

A man in a brown jacket and cap stands on a rock, looking out over a forest. A German Shorthaired Pointer dog sits beside him, also looking out. The scene is set in a wooded area with a white fence in the background.

The
HUNTING
Guide

Trends for whitetails

Deer harvests are down in many areas, and the latest data from QDMA's Whitetail Report shows some states' buck harvests have decreased by as much as 40 percent over the past decade.

The report notes one of the biggest issues facing hunters in the Midwest is a significantly reduced deer harvest.

“Harvest declines of this magnitude are extremely noticeable by hunters, and state wildlife agencies are bearing the brunt of their frustrations. Unfortunately, communication between the agencies and hunters is not at a productive level in many states,” Kip Adams of QDMA said. “Even though I’m an optimist, I’m not naive to the current challenges and threats facing whitetails and our hunting brethren.”

‘COMPLEX PROBLEMS’

The report noted these whitetail trends dovetail with other problems facing the hunting industry, from hunter access and recruitment to retention issues.

“These are complex problems, and private land access programs, mentored youth programs and adult apprentice hunting programs are steps toward solving them,” Adams said. “Other challenges are newer, like proposals to legalize the sale of venison and create commercial hunting licenses. This concept has been discussed in professional circles for the past few years, and the first legislative bill allowing this was proposed in 2014. The bill



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failed last year, but it’s already back on the table in 2015.”

MORE DETAILS

The report notes the antlered buck harvest (those 1.5 years or older) in 2013-14 was steady in the Northeast, though the overall buck harvest in

Southeastern and Midwestern states declined approximately 4 percent. The report points out 20 of 37 states (54 percent) in the Midwest, Northeast and Southeast shot fewer antlered bucks in 2013 than in 2012.

In total, the Midwest, Northeast and Southeast regions tagged over 2.7 million

bucks. Texas led the charge ahead of every other state, harvesting 330,535 antlered bucks — more than half as many bucks killed in the entire Northeast.

BEST STATES TO HUNT

The Whitetail Report found

Texas (330,535), Michigan (203,057), Wisconsin (143,738), Georgia (137,025) and Pennsylvania (134,280) at the top of the list. The top five for buck harvest per square mile, per the report: South Carolina (3.8), Michigan (3.6), Maryland (3.3), West Virginia (3.1) and Pennsylvania (3.0).

How to use a trail camera

Over the past several years, trail cameras have changed the game for hunters — especially those willing to embrace high tech in an effort to more effectively track a buck.

Many of the early models had one feature that often did more damage than good: To take nighttime pictures, they would often flash or feature a red photo light that would spook game in the dead of night. The goal is to see but not be seen, and some cutting-edge new cameras do an excellent job fitting the bill.

Many new models now use black-flash technology and dark LEDs, which are capable of taking a viewable image in the dark without a detectable flash that will scare away the deer.

KEEP A CONSTANT CONNECTION

If the budget isn't much of an issue, there are models such as the SpyPoint Mini-Live 4G 10MP Cellular Trail Camera that can take a whole lot of the guesswork (and actual work) out of hunting. Priced anywhere from \$500 to \$1,000, these types of devices are top of the line in regards to technology and features. This model features black infrared LEDs that won't spook deer, but the best feature is the built-in cellular connection capable of streaming video to a cell phone from anywhere. These top-tier models also feature 10+ megapixel cameras, and the ability to stream 1080p video.

MID-TIER OPTIONS THAT WON'T SPOOK DEER

Field and Stream recommends a handful of affordable trail cameras they've tested and found to do a solid job of capturing the scene without scaring away the game. The recommendations land in the \$150-\$250 range, and all feature discreet flash mechanisms. Their list of options includes the Bushnell Trophy Cam HD Max (MSRP \$250), which records HD video and a sensor that automatically adjusts; the Eyecon Black Widow (MSRP \$150) which uses a barely-perceptible InvisiFlash and a backlit LCD screen; and the Moultrie Outfitter No-Glow C-50 (MSRP \$200), which records video with sound and uses a motion-trigger at night.



El Nino and hunting

Most hunters know the weather plays a major role in deer season, but the global weather event El Nino could have its biggest impact yet on deer populations across the nation. Is that a good thing, or a bad thing?

Historically, severe winters obviously do some damage to the deer populations. Deer survive the winter with extra fat reserves to keep them warm, but like anything, extremely cold temperatures make it harder for anything to survive. Due to El Nino, that shouldn't be much of a problem this year.

WARMER WEATHER

Weather experts generally agree we could see one of the most significant El Nino events in history this year, meaning temperatures should generally be on the warmer side this winter. Basically, El Nino is caused by warm water in the Pacific Ocean, which affects the weather on a global scale. This year, that likely points to a mild winter (especially in the northern states), which should mean more deer survive the winter than usual. For hunters, that means they can likely look forward to more game, and healthier game, during hunting season.

"The severity of winter weather conditions is the limiting factor for whitetail populations from the Upper Midwest through the Great Lakes, New England and Canada," wildlife biologist and QDMA staff member Matt



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Ross told Outdoor Life. "When conditions are bad, you can count on seeing both direct and indirect impacts."

PROJECTIONS

The National Weather Service is projecting above-average temperatures across

much of the United States, specifically northern states such as Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, North Dakota and New York. The typically frigid period between December and March should be most affected, according to current estimates. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric

Administration projects an approximately 90 percent chance that El Nino will continue through 2015-2016 in the Northern Hemisphere.

WHAT IT MEANS

As Outdoor Life notes, the effects of El Nino could cer-

tainly lead to healthier animals across the board, a more stable deer population and perhaps even better antler growth due to the warmer conditions. El Nino could be causing climate problems across the world, but for deer hunters, it could mean a great hunting season.

Cutting-edge knives

It might be one of the most obvious items to pack when heading outdoors, but the hunting knife has evolved quite a bit over the past few decades.

From corrosion resistance to blades designed for everything from dressing and skinning game, there are hundreds of good knives on the market. Many of the top-tier blades can cost hundreds of dollars, but there are still several great knives for less (and sometimes far less) than \$100.

THE BEST, AT THE BEST PRICE

One of the best-reviewed knives on the market is the Browning Featherweight Fixed Semi-Skinner (MSRP \$73). This fixed-blade knife is a bit bigger than the popular folding designs, but for the size sacrifice, you get a knife that should last for years thanks to the lack of moving parts and AUS-8A steel blade that is resistant to corrosion.

It's also a bit more versatile in the field, since the handle can be gripped at any angle without the need to press to keep it open. This Browning model features an extremely sharp edge, with a handle made of black Zytel with hardwood inserts. Field & Stream named this knife its best of 2015, noting it is especially effective for skinning and dressing game.

MID-TIER OPTION

The Kershaw 1830 OSO Sweet Knife (MSRP \$39.99) is an extremely popular option among

hunters and comes with a price tag that won't break the budget. The design is a classic, drop-point blade aimed to provide maximum utility. It features a one-handed opening mechanism with SpeedSafe assisted opening, and is easy to use for both right-handed and left-handed hunters. The blade is made of 8Cr13MoV steel, which features good edge retention, strength, hardness and wear resistance.

The handle is glass-filled nylon for improved durability and incorporates a textured scale pattern to help with aesthetics. A locking liner secures the blade during use and recloses easily for pocket carry or storage. The pocket clip can also be reversed for tip-up or tip-down carry.

THE SOLID, LOW-PRICE OPTION

If you're gearing up on a budget, the Tac Force TF-705 (MSRP \$10) is one of the most popular knives on the market and is extremely affordable. The knife features a high-carbon stainless assisted opening partially serrated drop point blade, with thumb slot and extended tang with lashing hole. Block-style grooved aluminum handles feature drilled hole design and integrated bottle opener and glass breaker.



Which weapon to use?

Depending on where you're hunting, the weapon of choice can vary greatly. Hunters find different success levels with bows and rifles, and certain areas seem to be better suited for certain weapons.

Findings from the latest QDMA Whitetail Report identified the states with the highest percentage of deer harvests with bows, rifle/shotguns and muzzle-loaders. To boil it down simply: Rifles and shotguns are more popular in the South, while bow hunting remains a very popular alternative in the Northeast. Looking at nationwide statistics, firearm (rifle/shotgun) hunters took 65 percent of all deer, bows took 21 percent and muzzleloader hunters took 12 percent of the total deer harvest.

"More hunters take advantage of bows and muzzleloaders today, and that's great for the future of hunting. More seasons to go afield helps even 'occasional' hunters stay engaged, and it greatly enhances the opportunities to mentor youth and new hunters," the report notes. "Finally, expanded opportunities help retain aging hunters, and every hunter is critically important to our wildlife management system."

RIFLE/SHOTGUNS

According to the report, the top five states for rifle/shotgun hunting based on percentage of harvest is South Carolina (89 percent), Maine (87 percent), Alabama (86 percent), Minnesota (85 percent) and South Dakota (85 percent). Firearms obviously remain the prevalent weapon of choice for hunters, but other options are gaining ground.

BOW HUNTERS

For bow hunters, the northeast

proved the most popular hunting grounds. The top states for bow hunting success include New Jersey (56 percent), Ohio (45 percent), Massachusetts (43 percent), Illinois (39 percent) and Rhode Island (37 percent).

It's interesting to note bow hunters

in New Jersey actually outnumbered the percentage of hunters with firearms, the only nation in the state that can make that claim.

MUZZLELOADERS

Data surrounding interest and suc-

cess in using muzzleloaders varied across the nation, making for an interesting mix. The report found Rhode Island (39 percent) led the top five, followed by Tennessee (24 percent), Massachusetts (22 percent), Mississippi (22 percent) and Pennsylvania (22 percent).



Asking permission to hunt

One of the biggest issues facing hunters these days is a simple one: the need for accessible land to hunt. All the guns, gear and cameras do no good without a place to actually hunt.

The need for accessible land was found to be one of the biggest issues facing hunters at the 2014 North American, according to the QDMA Whitetail Report.

PRIVATE PROPERTY

In many states, the vast majority of hunting occurs on private property. Those numbers can get extremely high in states like Alabama, Texas, Iowa, Kansas and Nebraska, where more than 95 percent of property is privately owned. The most obvious solution? Ask landowners for permission to use their land to hunt. Here are some tips for those discussions to go smoothly and successfully.

BEST SHOT AT ACCESS

• **Ask permission early and politely.** Reach out to the landowner well in advance of hunting season, and be sure to make a good impression. Be extremely polite and professional in making the request. If you'll be hunting with your child, bring him along so the landowner can get to know you and your family.

• **Offer to help manage the land.** If you're looking for



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access to hunt on a prime piece of property, your request might carry more weight if you offer to lend a hand in taking care of the property. Let them know you'd be willing to invest some time in the property yourself, by doing tasks such as cutting wood, planting

trees, picking up trash, mending fences or marking boundary lines. If nothing else, make a note that you'll keep an eye out on the property to ensure no one else is using it without permission. Making yourself useful can go a long way toward gaining permission.

• **Offer to get insurance, and leave them your information.** Have your contact information ready before you arrive (i.e. business card) so the landowner can reach you if any questions arise. Also, make a point to let the owner know you'd be willing to purchase hunting land liability

insurance, so he can rest assured there will be no liability if an accident does happen on the property. For just a few cents an acre, it could make all the difference in opening up a prime hunting spot.

— *Tips provided by QDMA.*

Know the rules

A hunting trip can take you all kinds of places, and sometimes across state lines in search of new game or territory to explore. When planning a trip to a new hunting camp, even if it's just in a neighboring state, the rules and licensing can vary greatly for hunting and fishing.

Plan ahead and be sure you have everything ready to actually hit the trails.

From how you need to transport a gun, to the different licenses needed in different states to do different things, there are several things to check out before loading up the truck and heading for a tree stand. Every state in the country has a hunting/wildlife department, and pretty much every one of them makes a point to post that information plus listening details. A full list can be found at (http://www.fws.gov/refuges/hunting/state_licenses.cfm).

CHECK GUN LAWS

Though a bit different than hunting regulations, gun laws are one of the hottest topics in the news these days — and state laws are changing almost annually. Different laws dictate whether guns can be loaded, where they have to ride in a vehicle, and what types of weapons can be transported. Be sure to check the state laws before carrying a gun across state lines.

Advice from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service:

- Everyone who hunts on a national wildlife refuge must have the required state



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license(s). (State government links are provided under the State Licenses tab.) Some refuges also require their own permits and/or user fees. These are noted in this guide.

- Everyone over 16 years old who is hunting migratory waterfowl must have a Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp (Duck

Stamp). Proceeds from these stamps are used to purchase wetland habitat for waterfowl. More than \$700 million have been collected from the sale of Duck Stamps since 1934, leading to purchase of over five million acres of wetland. In some cases, state stamps are also required.

- All state and/or refuge reg-

ulations for bag and possession limits must be followed, as well as those for tagging and checking in after the hunt.

- Federal law (Title 50 of the Code of Federal Regulations) allows only non-toxic shot for upland and waterfowl hunting in Waterfowl Production Areas and Wetland Management Districts. Most refuges ban

toxic shot.

- Follow state and/or refuge rules for wearing hunter orange.

- In some cases, a boat will be required to access hunting areas. While refuges have different rules on boats, all require adherence to U.S. Coast Guard and state regulations.