



Setting the Stage -Part 2

By J.T. Fleegle

PGC Wildlife Biologist

BY THE TIME antlerless deer were protected, the drama had been unfolding in Pennsylvania for nearly 250 years. Sure, the deer and most of the other wildlife had all but vanished from the land of plenty, but game wasn't the only thing disappearing. Penn's Woods, themselves, could have been classified as an endangered species.

In 1681, when King Charles II gave William Penn his chunk of the new world and sealed the deal on our great state's name, 90 percent of Pennsylvania was forested — an estimated 27 to 28 million acres. Now, Will recommended that "care be taken to leave one acre of trees for every five acres cleared." Because reducing a 90 percent forested state to a 17 percent forested state surely wouldn't change the complexion or the bounty of what was here when the colonists arrived.

While clearing the land for agriculture certainly caused its fair share of tree mortality, it was the lumber industry that waged war on Pennsylvania forests. Williamsport became known as the lumber capital of the world, and in 1899 Pennsylvania hit its peak annual lumber production of 2.3 billion board feet. (And here I thought numbers in the billions were reserved for the 21st century.)

By 1900, only 9 to 13 million acres of forestland remained in Pennsylvania. Like the deer, elk, beaver and the turkey, how could so much ever be depleted? Words like "conservation" and "sustainable" were nonexistent. Fires raged and erosion washed away topsoil, fouling creeks and streams. What was left was barren, stump-studded, burned over hillsides — a venerable moonscape in which Pennsylvania's wildlife (what was left) could not reside.

But no matter how beaten and abused, Mother Nature never surrenders. What did she do? She rolled up her sleeves and got back to work. Half of Pennsylvania's vast forests were gone. Something had to take their place. One of the reasons we can sometimes win a battle with Mother Nature but never the war is because she is always changing her game plan. Trees would retake Pennsylvania, but the forest would not look the same. Hemlocks and white pine had their heyday. Pennsylvania's "new" forests would be oak and cherry and maple and birch — millions and millions of tender, sweet, mouthwatering seedlings all growing at the same time with a healthy helping of greenbriar, elderberry, viburnum and asters. An endless deer buffet.

But were there any left to live in this new deer utopia?