



High-priced deer dinner

By HOLLY SPANGLER

FROM his Jersey County farm, Henry Kallal reports that he's managed to kill three deer. The problem is, that was all with vehicles.

"I decided I was using the wrong kind of ammunition!" he jokes.

Yet the prevalence of deer in Illinois' countryside is no laughing matter. It's certainly not to those many farmers, like Kallal, who experience increasing levels of crop damage — damage to a crop that's increasingly valuable.

For Kampsville farmer Lonnie Skirvin, deer feeding has caused him to change his entire crop management system. Skirvin farms on the north end of Calhoun County, just between the Mississippi and Illinois rivers.

Calhoun County is known as big buck country for good reason. Skirvin reports spotting herds numbering 100 as they ate their way through his fields. Deer have become so thick on roadways that locals joke they can spot an out-of-state driver if they're actually driving the speed limit.

In fact, Skirvin quit growing soybeans because the deer would pass through and nibble off the majority of the plant,

Key Points

- Illinois farmers lose high-value crops to deer and other wildlife.
- IDNR admits deer population is too high.
- Task force brings stakeholders together to determine solution.

including the growing point. Now he's considering pulling wheat from his rotation as well, leaving him with just corn. Even that won't be a moneymaker this year. Because flooding pushed deer off river islands and into his upland fields this year, Skirvin expects deer feeding will reduce his yields to 50 bushels per acre (140 is a normal average).

Collisions up

Kallal, who serves on the state's Deer Population Task Force, says deer numbers have exploded in recent years.

Illinois Department of Natural Resources' Mike Conlin says the population has held steady at 800,000 for the past four years. He points to deer-vehicle collisions per billion miles driven as the best measure of the changing population.

According to IDNR, in 1997 there were 173 collisions per billion miles driven. The number peaked at 241 in 2003,

and came in at 233 in 2007. When the numbers are broken down by county, they reveal a near doubling of accidents in some counties. And in 2005, 11 people were killed in deer-vehicle collisions.

The financial cost of collisions is staggering, as well. Country Financial reports that in 1998, deer-vehicle claims totaled \$7.9 million. In 2008, as of Oct. 1 — before prime deer collision season — claims total \$12.7 million. Average vehicular damage per incident over those 10 years tops \$1,800.

Crop losses vary from simply a nuisance to near crop failure. Many Illinois farmers go into harvest knowing the yield monitor will drop on those outside rows that border timber. Other farmers, in places like Calhoun County, are constructing 9-foot fences around fields. Expensive, certainly; but perhaps justifiable when they've already invested \$500 an acre in corn inputs.

Hunting trophies

Kallal blames trophy buck hunters for part of the problem. "It used to be that a 4- or 6-point buck was a big deal," he says. "Now they want 16 points — an atypical rack. They're getting more selective, and they're leaving does behind."

Conlin agrees. He fields reports from outfitters (the folks who lease ground for fee hunting and organize hunts) who say their hunters just want to shoot bucks. "That's a common problem," Conlin says. "The population gets out of whack and landowners take a beating on crops."

However, in one instance in southern Illinois, when an outfitter sought out places for the

Leasing ground? Limit your liability

LEASING timber ground to hunters or outfitters can be an excellent way to help control the deer population while also helping recoup some of the profits those deer devoured. However, before you cash the check, Bryan Endres, University of Illinois ag law, says to consider the legal ramifications.

Illinois statute provides liability protection to the landowner if he or she allows hunters free of charge. The law was written to encourage that exact practice. Start charging those folks, however, and the statute does not apply.

In that instance, Endres says, landowners need to have both adequate insurance and have a contract drawn up. Call your insurance agent to be certain your farm policy covers this situation, particularly since leasing hunting ground may not be considered part of the farm operation.

The contract should include the following:

- **Finances:** how much is being paid and for what privileges
- **Dates:** when they are allowed access and when access ends
- **Stewardship:** commonsense land-care clauses, such as closing gates and not damaging the property
- **Liability:** completely transfer responsibility for injury to lessee

Endres adds that the liability clause should be drawn up very broadly, to include anyone the lessee might bring with them. However, in some cases, minors' rights cannot be waived by an adult. He recommends landowners discuss that situation with their attorney.

Use excess meat to feed the poor

Two groups in Illinois seek to match extra deer meat with the folks who need it:

Farmers and Hunters Feeding the Hungry
www.fhfh.org

Illinois Sportsmen Against Hunger
dnr.state.il.us/legislation/isah