either go in late or not at all. Harvest will undoubtedly be late this year, which may have a direct impact on deer harvest. Thus far it appears

to be an average to above average year for production of both acorns and wild apples. Again, scouting to find these areas will be important and we recommend contacting your local DNR office to get staff perspective on the area. High quality forage is rarely an issue in the SLP.

Bucks: Deer, including bucks, are abundant in many areas. Observations coming in show buck numbers and condition are similar to last year. Bachelor herds are being seen with some nice 2.5 and 3.5-year-old deer in them.

Tips for a Successful Deer Hunting Season

Hopefully you have been out planning, preparing and refining your strategy all year long for the upcoming season. If you have, give yourself a pat on the back because you've earned it. If you're like the rest of us, we have a few things to think about to get ready for the season.

Talk to a biologist

Your [local biologist](#) is a wealth of information. Wildlife biologists not only have a broad knowledge of deer behavior and ecology from the scientific point of view, but they are also in tune with the local area and factors that may influence deer.

Contact your local soil conservation district

Do you have a food plot or planting that did not fare as well as you had hoped this year that could use a boost for next year? Even though we are on the eve of the 2019 deer season it is never too early to set things in motion for a great growing season in 2020. One of the best places to figure out where to start, or what the next step should be, is your [local soil conservation district](#).

Scouting

Scouting probably has the biggest impact on success. If you are unsure what you are looking for, or how to go about it, scouting can seem like a daunting task. No matter how large or small the property you are hunting, keen observation and understanding of how and why deer move on that landscape is important. Even making an adjustment of a couple feet here or there can make all the difference in success.

Scouting: Digital maps

There are several tools out there to digitally gain mapping information. Some of the most well-known navigation tools like google maps can give you a bird's eye view of places you plan to hunt. There are also tools available that show you where private/public land boundaries are. If you are hunting public land in Michigan a great, free tool is [Mi-Hunt](#). Mi-Hunt is a digital tool that has a ton of information stored in "layers." Mi-Hunt provides everything from public/private land boundaries, satellite imagery and cover types (upland, lowland, oaks etc.) to trails, topography and more.

Scouting: Terrain

Whether reading a map or observing on the ground, knowing the terrain can help uncover where a deer is likely to move. Land features that help provide protection, assist in giving their nose an advantage or that lead to an absence of human pressure can all influence a deer to move one way or the next. Learning to read those features can take time but is worth the effort. Some popular terrain features to keep an eye out for are ridges and saddles. A ridge is simply an elevated portion of terrain that extends out like a finger. Deer will often parallel these land features at various elevation points depending on the scenario. A saddle is simply an area between ridges that creates a depression or low point, often between valleys. Like with most factors revolving around deer, there are also many other terrain features that a deer may utilize. The key is to start familiarizing yourself with the terrain to help make sense of the deer movement in the area you are hunting.

Scouting: Ground Truthing

No matter how much time you spend on digital map scouting, it always pays to get on the ground and see what the terrain really looks like. If you have the time to get out ahead of the season, you can both be sure your map

interpretations are correct and look to find evidence that areas of interest have visible signs of present or past deer movement.

Scouting: Bedding and feeding

Understanding deer bedding and feeding locations will uncover deer travel patterns. As straight forward as that statement is, figuring out the specifics can take a bit of work. Deer are adaptable and will bed in a variety of environments if they feel it is secure. Bedding locations can be found in the middle of cattail swamps or on the edge of an idle field fence line. The important part is getting out and identifying those locations. As adaptable creatures, deer will also eat a variety of food sources. Depending on factors like the time of year, food abundance, proximity to security and the like, deer may choose one food source over the other. Deer could be feeding on anything from recently forested aspen trees to grain in large agriculture fields and many items in between. The important part is figuring out what types of food are in your area and how that relates back to bedding areas. Another thing to key in on is the areas of habitat “edge” between these bedding and feeding areas. Habitat edges are areas of habitat that transition from one type to the next. These areas are important to deer and can concentrate a lot of activity. Finally, understanding a pathway to access where deer will be traveling while remaining undetected can be influential in determining success. Direct pathways may lead to being detected by deer and may cause them to alter their movements. Understanding the deer’s top defenses (their nose, eyes, and ears) and getting into a location that doesn’t alert either one of those senses will greatly improve your chance of success.

Scouting: Finding the sign

Deer Trails

Deer trails are telltale signs that give a look into habitual activity. A deer trail is a path of varying degrees of wear depending on how well traveled it is. If you see what appears to be a narrow trail in Michigan, and it isn’t a walking trail, it is likely a deer trail. One thing to keep in mind is that time of year can dictate some of that trail use activity. You may find a very freshly worn trail in summer that may not be all that active when a food source changes, or some other seasonal factor is introduced. Trying to understand how a particular trail may connect some of the food, cover or terrain previously discussed can help narrow down some likely spots of interest. Looking for trail intersections, where multiple trails come together or cross, can also be a good way to key in on spot to consider. If you want to get a better idea what may be coming down those trails and when they are coming, you can purchase a trail camera and set it up along the trail.

Rubs and scrapes

Depending on the time of year bucks will also leave telltale signs by making rubs and scrapes. A “rub” is simply a tree that has bark rubbed off by antlers of a deer. These start to show up in large part later in October and into November timed with rut activity. Although it can be debated how much stock to put into rubs, they do tell a story of guaranteed past activity. Also be on the lookout for rubs that form a line. A rub line is a series of rubbed trees that form a line that follows a line of travel. Scrapes, on the other hand, are cleared areas of bare dirt that deer also make in that late October early November timeframe. These are viewed as more consistent opportunities for repeat visits from deer, particularly bucks. Some scrapes may be just a one-time occurrence, or they can be communal areas that are frequented often by many deer. Even if you are not in that magic window of fresh activity, you may be able to detect last year’s activity which could be similar to the current year.

Picking a spot

Once you have put together more and more pieces of the puzzle, it will be time to find a spot to sit. You may be looking for a place to set up a tree stand for the season or simply just identifying a place to setup the day of your hunt with a ground blind. Ideally you will try and find a spot close enough for a comfortable shot in the area a deer will likely travel, while remaining concealed. Keep in mind the predominate wind (in Michigan, absent any unique terrain influencing wind direction, it is generally out of the west) to make sure that your location will be

downwind of that area you expect to have a deer travel. Another successful strategy is to make note of the location of the stand in proximity to where you expect to see deer travel and note the wind direction to be sure you hunt that stand on days the wind will be blowing away from that area.

Scent control and pressure

Scouting and spending time figuring out why, how and where deer travel is infinitely important. The more time you invest the better. However, your presence also has an impact. Each area is a little different on the dynamics of how much human activity will be tolerated, but as a rule each time you are in the deer's environment you are increasing their awareness and wariness. This can be true of scouting and of hunting a single location often. The safe bet is usually to play it safe and don't visit areas you are actively hunting or plan to hunt any more than necessary. It is always a balancing act. To avoid deer figuring out your pattern instead of the other way around, a method that is increasing in popularity is the "hang and hunt." The hang and hunt method involves identifying the area or trees you would like to come back to and setting up the stand when you hunt. This premise is built around selecting many areas to hunt and not being selective to one area. If hunting a small tract of land this method may not apply. If you are venturing out onto larger properties or some of the over 8 million acres of publicly accessible hunting ground in Michigan this could be something to consider.

Review the current regulations

In an effort to combat Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD), as has been the case for the past couple years, there are some evolving regulatory changes that may be in effect where you hunt. Be sure to check up on the [latest hunting regulations](#) in your area, which may influence your strategy.

Get afield

The most important thing you can do this fall is get out in Michigan's great outdoors and enjoy the deer season. There is one guarantee, that there is always something to be learned. There is no substitute for time spent afield.