

## WILDLIFE

# Common white-tailed deer misconceptions affect views

by Will Moseley / wamoseley@noble.org



**Like most** subjects, there is a plethora of misinformation about white-tailed deer biology and management. Most people try to be well informed about

deer because they enjoy observing or hunting them. However, even the most well-intentioned deer enthusiast has trouble finding accurate information about deer on the Internet or TV. Most websites and TV shows are trying to sell a product and can mislead the user about deer "facts." This article addresses a few common deer misconceptions.

### **Only trophy bucks do the breeding.**

There is a common thought that only large adult, or "breeder bucks," do the majority of the breeding in the wild. However, studies have shown that at least 30 percent of the breeding is done by bucks younger than 3.5 years of age. In populations with a high proportion of bucks in lower age classes, breeding by bucks younger than 3.5 years old increases. This is due to the breeding strategy of white-tailed deer. A buck tends a doe for a short period before she comes into estrous then tries to breed her while she is receptive (usually for about 24 hours).



Most does come into estrous around the same time, so an individual buck does not have time to breed a significant portion of the does.

### **Bucks are smarter than does.**

This is a common thought among hunters because they see more does than bucks while hunting. However, bucks are not any smarter than does. With significant doe harvest, most hunters see as many if not more bucks than does. This tells us that this behavior is effected by hunting pressure and not brain power.

### **Culling improves antler genetics of a free-ranging herd.**

Culling is a popular topic among land managers when it comes to managing for trophy deer. However, it is difficult to cull deer that have inferior antler genetics because bucks do not express all the antler genes they carry and does contribute at least 50 percent of the antler genetics. Also, we have no control over breeding pairings of free-ranging deer. Young bucks not old enough to express their genetic potential for antler growth are often the victims of ▶

culling attempts. Wild bucks usually grow bigger antlers each year, so you never know what will happen if they grow old enough to express their antler genetics.

**Spike bucks indicate poor genetics.**

Spike bucks are typically viewed as genetically inferior in trophy management. When there is a high percentage of spikes in a deer herd, it usually indicates other issues besides genetics. Generally, the deer herd is above carrying capacity and the animals are not getting the proper

nutrition. It could also indicate a skewed sex ratio with does being bred later, resulting in late-born fawns that are bred late the following year. These fawns can be spike bucks as yearlings but can develop very nice antlers if allowed to age and have proper nutrition.

**Food plots increase antler size.**

Food plots are a very common management tool. However, food plots rarely increase the overall level of nutrition enough to note an increase in antler size. The key

to managing food for wildlife is to have a diverse landscape of native woody and herbaceous plants. The old adage regarding food plots “when you can grow them you don’t need them, and when you need them you can’t grow them” is very true. However, food plots can be a useful tool to increase deer visibility for observation or to aid in doe harvest.

These are just a few, among many, misconceptions pertaining to white-tailed deer biology and management. ■