



**By PGC Deer Biologists
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AUTHORS' NOTE: This article contains data with which some might disagree. It is important to understand the article is not a criticism of hunters any more than it is a criticism of biologists. As humans, we are all imperfect, regardless of our role in deer hunting and management.

WE often hear complaints that the Game Commission is not listening, that there are hundreds of thousands of hunters in the woods who know what is going on with the deer population, and that the commission needs to listen to what hunters say. It's a contentious issue for both sides. Hunters feel undervalued and the commission is accused of being uninterested

and unengaged. Is the commission listening? And what are hunters really seeing in the woods?

The commission regularly requests input from hunters. Sometimes this is embraced with enthusiasm by hunters, sometimes it's not. For example:

- The commission invited hunting groups to identify the goals used to guide deer management recommendations today.
- The commission asked thousands of hunters about their support for these goals.
- The commission annually sends surveys to tens of thousands of hunters and 60 to 70 percent of hunters respond.
- Each year, more than 300,000 hunters are required by law to report their deer harvests, some of the most important input hunters can provide to the deer program. Unfortunately, only

30 to 36 percent of successful hunters report their harvests. The rest don't.

Seeking input from hunters is an annual and critically important activity for the agency's deer and wildlife-management programs. Input from hunters is a necessity and the commission actively seeks it.

We have all heard that saying, "What you see is what you get." Although most people, hunters included, might believe that what they "see" while looking for whitetails is actually what is there, it almost always is not true.

For wildlife biologists, it's not the number of deer seen, but the number not seen that presents the challenge in our work.

Biologists expend considerable effort and resources trying to determine this, and we use tools and methods not available to hunters.

For example, we can capture and mark a sample of deer with radio collars. This sample is a "known population," because we know how many collared deer are in it. We can then see how many are harvested. If 20 of 100 radio-collared deer are harvested from our known population, then we can calculate that 80 percent of the known population was not harvested. If our sample of deer is representative of the entire deer population, we estimate that 80 percent of the population was not harvested.

The number not seen (or harvested) can be eye-opening.

As a profession, wildlife biology continues to reinforce that what we see might not actually reflect what is there. This is why we spend considerable time and effort to estimate what we did not see. We're better at it than

we were a few decades ago, but it's still not, and probably never will be, an exact science, because the number of deer in the commonwealth changes by the hour every day of every year.

For a good number of hunters, what they see is what they believe is there. But the same reasons — primarily deer aren't where you expect them to be or cover hides them well — that prevent biologists from observing all animals also apply to hunters. That's why results based only on observation might contradict other measures. For example, in the four WMUs where the seven-day concurrent season was evaluated over four years, we have population estimates, hunter reports and hunter opinions that do not agree with one another.

Although agency population estimates and hunter reports showed stable or increasing deer population trends, a good number of hunters believed deer populations were declining after the 2010 hunting season. We all are human, and "seeing is believing," but that's why it's important to look for what cannot be easily seen. Regardless of our desires, experience or skill, we cannot see every deer in the woods.

The Game Commission has a constitutional mandate to manage responsibly Pennsylvania's white-tailed deer populations for everyone. That's why our deer management recommendations are based on a combination of hunter reports and appropriately collected data. In deer management, there is always more than meets the eye. 🍄

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