

It All Hangs In the Balance

For me, the month of March brings with it many positives. You can feel the last strongholds of winter beginning to yield to the forces of spring. The sun has more warmth, snow begins to melt, sap begins to run, and the energy of optimism begins to set in our human bones. But for many species of wildlife, particularly whitetail deer, March can also be a month full of negatives.

By this time of year most herbivores have exhausted the fat reserves they accumulated the previous fall. With little to eat they are just trying to make it to green up. The old and the young are feeling the effects of malnutrition. Death, in the form of starvation or predation, is omnipresent and lurks in the shadows. March is the "heartbreak hill" of the winter marathon. Not all will make it to the finish line.

Of course, that is all natural. And if spring arrives in time most will live to see another season. Yes, the weak along with a few others will fall victim. But for the most part the strong will make it, and the best of the specie's DNA will pass on to the next generation.

But what if winter holds firm with a late season arctic blast, and/or a classic Nor'easter that dumps two or more feet of snow on us? When winter hangs on into April many simply won't have the strength to "make the hill", and perish. Such is life in the animal kingdom. There is seldom a graceful exit.

I guess if I was trying to encapsulate my emotions regarding the month of March in one word that word would be "anxiety". Living in the North Country the deer I hunt are very vulnerable to winter mortality. The deer yards are not what they once were. There is little refuge when snow depths restrict their movement. With only browse for forage a "good old fashioned winter" can decimate local deer populations.

One of these "good old fashioned winters" seems to come along about every three or four years, and the deer population gets whacked pretty hard when it does. Last year was one of the mildest I can remember. That translated very well last deer season with hunters taking good numbers along with many mature "monster bucks".

It wasn't unexpected. A mild winter always correlates to bigger bodies and heavier antlers the following fall. The older mature bucks that were "rutted out" and past their prime that likely would have succumbed to a hard winter did not. Rather than lose a significant part of their overall weight, many held onto weight. Bare ground and a bumper acorn crop made for easy foraging.

I'm hoping this year's winter will also be on the mild side. But that is only a hope. As I write, I don't know how things will "sugar off" yet. Like our beloved Patriots in February, the outcome won't be known until the game has ended. Last week we got hit with two big storms and several "two to four inches" dropping over 30 inches of snow in total. Although still only February, my anxiety level begins

to rise anytime I need to evaluate shoveling off my roof. But now this week temperatures are above normal and the snowpack is settling nicely. It's almost impossible to know what next week may bring. I'm just hoping old man winter doesn't have any fourth quarter miracle comebacks.

But what if it does? Well I'll be right back to square one, having to "start over" waiting for the deer herd to recover. 2017 will not hold much promise. I remember some of the biologists back when I was a young warden saying "You can't stockpile deer." That was a direct reference to the carrying capacity of the land and the need to emphasize habitat management over trophy management.

Carrying capacity is defined by how much biomass a habitat can sustain "perpetually". If three out of four winters are mild but the fourth one is a doozy, deer will experience large scale die offs. In essence, the previous successive mild winters allowed the herd to expand and exceed the carrying capacity of the habitat. And having more animals competing for the same limited resources only exacerbates the situation. Over the past twenty years it has repeated time and time again. And yet we learn nothing. We are primed for that to happen yet again.

That is the problem with attempting to manage for trophy bucks. Trophy bucks are four and a half years old or older. How do you produce a five year old animal when most perish before the age of three? You don't. And as a side effect, a significant natural resource is left to go unutilized in the process, to be converted into little more than coyote scat.

Unfortunately, today's crop of biologists trend towards trophy management. They worry that a liberalized kill would have detrimental effects on the herd's ability to produce mature bucks. In a Utopian world, where hunter mortality was the only variable, and you could happily survive on salad, that would make sense. But does it make sense when our deer herd fluctuates from one year to another by tens of thousands because of one severe winter? What became of those thousands of deer? Wouldn't it have made sense if some of those could have found their way into a hunter's freezer? The definition of "Conservation" is the WISE use of our natural resources. So you be the judge. Is that your definition of "Conservation"?

It's not unusual for March, and even April, to be very snowy months in the North Country. The way things are trending rain seems more likely than snow. But you can't take that for granted. Our weather patterns seem to be oscillating to extremes. For all we know, March may be the snowiest month on record. It's hard to predict the future. How many of you can say back in November that you predicted it to be 25 below zero two weeks before Christmas. I sure didn't. It is for that reason that I have always been an advocate for allowing for a reasonable harvest of antlerless deer.

I've barked up that tree loudly for many years without having any success. About the only thing I have been able to accomplish was to hold my ground in stopping the very ill conceived "three point antler restriction" proposal. Why? Because it is completely inconsistent with what "Conservation" is all about. And Conservation is the sportsman's guiding principle. Plus, a management scheme that produces healthy habitat will also produce the healthiest mature bucks. Good habitat management is also trophy deer management as well.