

Whitetail Sorties

How Airborne Biologists Watch From Above

BY JOE WILKINSON PHOTOS BY CLAY SMITH

Looking down from 200 feet, the picture takes shape. On the wooded hillside, three deer stand on a cold rug of snow. As we hover above, another two come into focus. They become hash marks on Department of Natural Resources wildlife biologist Tim Thompson's chart, as we fly to the next Cedar Rapids transect.

Up here in a helicopter; every hour we look for deer provides another piece of the puzzle. Those 350 aerial routes help visually confirm deer populations; a topic that can run red hot among hunters, landowners, drivers and others with a stake in Iowa's whitetail population. "We cover quite a bit of ground up there. We can determine deer numbers and how they are distributed," explains DNR deer biologist Willy Suchy. "It is actual science; quantitative measures, rather than just coffee shop talk of too many deer, or hunters in the field saying there aren't enough. It gives us an idea of what is really out there."

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Danger in the Skies

Air crashes are the number one cause of death for wildlife workers, reports the American Wildlife Society. While no survey deaths have occurred in Iowa, and dozens of annual winter survey flights go as planned, harrowing exceptions are mentally imprinted on several wildlife workers, officers and pilots.

"There are times when the engine stalls while you're up there. It has always started up again," recalls DNR biologist Tim Thompson. "Another time, we tried to set a helicopter down in a heavy wind. As we hovered, the wind gauge read 47 knots (about 55 miles an hour) when a gust of wind hit us. A moment later, we were looking down at grass, not the landing pad. The pilot just set it down on the runway. We walked the rest of the way."

Wildlife biologist Bill Ohde and technician Chris Larsen survived a Hollywood thriller during a mid-1990s flight near Mediapolis. Turning to remind their pilot the plane was off course, Ohde realized the private pilot blacked out. "His face was ashen gray. His eyes were glazed. He offered no response. The plane was picking up speed and dropping altitude," he recalls. Grabbing the yoke, Ohde pulled the plane's nose back up as Larsen, from the back seat, shook the pilot. Then the engine faltered. "I leveled it out and tried to call on the radio. I couldn't raise anybody. I just kept the plane level," said Ohde.

The pilot recovered and set the plane down. "He remembered everything going 'fuzzy' but thought it was just a momentary lapse," says Ohde. "He actually got kind of irate when we told him it was close to five minutes that I was flying the plane." Both wildlife workers went up the next day — with a different pilot. Today, Ohde gets queasy when the first snows signal more flights.

When the unexpected happens, pilots rely on their training. "We fly 400 to 600 hours a year. We're trained in emergency procedures," emphasizes Iowa State Patrol trooper-pilot Scott Pigsley. Troopers are utilized frequently for patrol flights, such as hunting season enforcement. "We were looking for (illegal) spotlights two years ago, when there was a large, 'bang!' We saw bird feathers on the windshield near my head. It had been a bird strike."

And the worst can happen. As shooting wrapped up on the film, "A Final Season" near Cedar Rapids last summer, a low flying helicopter caught a power line and crashed into a cornfield. Photographer Roland Schlotzhauer died on impact. Film producer Tony Wilson of Dallas Center and veteran pilot Richard Green of Hudson were hospitalized with serious injuries. Green regularly pilots surveys for DNR officials who need the closer look helicopters provide in urban and park areas.



Richard Green

Combined with three other elements, the 'eye in the sky' helps biologists establish hunting seasons and quotas. Counts in late winter '06 showed an 18 percent drop in deer statewide, prompting antlerless license restrictions in many north central and northwest counties this season. The counts lead to quotas in muzzleloader seasons, set up urban hunting zones and help expand or shrink special seasons.

The key is consistency. Since 1983, crews go back over the same routes, at about the same time each year. Most are in rural areas, aboard small planes plowing along at 80 miles an hour, at 400 feet. Not everybody relishes the

assignment. More than a few volunteer for ground duty. I rode out the steep, sharp banks of the plane — and each time I lost sight of the horizon — was glad I skipped lunch. With each route, too, winter cold seeps through the thin skin of aircraft, numbing ill-protected hands and feet.

Helicopters are far less punishing. They're more expensive, too, but in urban areas, a copter can make or break the count. "You have to get lower to see the deer. They are in tighter spots; backyards, small ravines; even under decks next to the house," recalls Thompson. "With a helicopter, you can hover...You can make tight turns to

Harvest Reporting

The cumbersome, sometimes ineffective method of estimating deer harvest via postcard hunter surveys is on its way out. In its place is a sleek, new-age electronic reporting system that could — and should — help wildlife biologists better manage the resource.

Deer and fall turkey hunters got their first taste of Iowa's new mandatory reporting system last fall and winter. Spring turkey hunters get theirs this season.

Under the new rule, any hunter who tags a deer or turkey must report the harvest by midnight the day after the kill, before processing the animal for consumption, before taking it to a locker or before transporting the animal out of state, whichever comes first. Harvest reports can be done online (www.iowadnr.com) or over the phone (800-771-4692).

Failure to report the harvest could result in a citation.



ABOVE: During a low-flying helicopter survey, biologists count deer as they scatter. This winter marks the silver anniversary of Iowa survey flights. **ABOVE, TOP RIGHT:** Three to four inches of new snow and steady eyes help biologists Tim Thompson (with sunglasses) and Willy Suchy pick out deer below. Snow helps cover deer beds, stumps and other dark, deer-sized obstructions. **ABOVE, BOTTOM RIGHT:** Helicopter surveys over metro areas better penetrate tight spaces where deer congregate. Taking advantage of minimal snowfall can mean going airborne in rough conditions. During this survey near Ankeny, both deer and cockpit occupants pilot Richard Green, biologists and photographer Clay Smith braved -25 degree windchills on a single degree day with 27 mph sustained winds

confirm it was a deer, or three or six.”

Thompson flies surveys each year in Iowa City-Coralville and in Cedar Rapids where deer populations are flashpoints of controversy. Up Interstate-380, Cedar Rapids officials relied on aerial survey data for their bow hunt last year. Hunters removed 298 antlerless deer, helping reduce a growing urban herd. In Iowa, about a dozen cities use controlled hunts to reduce whitetails.

Still, it takes more than aerial surveys to assemble a deer forecast. Suchy also reviews 40,000 hunter surveys, input from 200 spring spotlight surveys and deer road kill

data. “We do extensive deer surveys, compared to most states,” says Suchy. “It is important for what we do. It helps confirm what we are seeing.”

From that data, he recommends adjustments in quotas and special seasons. The state’s Natural Resources Commission reviews the DNR recommendation. A legislative committee has final say. Those suit and tie decisions lead to blaze orange hunting opportunities each season.

And they all started the winter before, in cramped cockpits. 🐾