

Life & Times of the whitetail

Biologist



Deer Season from the other end of the gun

IT HAS TAKEN 350 days, but deer season is finally here. If you are one of Pennsylvania's deer hunters, the excitement and anticipation on the weekend after Thanksgiving is almost tangible. If you are a Game Commission biologist or any other person assigned to a deer aging team, those aren't exactly the words you'd use.

For us, seven of the next 15 days will be spent aging hundreds of deer heads. It takes a small army to collect deer harvest data. Deer & Elk Section biologists coordinate the effort, and are accompanied by more than 10 percent of agency staffers. Together we charge the hill . . . of deer heads.

Meat processors across the commonwealth save mountains of heads, and soldiers in our biological army record age, sex and license information for thousands of these deer each year. These data are used to estimate harvests and monitor population trends. Annual reports detail how many males and females were checked, how they were dispersed among age classes, how many were checked

and how many were reported harvested.

But, the annual reports lack the true experience. Although the deer-aging army is well-trained for battle — having passed a deer aging exam with a 95 percent or higher, having become familiar with datasheets and equipment, and being stocked with supplies — little can prepare a person for the sights, sounds and smells of deer aging — think Dirty Jobs, not Animal Planet.

The sights: 50-gallon drums overflowing with deer heads, brain matter, bulging eyeballs, blood clots, and an indescribable soupy red mix at the bottom of the barrel. The sounds: the telltale thud of 10-pound deer head hitting the ground, the wicking of the knife as it slices through the cheek to reveal the lower jaw, the pop of the jaw with the twist of the jaw spreader. The smells: let's just say a strong stomach is a requirement. Although green is a term used to describe someone with little real-world experience, it is also the color of some novice deer agers. That's the sight picture from the biologist's end of the gun. **0**



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