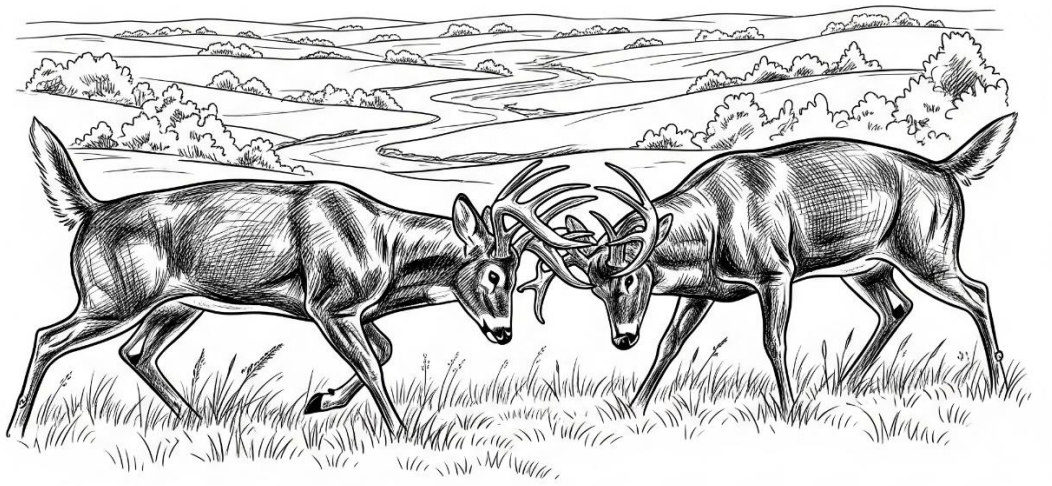
White-tailed Deer Management Plan

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

2025-2026



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This plan outlines the Iowa Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) comprehensive strategy for managing white-tailed deer populations across the state. Following a period of extirpation and recovery in the early 20th century, Iowa's deer population has rebounded and now supports the state's most culturally and economically significant wildlife resource. The Iowa Deer Program has evolved into a nationally recognized model that balances hunting quality, recreational opportunity, conflict mitigation, and public safety.

The overall objective of the Iowa Deer Program is to **maintain balanced, quality deer populations throughout Iowa's diverse landscapes, using a responsive, county-specific approach grounded in science and shaped by public input.**

The program emphasizes adaptive management, recognizing that population dynamics, land use, and social expectations vary across Iowa's diverse landscapes. Key components include:

- Population Monitoring and Assessment: Integrating multiple independent datasets, including harvest reports, spotlight surveys, bowhunter observations, and deer-vehicle collision rates, to evaluate population trends at county, regional, and statewide scales. Biological indicators are considered alongside stakeholder feedback to ensure decisions reflect real-world conditions and public values.
- Harvest-Based Management: Utilizing voluntary, regulated hunting as the primary tool for managing deer abundance, with emphasis on balanced age and sex structures through responsible doe harvest and mature buck conservation. County-level antlerless quotas and special hunts are adjusted annually based on local management strategies.
- Adaptive, Region-Specific Objectives: Rather than applying a broad, one-size-fits-all approach, the program sets regional population objectives by considering population and harvest trends, landowner tolerance, and disease impacts. Localized harvest strategies promote population stability, recovery, or reduction where appropriate.
- Stakeholder Engagement: Maintaining open communication with hunters, landowners, agricultural producers, and other stakeholders through advisory committees, public meetings, and outreach efforts. The Deer Study Advisory Committee (DSAC) provides valuable input and perspective, while partnerships with NGOs and universities enhance the program's outreach capacity and reinforce its commitment to collaborative management. Regional DNR staff also provide valuable insight into local attitudes and trends.
- Public Accountability: Serving as both a trusted wildlife authority and a responsive public resource, the Deer Program ensures transparency and accessibility through regular updates, data sharing, and community engagement.

The Iowa DNR remains committed to responsible stewardship of the state's white-tailed deer population. Through data-driven management, public collaboration, and flexible strategies, the Deer Program supports socially acceptable deer populations while preserving the ecological, recreational, and economic benefits provided for all Iowans.

INTRODUCTION

The mission of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is to conserve and enhance our natural resources in cooperation with individuals and organizations to improve the quality of life in Iowa and ensure a legacy for future generations. White-tailed deer are one of Iowa's most valuable natural resources, and represent the state's most culturally and economically impactful wildlife species.

The goal of the Iowa Deer Program is to manage a quality, balanced deer population that maximizes recreational benefits, such as hunting and wildlife viewing, while minimizing negative impacts, such as agricultural and property damage. A combination of Iowa's diverse habitat, climate, nutritional resources, and regulatory foresight have resulted in some of the highest quality white-tailed deer hunting opportunities in the world. However, maintaining world-class deer quality into the future heavily relies on the crucial role of Iowa's many hunters in conserving and managing balanced populations. This critical relationship depends on sustaining a high level of trust and underscores the Iowa Deer Program's commitment to transparency and accountability with all members of the public.

The objective of this plan is to showcase the comprehensive framework that guides the population monitoring, management strategy, regulatory framework, and stakeholder engagement efforts related to white-tailed deer in Iowa. By outlining the biological, social, and regulatory foundations of the Iowa Deer Program, this plan serves to inform the public, support science-based decision-making, and foster continued collaboration among hunters, landowners, conservationists, and other key stakeholders. Through this approach, the Iowa DNR remains committed to ensuring the long-term sustainability of Iowa's deer herd and preserving the cultural, ecological, and economic benefits to Iowa's citizens into the future.

OBJECTIVE

The primary objective of the Iowa Deer Program is to manage balanced, quality deer populations through county-scale monitoring and regulations. Given Iowa's diverse landscapes and the varying interests, priorities, and expectations of local stakeholders, a one-size-fits-all, statewide management approach is neither practical nor appropriate. While the Iowa DNR maintains robust data to monitor deer population trends at the county level, the Deer Program recognizes that sound management decisions require more than data alone-it must also incorporate input and perspectives from local residents, hunters, agricultural producers, and natural resource professionals. Rather than adhering to fixed or arbitrary population targets, the program follows an adaptive management framework that seeks to maintain deer populations within ecologically sustainable and socially acceptable levels, guided by both stakeholder input and data-driven insights.

HISTORY OF WHITE-TAILED DEER IN IOWA

Prior to European settlement, white-tailed deer were abundant on the Iowa landscape due to a diverse mosaic of forests, prairies, and wetland ecosystems. White-tailed deer, along with other large mammals with which they shared the Iowa landscape, such as elk and bison, represented a vital resource to Native American communities. While a lack of primary data on deer populations during this era make it difficult to speculate on population densities, early European travelers noting the Iowa territory as "a country so full of game" suggest that white-tailed deer had a thriving presence across the landscape.

Throughout much of the early 19th century, early settlers responded to the strong market for deerskins and venison with unregulated and unsustainable harvest of white-tailed deer throughout the state. This era of early settlement also included major landscape changes, with settlements and agriculture beginning to replace much of the state's habitat, specifically prairies. By 1856, the deer population had dwindled to the point that the Iowa Legislature banned deer hunting from February 1-July 15, which marked the state's first regulatory protection of the species. The deer hunting season was closed completely in 1898, at which point wild deer had been nearly extirpated from the landscape.

During the first decades of the 20th century, Iowa's deer population remained very low, with rare pockets of wild deer growing in parts of northeastern, western, and central Iowa. Beginning in the 1930s, a captive deer herd managed by the state in Ledges State Park served as the source population for deer translocation efforts across the state. Statewide, deer herds grew slowly at first, with population estimates suggesting roughly 1,000 in 1940 and 1,650 in 1947.

By 1950, the statewide population was estimated at over 10,000 deer, and conflicts were beginning to emerge in certain areas that contained unmanaged, growing populations-specifically increased agricultural damage and collision with vehicles. In 1953, the state responded by holding the first modern deer season in 45 counties across five days in mid-December. A total of 3,782 Iowans purchased a deer hunting license that year, resulting in a total harvest of approximately 4,000 deer.

Over the next two decades, statewide population size, and consequently deer harvest, increased gradually. All deer hunting licenses issued in this era were 'any-deer' tags, meaning that deer of both sexes could be harvested legally. By the early 1970s, deer hunters in Iowa expressed enough interest in growing the deer population that 'buck-only' tags became the default for hunters statewide. Quotas of 'any-deer' licenses were still available through a lottery system, though these tags were limited in quantity to bolster the reproductive capacity of the deer population. While any resident could still participate in the deer hunting season, this regulatory shift ushered in a new harvest paradigm, and limited 'any-deer' licenses became highly coveted.

As Iowa's deer population continued to grow, so did interest in deer hunting. Due to Iowa's fragmented, row crop-dominated landscape, hunters were noticing more and more competition in the field each season. In 1975, Iowa responded to this issue by establishing a two-part gun season that limited hunters to participate in only one of two gun seasons-a tradition that continues today. Hunters also had to select a specific zone for which they wanted to hunt, which deviated from the 'statewide' license model of the 1960s and prior. As many as nine zones were designated across the state, each containing their own season length and 'any-deer' quota. These changes successfully distributed the harvest pressure of Iowa's growing contingency of deer hunters without sacrificing opportunity to participate each season.

The decade that followed these shifts in regulatory framework can be characterized as a rapidly increasing deer population due to antlerless deer, such as does and fawns, being subject to far less harvest pressure. Iowa was quickly developing its reputation as a premier whitetail hunting state, and archery hunting was becoming a more popular pursuit. In 1981, 'buck-only' licenses were reverted back to statewide-the first statewide deer license since 1963. In 1986, hunters were able to purchase two deer licenses for the first time, so long as one license was designated for archery. An early and late muzzleloader season was also established in 1984 and 1986, respectively. 1989 marked the first season that allowed a limited number of nonresidents to participate in Iowa's deer seasons. This era of Iowa's deer management demonstrates two important principles: first, that deer population dynamics are highly sensitive to female harvest, and second, that distributing harvest pressure across space and time is crucial for maintaining a quality hunting experience in landscapes with limited habitat.

By the 1990s, most of the state (and surrounding Midwest region) contained higher deer populations than had been observed any time in the last century. While strong deer populations were offering a quality of hunting experience unmatched in recent decades, deer damage to crops and property were also increasing in some areas. However, Iowa's diverse landscape has always created difficulties in managing deer populations at the statewide scale. Deer populations in regions with strong habitat, such as southern and eastern Iowa, are far different from deer populations in habitat-limited regions, such as northern and western Iowa, in terms of abundance and response to harvest pressure. In response, the Iowa DNR sought to strike a balance by ushering in a new county-scale management strategy in 1992. By setting county-level regulations and harvest opportunities (e.g., antlerless license quotas), biologists were able to manage deer populations more effectively in accordance with regional differences in deer abundance and habitat availability across the state.

1996 was a benchmark year, marking the first modern season that hunter harvest exceeded 100,000 deer in Iowa[1]. Iowa's deer hunting was entering its heyday, but not without its share of controversy from farmers, landowners, and motorists. Around this time, the Iowa DNR formed a deer management committee, including representatives from recreation, conservation, and agricultural groups to discuss deer concerns (the present-day version of the Deer Study Advisory Committee still meets annually. In 1997, a legislative bill was passed to form the Depredation Management Program, a program for helping farmers effectively deal with deer damage that can result from local "hot-spots" of deer

[1]Prior to 2006, Iowa's deer harvest was estimated using post-season surveys. Comparison of deer harvest levels pre- and post-introduction of Iowa's mandatory reporting system should be done with caution.

abundance. Shortly after, special urban deer hunts were developed across the state to assist municipalities in managing high deer populations by offering hunters additional deer tags within these zones.

While antlerless hunting opportunities started to become more available during the 1990s, deer populations continued to grow, particularly in southern and eastern Iowa. By the early 2000s, deer populations in these regions had grown to levels that created challenges for many Iowans, particularly farmers and landowners. According to a statewide survey issued in 2002, approximately 75% of landowners wanted to see a decrease in deer numbers, and Iowa's deer program responded by increasing harvest opportunity for antlerless deer. Statewide, Iowa's county antlerless tags increased from around 22,000 to over 100,000 between the 2002 and 2005 hunting season-and hunters responded with increased harvest. Through the 1990s, approximately equal numbers of bucks and does were taken by hunters each season; however, by the 2005 season, doe harvest was well over 150% of reported buck harvest. In 2008, the Deer Study Advisory Committee agreed that a balanced, statewide deer population would be such that could be sustained by the statewide harvest levels of the mid-1990s.

Iowa's deer populations responded to the aggressive doe harvest through the 2000s, and by the early 2010s, statewide harvest was back to the estimated levels of the mid-1990s. The deliberate population reduction strategy was further compounded in 2012 and 2013, when hemorrhagic disease (i.e., EHD and/or Bluetongue) outbreaks impacted local deer populations in southern and western Iowa, respectively. To further complicate deer management during this time, Iowa's first detection of Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) was detected in Allamakee County in 2012. While other states have responded to CWD detections with eradication efforts, often involving sharpshooting or intense targeted removal, Iowa's deer program took a more pragmatic approach that emphasizes surveillance and balancing potential overabundance through voluntary harvest.

By 2013, a growing number of counties were showing clear disparities between antlerless quotas and actual tag sales-signaling a notable decline in hunter demand for antlerless harvest. In 2014, the statewide total of county antlerless tags was reduced by 35% to begin a new objective of maintaining current population levels at the statewide scale. At this time, negative impacts of deer abundance were considered alleviated from the levels experienced in the past decade, and the focus returned to maintaining balanced, quality deer populations at the county scale. Today, the Iowa Deer Program's management strategy focuses on balancing quality recreational opportunities with mitigating negative impacts of deer abundance using a combination of local engagement and data-driven decision-making. This approach acknowledges that Iowa's diverse landscape makes statewide harvest or population targets an impractical management objective. By adapting to regional conditions and prioritizing both biological and social considerations, Iowa's Deer Program remains committed to sustaining healthy deer populations and preserving the state's natural heritage for future generations.

MONITORING AND ASSESSMENT

Overview

Wildlife populations are inherently dynamic, continually influenced by changing environmental, ecological, and human factors. White-tailed deer are no exception, especially considering their ability to thrive in diverse habitats with high reproductive success. At the same time, deer populations trends are impacted by disease outbreaks, hunting pressure, and shifting land use patterns. While stable, balanced deer populations are the long-term objective of the Iowa Deer Program, achieving uniform stability at a statewide scale is neither practical nor realistic due to ecological and social variability. Therefore, population monitoring is an essential component of adaptive management, providing the data needed to respond effectively to regional changes and guide responsible decision-making.

Population Monitoring

Spring Spotlight Survey

The Spring Spotlight Survey is a long-standing, DNR staff-led survey to monitor white-tailed deer populations, as well as many of Iowa's furbearer species, during late winter and early spring. Conducted annually across standardized routes in every county, this survey involves driving approximately 50 miles of rural roads at night using spotlights to count animals observed in open habitats such as fields, pastures, and woodland edges. Efforts are made to maintain consistent routes, timing, and weather conditions annually in each county. Because it is performed after hunting seasons have closed and before vegetation fully greens up, the Spring Spotlight Survey provides a consistent snapshot of overwintering deer

numbers. Although seasonal timing and weather conditions can affect detection rates, its value lies in tracking year-to-year trends in relative abundance at a local scale. The data serve as a direct index of late-winter abundance and help identify regional changes in deer numbers-particularly when interpreted alongside other datasets. As a staff-led survey with consistent methodology, the Spring Spotlight Survey is considered one of the most standardized and comparable datasets in the Deer Program's population monitoring toolbox.

Bowhunter Observation Survey

The Bowhunter Observation Survey is a citizen-science initiative that enlists volunteer bowhunters to record detailed wildlife sightings during their time afield. Participants log the number of deer they see per hour of hunting effort, categorized by sex and age class, along with sightings of other species such as turkeys and furbearers. Similar to the Spring Spotlight Survey, this effort is conducted annually in every county and provides a passive and cost-effective way to monitor deer numbers across the state. Bowhunters represent an ideal sample group for collecting such data, as bowhunting primarily involves long periods of quiet, stationary observation. This survey allows for meaningful data comparisons across years and among counties with sufficient participation. Though subject to observational bias and variability in hunter behavior, the Bowhunter Observation Survey remains a robust, valuable complement to staff-led monitoring efforts and provides an opportunity for Iowa's deer hunters to assist in population monitoring.

Reported Harvest

Reported deer harvest data provide a foundational dataset for understanding deer population trends, hunter participation, and management effectiveness across Iowa. All hunters are required by law to report their deer harvests by the day following the harvest, specifying information such as sex, age class, weapon type, and county of harvest. This self-reported data is verified and summarized annually to produce county, regional, and statewide summaries that inform regulatory changes, such as license quota setting. In particular, antlered deer harvest provides additional value as a population index because the opportunity to harvest antlered deer remains consistent over time, unlike antlerless harvest, which is subject to varying quotas and regulatory adjustments. Given Iowa's relatively stable number of license-buying deer hunters, trends in antlered harvest serve as a useful indicator of changes in deer abundance and a direct reflection of hunter success over time.

Deer-Vehicle Collisions (DVCs)

Deer-vehicle collision data offer a unique, non-hunting-based index of deer population trends across the state. After most major deer-vehicle collisions, a report is typically made to law enforcement, which ultimately gets summarized by the Iowa Department of Transportation (IDOT). To ensure consistency across counties and years, the Iowa Deer Program standardizes total annual DVCs with estimated miles driven by county, both of which are provided by IDOT. This system results in a long-term dataset that can reflect deer changes in abundance through the standardized frequency of deer-vehicle collisions.

Disease Monitoring

Numerous diseases can impact white-tailed deer in Iowa; however, Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) and Hemorrhagic Disease (EHD/Bluetongue) are the primary diseases that have the potential to produce population-level impacts and pose risks to a balanced, quality deer population.

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD)

CWD poses a significant, long-term threat to the quality and health of deer populations in Iowa, due to its transmissible, persistent, incurable, and 100% fatal qualities. As of 2025, CWD has been detected in wild deer within 29 Iowa counties, though estimated prevalence remains relatively low. The Iowa DNR Chronic Wasting Disease Response Plan (2025-2030) provides a comprehensive overview of the history, policy, surveillance efforts, management strategies, and recent research regarding this important disease.

For more information on Chronic Wasting Disease in Iowa, visit www.iowadnr.gov/cwd.

Hemorrhagic Disease (EHD/Bluetongue)

Hemorrhagic disease tends to affect deer in Iowa between late summer and early fall, though outbreak severity can vary from year to year. In the event of severe outbreaks, hemorrhagic disease may cause substantial, though often localized,

mortality of deer in Iowa. Hunters and landowners may discover multiple deer carcasses on a property, specifically near a water source, during these months as a result of hemorrhagic disease. There is no effective treatment or known prevention for wild deer.

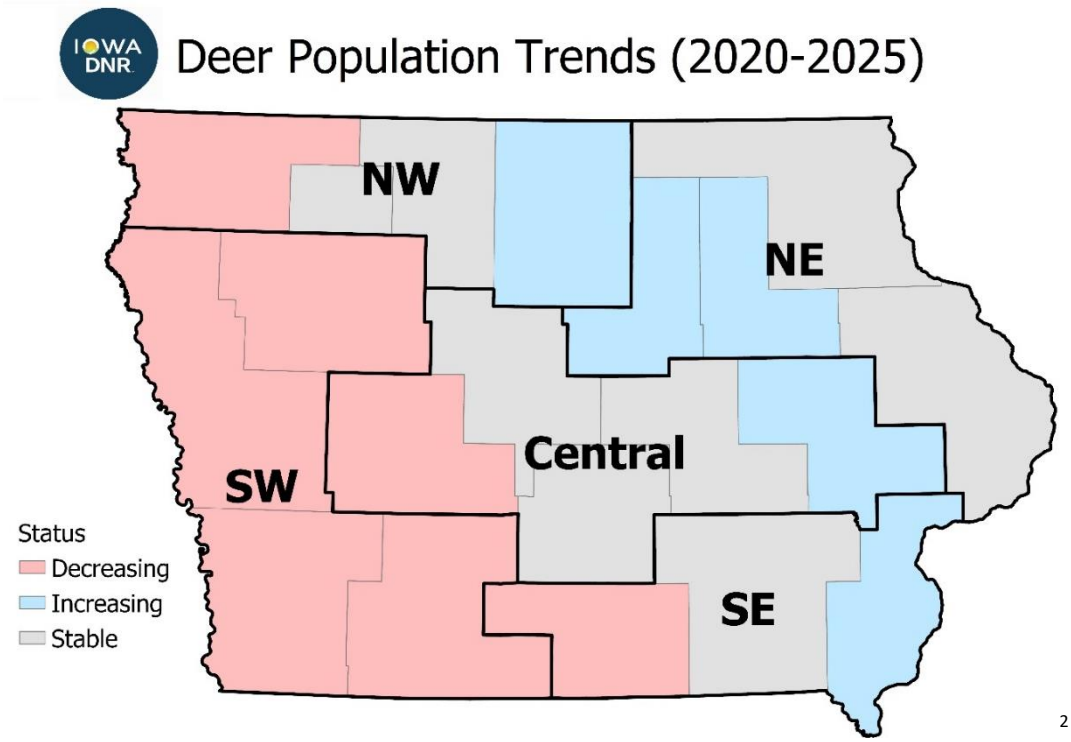
It is important to keep in mind that these diseases typically don't impact county deer populations uniformly, meaning that deer on one property may experience a severe outbreak while deer on neighboring properties do not. Since Iowa's first major outbreak in 2012, the majority of some counties that faced severe hemorrhagic disease activity, particularly those with ample habitat and strong deer populations, saw deer numbers return to normal within 2-3 years. However, other counties that experienced severe outbreaks may still be dealing with lower deer numbers several years later. As we're learning more about this disease and its impacts on county deer populations, the Deer Program will continue to explore regulatory options to help facilitate population recovery when appropriate.

Hemorrhagic disease monitoring in Iowa relies primarily on public involvement. Reporting hemorrhagic disease mortalities is crucial for the Deer Program to understand local population impacts and inform appropriate management decisions. Recently, two online tools were developed to assist with hemorrhagic disease public reporting: the EHD/Bluetongue Reporting Tool (also available in the GoOutdoorsIA mobile app "toolbox") and the EHD/Bluetongue Reporting Dashboard.

Current Trends

Statewide

Statewide, the Iowa deer population is maintaining a relatively stable population trend in recent years. However, looking at population trends on a statewide scale obscures important regional differences that are critical to effective management. While some areas-particularly in eastern Iowa-are experiencing localized increases in deer abundance, others have stable or declining populations. Separating deer population trends from a strictly statewide perspective is essential for responsibly managing for balanced and regionally appropriate deer populations.



[2]

[2] The figure above displays five-year (2019–2024) deer population trends by Wildlife Management Unit (WMU), based on all available population indices. Because these trends are generalized at the WMU level, deer populations in individual counties may not always align with the broader regional pattern.

Northeast Region (NE)

Profile: Due to a landscape defined by rugged topography and steep forested valleys characteristic of the Driftless Area, interspersed with cropland and pastures, this region contains some of the most suitable habitat, and consequently, strongest deer populations found in the state.

Population Trends: Generally speaking, this region has experienced relatively stable deer population and harvest trends over the last decade. Exceptions are certain counties at the interface of the Driftless Area and predominant cropland (e.g., Butler, Black Hawk counties) which have seen increasing deer numbers in the last several years. This trend is partly driven by increased residential development along major habitat corridors-such as the Cedar River-which limits hunters' ability to implement harvest-based population management.

Southeast Region (SE)

Profile: Much of the landscape in this region is characterized by a diverse matrix of rolling hills, significant riparian corridors (e.g., Skunk, Iowa, Des Moines, Mississippi River), mature hardwood timber, as well as row crop and pastureland. The southeastern region contains some of the most suitable deer habitat in the state, with moderate to strong deer populations, particularly along the Missouri border.

Population Trends: Within the southeast region, recent deer population trends have varied geographically. Survey and harvest data suggest that deer populations are increasing in the eastern part of the region, relatively stable in the central part of the region, and declining in the western part of the region. Recent population declines are primarily attributable to recent hemorrhagic disease (EHD/Bluetongue) outbreaks in both 2023 and 2024. It should be noted that while deer populations in southern Iowa appear to have suffered from hemorrhagic disease, recent population survey and harvest data still indicate relatively robust deer populations throughout most of this region.

Central Region

Profile: In contrast to the two eastern regions above, the central region is more heavily agricultural, with much of the landscape dominated by row crops and small woodlots. Though more fragmented than eastern regions, suitable deer habitat persists along the Raccoon, Des Moines, and Iowa River, which support moderate to strong deer populations, especially within the southern and eastern portions of the region. Where habitat is more limited, such as the northern and western portions of the region, deer numbers tend to be relatively low.

Population Trends: Consistent with patterns observed statewide, deer population trends in this region tend to transition from increasing in the east to decreasing in the west. Increasing deer populations in this region are primarily concentrated around the Cedar Rapids–Coralville–Iowa City metro areas, where expanding development creates harvest-based management challenges by limiting hunting access. Deer populations in the western portion of this region appear to have been particularly impacted by the 2024 hemorrhagic disease outbreak, though data suggests some of these counties have been slightly declining for several years (e.g., Guthrie, Dallas, Polk counties).

Southwest Region

Profile: Like the Central region, land cover in the Southwest Region is highly variable. Deer habitat suitability-as well as resulting deer numbers-tends to increase in the southern and eastern portions of this region, due to rugged terrain, wooded draws, brushy hillsides, and early successional cover being more abundant. Farther west and north, deer habitat becomes increasingly limited as the landscape shifts toward row-crop agriculture. Despite the expansive cropland, western portions also include major habitat corridors, such as the Loess Hills and Missouri River. Besides the southeastern lobe (Adams, Taylor, Adair, Madison, Union, Ringgold, Decatur counties), deer populations in this region are among the lowest in the state.

Population Trends: The vast majority of counties in the Southwest Region are experiencing a sustained population decline. Likely contributing factors include a combination of habitat loss (conversion of grassland and forest to agriculture and development), hemorrhagic disease (EHD/Bluetongue) outbreaks, strong predator (i.e., coyote) populations, and historic overharvest of antlerless deer.

Northwest Region

Profile: The Northwest Region is characterized by a predominantly flat, intensively farmed landscape with limited tree cover. Primary deer habitat exists mainly along intact riparian corridors, tallgrass prairies, and pothole wetlands. Deer numbers in this region are among the lowest in the state, with highly localized herds found within existing cover. While Northwest Region deer populations are very low relative to other regions, certain habitat corridors-such the Little and Big Sioux River-can support moderate densities. Habitat suitability generally improves toward the eastern portion of this region, contributing to relatively greater deer abundance in those areas.

Population Trends: Consistent with patterns observed statewide, deer population trends in this region tend to transition from increasing in the east to decreasing in the west. County deer populations in the eastern portion of this region have greatly benefited from population recovery efforts initiated in 2014. Despite the same regulatory strategy, populations further west have been slower to recover, likely due to poorer habitat conditions. In 2024, severe hemorrhagic disease (EHD/Bluetongue) outbreaks were experienced in far northwestern counties, resulting in record-low population and harvest metrics.

Using Data to Inform Management

Robust population monitoring of white-tailed deer in Iowa is essential for addressing stakeholder concerns, evaluating management outcomes, and guiding data-driven regulations. Population data are collected and analyzed at the county, wildlife management unit (WMU), and state level-though emphasis is placed on finer spatial scales, such as county and WMU, where land use, hunting practices, and habitat conditions vary most significantly. County-level monitoring enables the Iowa Deer Program to respond to region-specific trends and management needs, rather than applying a broad, one-size-fits-all strategy across the state.

The Iowa Deer Program relies on multiple independent datasets-including reported harvest, staff surveys (Spring Spotlight), hunter surveys (Bowhunter Observation Survey), and deer-vehicle collision trends-each offering a unique lens into herd status and population dynamics. While each of these important datasets offers valuable insights, each also has inherent constraints that limit its reliability when used on its own. By utilizing all available datasets in a composite framework, resulting population trends are more reliable and less susceptible to bias from any single source.

These datasets are primarily used as indicators of population trends (i.e., indices) rather than direct estimates of deer abundance or density. This approach acknowledges that while individual datasets can effectively track relative changes over time, none can reliably quantify statewide or county-level population size due to inherent sampling variability, reporting inconsistencies, and methodological limitations.

While population and harvest data play a critical role in informing decisions, the Iowa Deer Program also relies on an equally important form of data-local feedback. Iowa's deer populations are managed for the benefit of Iowans, not for arbitrary data metrics; therefore, a key component of Iowa's deer management involves insight from local community members, such as hunters, landowners, agricultural producers, and natural resource professionals. Each year, the Iowa DNR provides ample opportunity for both formal and informal public outreach using Stakeholder Engagement.

Importantly, Iowa's white-tailed deer populations are primarily managed to balance social considerations-such as recreational value and property damage - which are subject to vary based on regional differences in social expectations. For example, what constitutes 'acceptable' crop loss or deer sightings per hunt is likely to differ across regions of the state. Therefore, the Iowa Deer Program sees minimal value in tying management decisions to rigid biological thresholds, such as estimated deer density or harvest levels, and instead remains committed to a framework that actively engages local stakeholders and leverages robust population trend data to guide deer management objectives.

DEER MANAGEMENT

Overview

The Iowa DNR Deer Program takes pride not only in managing a world-class deer population, but also in promoting responsible management across multiple scales to reduce conflict and address the diverse needs of Iowans. Thoughtful regulatory planning has preserved the trophy quality that continues to attract hunters from across the country and beyond, while also empowering agricultural producers and landowners to manage deer effectively at the property level.

However, the DNR's ability to deliver both high-quality hunting experiences and practical damage mitigation tools depends on strong partnerships and mutual trust with Iowa's deer hunters and landowners. Because Iowa's deer management system relies on voluntary harvest, balancing diverse stakeholder interests requires continued public engagement, trust, and support.

Annual Management Process

The Iowa Deer Program formally begins its annual management process by holding a series of DNR District Deer Meetings across the state. These meetings involve direct engagement with relevant DNR research personnel, depredation staff, field staff, and law enforcement officers within each geographic district. Prior to these meetings, population and harvest trends are reviewed within each county, using all available data to infer where each county deer population relates to management objectives. When appropriate, preliminary changes to harvest regulations (e.g., antlerless quotas, January antlerless seasons, buck-only restrictions, etc.) are proposed to guide discussion. A key component of this process involves insight from local staff, local hunters, landowners, and agricultural producers. This critical aspect of the meetings creates a formal opportunity for local sentiment to influence final regulatory proposals, which emphasizes the model of engaging stakeholders and maintaining public trust. Ultimately, the Iowa Deer Program presents the final list of proposed regulatory changes to the Natural Resources Commission. If approved, these changes are incorporated into the regulatory framework for the subsequent deer hunting season.

Deer License Structure

Voluntary deer harvest represents the most resource efficient, socially acceptable, and effective management tool for white-tailed deer populations. Maintaining balanced, quality deer populations depends on two core objectives: first, promoting the responsible harvest of antlerless deer (i.e., does) to meet local population goals; and second, reducing the harvest vulnerability of antlered deer to preserve a strong proportion of mature, high-quality bucks on the landscape.

Currently, Iowa's deer hunters lead the region in doe harvest rates, particularly in counties where deer habitat and abundance are strong. The state also ranks among the top producers of Boone & Crockett (B&C) record bucks nationwide and, when adjusting for relative buck harvest, offers hunters the highest likelihood of harvesting a B&C buck in the country. Together, these impressive benchmarks highlight the effectiveness of Iowa's approach to maintaining balanced, quality deer populations-achieved through judicious doe harvest opportunities, a responsible regulatory framework, and a high level of hunter trust.

The Iowa DNR utilizes a variety of deer license types that offer deer harvest opportunities at the state, county, zone, and property level. Each category of license, outlined below, plays a specific role in supporting Iowa's comprehensive deer management strategy.

<u>General Deer Licenses</u>

General deer licenses are intended to provide resident hunters with a baseline opportunity to participate in deer harvest each year. Currently, general deer licenses are valid statewide and may be used to harvest either antlered or antlerless deer (i.e., 'any-deer' licenses). All resident hunters are eligible to obtain up to two general deer licenses: one for the archery season and one for the firearm season of their choice (early muzzleloader, Gun 1, Gun 2, or late muzzleloader). For most resident hunters (see landowner-tenant section below), general deer licenses are the primary opportunity to harvest antlered deer, though approximately half of the deer harvested on these licenses are antlerless. These licenses represent the most fundamental deer hunting opportunity and account for over half of the annual deer harvest in Iowa.

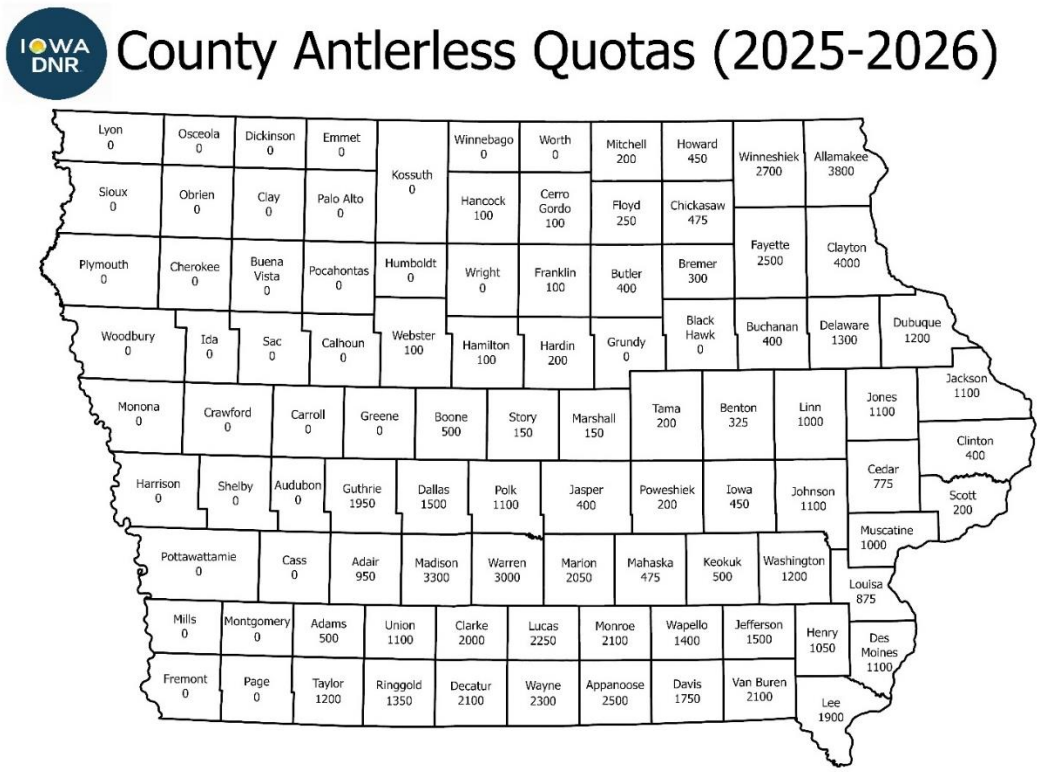
Buck-only restriction

One exception to the 'any-deer' designation applies to select counties during the first gun season (i.e., Gun 1), where a special 'buck-only' restriction is in place for general deer licenses only (does not include landowner-tenant or depredation licenses). This measure is intended to reduce doe harvest and support population recovery in counties experiencing low or declining deer numbers (e.g., western Iowa). This restriction has aided in the successful recovery of deer populations in many northcentral counties; however, retrospective analyses show that the largest reduction in doe harvest is experienced in the first 2-3 years after enacting the regulation. While, over time, harvest rates suggest that

many general hunters shift their participation into the Gun 2 season, this regulation still decreases the duration that antlerless deer are subject to harvest pressure from firearms each year.

Counties currently restricted to buck-only harvest on general licenses during Gun 1 include:

Buena Vista, Calhoun, Cherokee, Clay, Crawford, Dickinson, Emmet, Fremont, Harrison, Ida, Lyon, Mills, Monona, O'Brien, Osceola, Palo Alto, Plymouth, Pocahontas, Pottawattamie, Sac, Shelby, Sioux, Woodbury



County Antlerless Licenses

This license category serves as the Iowa DNR's primary tool for responsively managing deer abundance. The goal of county antlerless tags is to ensure adequate doe harvest in areas where general any-deer licenses alone are insufficient to meet population management objectives. Antlerless tag quotas are established for each county based on these objectives and are re-evaluated annually. Quotas are informed by population trend data, harvest statistics, and input from local stakeholders and DNR staff.

Landowner-Tenant Licenses

Qualifying landowners or tenants with at least two contiguous acres operated as a farm unit for agricultural purposes are eligible for additional deer licenses. These include one any-deer license and up to three antlerless-only licenses, all valid exclusively on the designated property. These supplemental licenses provide landowning residents with added harvest opportunities, supporting localized deer management on properties actively engaged in agriculture. The intent of this license category is to empower landowners to help manage deer populations at the property level, particularly in areas where deer-related crop damage or overabundance may be a concern.

Deer Management Zones (DMZ)

Special Hunts

Special hunts are an important component of Iowa's deer management strategy, offering a targeted and flexible tool for addressing localized deer population concerns. These hunts are typically designed to increase harvest in areas where hunting opportunities are not traditionally allowed-such as urban areas, state or county parks, and wildlife refuges. Common goals include reducing local overabundance, mitigating property damage, improving ecosystem sustainability, and addressing public safety concerns.

Special hunts are typically organized through partnerships with municipal governments or county conservation boards, and are often structured with clearly defined harvest goals, weapon restrictions, participant screening, and reporting requirements. Most hunts focus on increased harvest of antlerless deer to achieve population reduction or stabilization. In some cases, these hunts are also used to monitor disease prevalence, improve habitat condition, or offer opportunity to new hunters through mentorship programs. While participation is often limited through application or lottery systems, special hunts still rely on voluntary hunter involvement and ethical harvest practices. These hunts have a decades-long history of success in Iowa, and continue to provide a model for site-specific management that complements statewide population strategies.

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) Zones
The goal of implementing CWD DMZs is to provide additional doe harvest opportunity to avoid overabundance, potentially decreasing disease transmission over time. These zones can provide additional antlerless-only harvest opportunities within geographic regions that are typically smaller than the county in which they occur and span an established disease management area (i.e., CWD endemic zone determined via disease surveillance). DMZ antlerless licenses are similar to county antlerless licenses in that they must be designated for a specific season (e.g., archery, early muzzleloader, etc.); however, unlike county licenses, DMZ licenses can be designated for any season irrespective of other deer hunting licenses bought.

For more information on Chronic Wasting Disease in Iowa, visit www.iowadnr.gov/cwd or see the Iowa DNR Chronic Wasting Disease Response Plan (2025-2030).

For more information on Deer Management Zone hunts in Iowa, visit our website at: https://www.iowadnr.gov/things-do/hunting-trapping/types-hunting-trapping/deer-hunting/deer-management-hunts.

Nonresident Licenses
Iowa's nonresident deer hunting system is intentionally structured to balance opportunity with conservation, supporting harvest-based management while prioritizing the interests of resident hunters. Each year, the Iowa DNR allocates a limited number of nonresident licenses through a lottery system, with a total of 6,000 licenses available across ten zones in the state-only 35% of which can be designated for the archery season. This system ensures responsible nonresident harvest levels to sustain Iowa's legacy of world-class deer hunting.

See the Nonresident Opportunity section for more details.

Depredation Management Program
While Iowa's white-tailed deer populations are primarily managed at the county scale, localized overabundance can result in significant crop damage and landowner conflict. In such cases, the Depredation Management Program provides a formal pathway to address site-specific concerns while ensuring deer populations remain managed in a sustainable and socially acceptable manner.

Iowa's Depredation Management Program involves the issuance of depredation licenses and out-of-season shooting permits, both of which are important components of the state's harvest-based deer management strategy. These licenses are designed to address localized conflicts where deer populations are causing significant damage to agriculture, horticulture, or silviculture operations. All harvest permits issued under the depredation program are only valid within (or surrounding) specific properties that experience a specific threshold of economic loss. These permits are issued under strict guidelines to ensure ethical harvest and mind overarching deer management objectives, and participants must demonstrate reasonable hunter access to sustain long-term balance. By integrating depredation efforts within broader population management goals, the program helps maintain a balanced deer herd while supporting the agricultural viability and property interests of Iowans.

Specialized depredation staff are available across the state to offer technical assistance, educational support, and, when appropriate, provide additional harvest opportunities for landowners experiencing eligible deer-related crop damage. Upon request from a producer, depredation staff will schedule a timely visit to inspect and identify the type and amount of crop damage sustained from deer. This one-on-one opportunity is necessary to contextualize existing crop damage

and determine the best steps forward. Occasionally, certain farms do not meet the threshold of deer-related crop losses to justify additional harvest opportunities, in which case, technical guidance will still be given to the producer on methods to reduce or prevent future damage.

If damage is eligible and the producer agrees to participate, a written depredation management plan will be developed by staff in consultation with the producer. Depredation management plans typically span a three-year period to encourage sustained mitigation, after which a re-evaluation may be conducted. This agreement outlines a customized strategy to reduce deer-related damage primarily through targeted harvest of antlerless deer, property-specific conditions such as hunter access, and potential mitigative practices such as deterrents, fencing, or habitat management (if applicable).

Strategic Regulations

Iowa's deer hunting system is intentionally designed to balance quality, access, and sustainability across a diverse and heavily privatized landscape. Through a combination of carefully structured seasons, regulated weapon use, and limited nonresident participation, the state emphasizes ethical hunting practices, healthy deer population dynamics, and long-term resource stewardship. This approach reflects a broader commitment to fair chase principles, hunter satisfaction, and the management of a quality, balanced deer herd, while also supporting a strong conservation funding model and maintaining broad public support for regulated deer hunting.

Deer Season Structure

Iowa's general deer season structure is intentionally staggered to distribute hunting pressure across different times, weapon types, and hunter groups-an approach that's especially effective on Iowa's predominantly private and fragmented landscape. With distinct seasons for youth, disabled, archery, two muzzleloader seasons, two gun seasons, and antlerless-only hunts, the system reduces overcrowding during any particular season. It also encourages private land access by offering flexible options that align with landowner preferences, reduce hunter competition, and simplify coordination for permission and scheduling. This distribution of activity helps maintain natural deer behavior and promotes more balanced use of available hunting land statewide.

Based on findings from the 2023 Iowa Deer Hunter Survey (n = 4,062), a majority of hunters (54%) indicated they primarily deer hunt on private ground they do not own/lease (permission-based). These findings emphasize the importance of maintaining a deer season structure that encourages private land access to maintain necessary levels of harvest-based deer management in Iowa.

Critically, Iowa does not allow general firearm (muzzleloader or gun) seasons to overlap with the deer breeding season (i.e., the rut), a deliberate choice that protects mature bucks during their most vulnerable period. Instead, archery hunters-who are restricted to vertical bows, leading to reduced harvest success and hunting pressure-are the only group allowed to hunt during the several weeks of peak breeding activity. This protection helps maintain an older age structure within the buck population, supports Iowa's reputation for producing world-class buck quality, and aligns with the state's emphasis on fair chase hunting principles.

Based on the 2023 survey, 79% of hunters agree that the Iowa DNR should consider fair chase principles when setting hunting regulations, and 76% of hunters agree that maintaining fair chase principles during the hunt is more important than the harvest.

Archery Season

Iowa's archery deer season is regulated to maintain the integrity and challenge of conventional bowhunting by limiting hunters to the use of vertical bows, such as longbows, recurves, and compound bows. Crossbows are only permitted for individuals with a documented physical disability or those hunting during the late muzzleloader season or January antlerless seasons, not during the main archery season. This restriction helps preserve the low-impact nature of archery hunting, which typically exerts less pressure on deer and allows for hunting during sensitive periods like the rut when mature bucks are most vulnerable to harvest. By focusing the season on vertical bow use, the regulation supports fair chase principles and helps maintain the quality of Iowa's deer herd by limiting harvest efficiency during a sensitive time of the season.

Based on the 2023 survey, only 5% of Iowa's deer hunters are unsatisfied with the currently allowed weapons during the archery season.

Gun Season

Iowa's gun deer seasons are intentionally restricted to specific weapon types and calibers to enhance safety, restrict long-range harvest capabilities, and maintain a controlled, ethical hunting environment. Hunters during the regular gun seasons (Gun 1 and Gun 2) are restricted to using muzzleloaders, shotguns firing slugs, or rifles chambered in calibers ranging from 0.35 to 0.50 inches in diameter. This regulation reflects a cautious approach to balancing harvest effectiveness with safety considerations, especially on Iowa's relatively flat, open, privately-owned landscape. Much of this terrain would otherwise enable long-range (>200 yard) harvests if high-velocity bottlenecked calibers were permitted. Given that most deer taken during the gun seasons are registered on any-deer licenses, expanded use of long-range firearms would increase the vulnerability of mature bucks during daylight hours-potentially undermining age structure goals and the quality-focused management that sustains Iowa's reputation for producing trophy-class deer. By limiting the range and ballistic capabilities of firearms, the state reduces the risk of unintended damage, promotes closer-range hunting, and reinforces fair chase principles during the gun seasons.

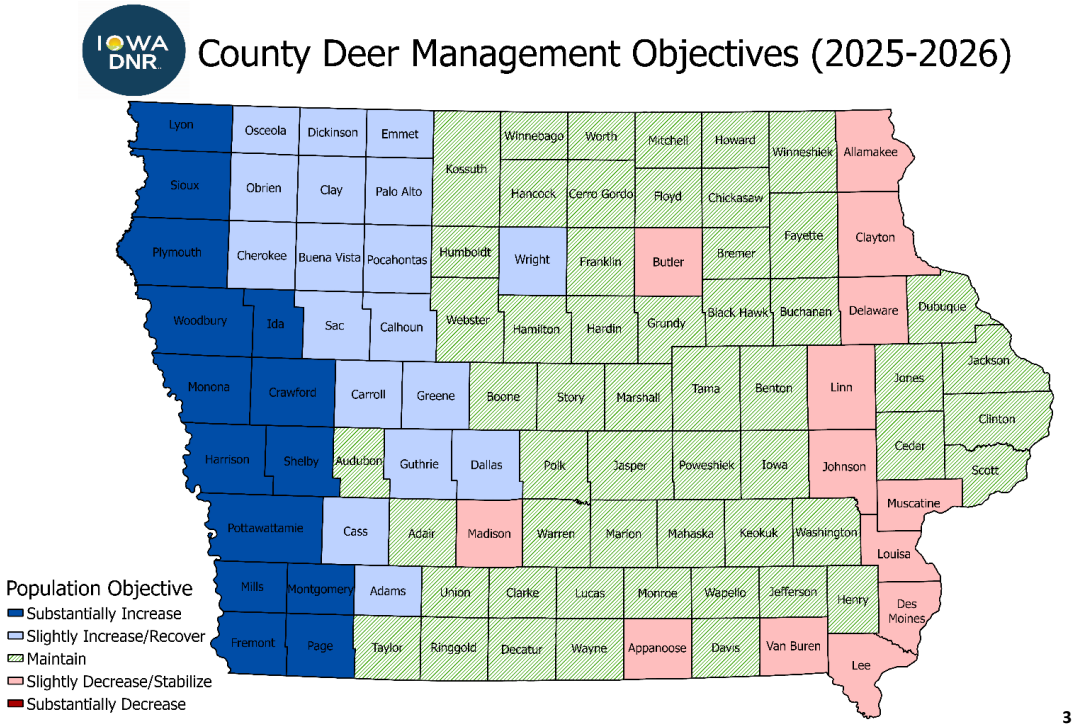
Based on the 2023 survey, only 12% of Iowa's deer hunters are unsatisfied with the currently allowed weapons during the gun seasons.

Nonresident Opportunity

Iowa offers limited nonresident deer hunting opportunities through a lottery-based licensing system that prioritizes herd quality, resident access, and sustainable harvest. Each year, a total of 6,000 nonresident deer licenses are available across the ten zones in the state. Iowa is one of the few states in the Midwest and Eastern U.S. to limit nonresident white-tailed deer hunting licenses. This framework reflects a clear policy choice: prioritizing resident hunting opportunity and herd management goals over maximizing revenue. Nonresidents apply through a preference point system, with archery tags-particularly in high-demand southern and eastern zones-often requiring several years to draw due to consistently high demand.

This carefully regulated approach reflects Iowa's emphasis on harvest quality over quantity. Limiting nonresident participation and strategically distributing hunting pressure helps prevent overharvest of mature bucks, sustain herd quality, and reinforce the goals of a balanced and healthy deer population. This system also reduces hunting pressure on Iowa's fragmented, largely private-owned landscape and ensures that resident hunters maintain access to local hunting opportunities. While buck vs. doe harvest rates are relatively balanced among resident hunters using general licenses, over 90% of the harvest on nonresident general licenses consists of bucks-reflecting the selective harvest preferences characteristic of nonresidents. By balancing national interest in the state's world-class deer hunting with long-term resource sustainability, Iowa maintains a resident-first approach that safeguards both herd quality and hunting heritage.

Regional Strategies



The Iowa Deer Program's deer population objectives for the 2025-2026 season reflect an annual, fine-scale approach to localized management needs. Rather than pursuing a broad, statewide directive, this framework emphasizes nuance-allowing data-driven insights, biologist opinion, and public input to guide regional objectives in pursuit of a quality, balanced deer population. All of these objectives are achieved through voluntary hunter harvest opportunities.

Pink counties (*slightly decrease/stabilize*): While deer populations within some of these counties may be considered overabundant, the majority of these counties are considered within or near the desired management goal. However, increasing deer population trends and/or increasing reports of deer-related conflict signal the need to slow or stabilize population growth. The primary objective in these counties is to proactively manage increasing trends before they result in broader management or social challenges.

Green counties (*Maintain)*: Generally speaking, these deer trends in these counties are relatively stable and/or within the desired population management goal. Certain counties, particularly in central and south-central Iowa, have experienced population-level impacts from recent disease outbreaks (EHD/Bluetongue), resulting in declines from previously stable or increasing trends. Many of these counties received antlerless quota reductions for the 2025-26 deer seasons in an effort to offset these impacts and will be closely monitored in coming years to reassess management needs. The primary objective in these counties is to preserve current population levels while remaining responsive to future changes in population trends, harvest levels, disease events, and public tolerance.

Light Blue counties (*Slightly increase/recover*): These counties typically contain declining deer populations below the desired management goal. Generally speaking, counties in this category have sensitive deer populations due to limited suitable habitat. Exceptions to this include Guthrie, Dallas, Cass, and Adams counties, which have fallen below population management goals due to recent disease outbreaks (EHD/Bluetongue), among other factors. The primary objective in these counties is to support a population recovery through a sustained reduction in doe harvest.

[3] Population objectives reflect annual strategies, not necessarily long-term goals, and are influenced by recent population trends, harvest levels, disease activity, landowner concerns, and citizen feedback. In most cases, these categories reflect recent regulatory changes to antlerless harvest opportunity.

Dark Blue counties (*Substantially increase)*: Counties in this category have deer populations that have declined far below the desired management goal. While some counties in this category are fairly limited in suitable habitat, current deer numbers are well below what the landscapes could reasonably support in terms of a quality, balanced population. Recent regulatory changes have greatly reduced antlerless harvest opportunity for general hunters, while maintaining opportunity for landowners and agricultural producers to continue mitigating property-level conflict. The primary objective in these counties is long-term strategy development to help rebuild local deer numbers while fostering public engagement and support.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

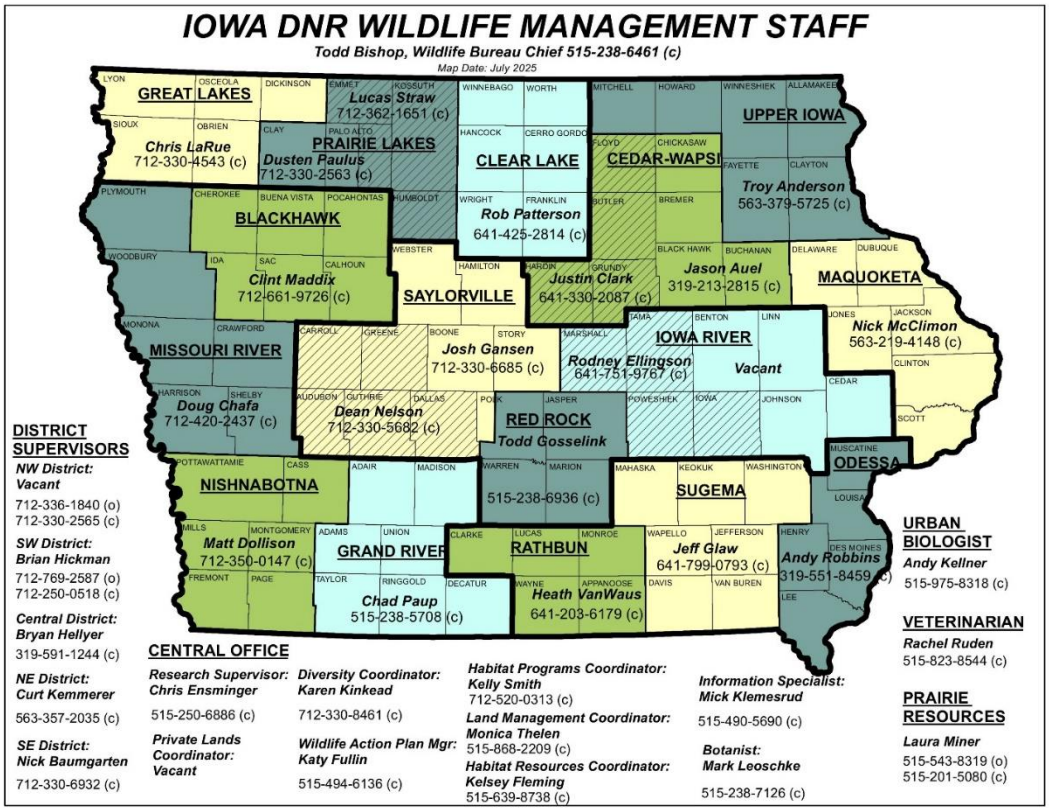
Overview

Responsible management of white-tailed deer can only be accomplished through an engaged stakeholder process, which serves as the foundation of the Iowa DNR Deer Program. The Deer Program actively engages the broad spectrum of stakeholders to Iowa's white-tailed deer population with sound, science-based communication and outreach both formally (e.g., annual advisory meetings, group presentations) and informally (e.g., media interviews, interpersonal communications). Beyond communicating the science behind Iowa's deer management, the Deer Program also seeks to serve in a guidance capacity to encourage the responsible stewardship of white-tailed deer in Iowa.

Citizen Involvement and Outreach

The Iowa Deer Program seeks to maximize engagement with Iowa's public through involvement and outreach opportunities. Citizens play a direct role in various aspects of deer management, from contributing critical information such as harvest data, observation surveys, and disease reporting, to attending public meetings (e.g., Annual Public Listening Sessions) and sharing local concerns with DNR staff. Public outreach efforts emphasize clarity, transparency, and accountability to ensure that Iowans understand how and why management decisions are made. Whether through timely press releases, educational materials, public comment opportunities, or individual correspondence, the Iowa DNR remains committed to a responsive, two-way dialogue with Iowa's public.

For information on local, upcoming public meetings (e.g., Good Neighbor meetings, Public Listening Sessions) please reach out to your local wildlife biologist.



Deer Study Advisory Committee

The Iowa Deer Study Advisory Committee (DSAC) serves as a formal advisory body composed of balanced representation from over 30 diverse stakeholder groups representing conservation, agriculture, hunting, forestry, transportation, public health, and non-hunting interests. Convened annually, this committee provides a structured venue to review population data, policy updates, proposed regulation changes, and emerging issues. While the committee does not hold regulatory authority, its input is vital to maintaining transparency and public accountability in Iowa's deer management decisions. This collaborative approach ensures that deer management remains grounded in both data and broad-based public values.

Partnerships

Sustained, effective deer management relies on meaningful partnerships across universities, organizations, and private entities. The Iowa Deer Program regularly coordinates across internal DNR programs and bureaus, as well as with Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, the Iowa Department of Transportation, and various university research programs. Externally, partnerships with groups such as the Iowa Bowhunters Association, Iowa Corn Growers Association, Iowa Woodland Owners, and local conservation boards help expand capacity for outreach, data collection, and community-based management. Such partnerships not only support the Iowa Deer Program's outreach efforts, but also reinforce the adaptive, science-informed, and community-supported approach that defines deer management in Iowa.

ECONOMIC IMPACTS

White-tailed deer are the most culturally and economically significant wildlife species in the state of Iowa, which underscores the importance of managing for balanced, quality deer populations.

Benefits

From a benefit standpoint, white-tailed deer produce substantial value to Iowa's economy through hunting-related expenditures such as equipment purchases and tourism (lodging, dining, gas stations, etc.), as well as supporting industries such as land management, outfitting, taxidermy, and venison processing. These benefits play a critical role in sustaining local and regional economies by supporting jobs, generating income, and driving broader positive economic outcomes. Revenue from hunting and deer license sales plays a major role in funding wildlife conservation efforts that benefit numerous wildlife species beyond white-tailed deer. A recent report from Iowa State University (ISU) estimated a minimum, annual economic benefit of deer in Iowa of approximately $181 million (in 2023). However, despite its comprehensive scope, the ISU report did not capture certain hard-to-quantify economic benefits - such as the white-tailed deer's major influence on recreational land values or its role in attracting out-of-state professionals to relocate to Iowa. Adding in these contributions, plus their role in wildlife viewing experiences, it's likely that the true tangible value of deer to the state of Iowa is upwards of several $100s of millions per year.

Costs

White-tailed deer can also incur significant economic cost to Iowans, particularly in overabundant populations. Deer-vehicle collisions (DVCs) represent the primary economic cost associated with white-tailed deer in Iowa, although they typically account for less than 15% of all reported vehicle crashes statewide. Recent analyses using Iowa Department of Transportation data showed no significant relationship between estimated deer abundance and frequency of DVCs per county. Another major economic cost includes damage to both traditional (e.g., corn, soybeans) and specialty (e.g., orchards, vineyards) agricultural crops. Through a flexible deer management framework, agricultural producers can utilize the Depredation Management Program to effectively mitigate damages. Additional economic costs of white-tailed deer can include damage to personal property (e.g., landscaping, gardens, fences). Finally, white-tailed deer, particularly when overabundant, can negatively impact the vegetational composition of forests through selective browsing (e.g., decreased oak regeneration). A recent report from Iowa State University (ISU) estimated the total annual economic cost of deer in Iowa to be approximately $140 million (in 2023), though similar to the estimated benefits, this likely represents a minimum bound value.

FINAL SUMMARY

White-tailed deer are a vital component of Iowa's natural heritage, providing substantial ecological, cultural, and economic value to the state. Through an adaptive, data-driven framework grounded in local engagement, the Iowa Deer

Program seeks to manage balanced, quality deer populations through county-scale monitoring and regulations. This management approach emphasizes voluntary, harvest-based strategies tailored to regional conditions and expectations, while promoting fair chase principles, robust stakeholder involvement, and the responsible stewardship of Iowa's world-class deer population.

By integrating population monitoring, disease surveillance, strategic regulations, and community outreach, the Iowa DNR remains committed to maximizing the benefits of healthy deer populations, such as recreation and economic activity, while minimizing associated conflicts, including crop damage and deer-vehicle collisions. Looking ahead, the Iowa Deer Program will continue to rely on strong public trust, sound science, and collaborative decision-making to ensure the long-term quality of Iowa's white-tailed deer, leaving a legacy for future generations.