

Weekly column for Aug. 16, 2007

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Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources

For the first time, Alabama's big-game hunters will be required to maintain records of their harvest of white-tailed buck deer and wild turkeys.

As part of the three-buck limit regulation passed by the Alabama Conservation and Advisory Board and approved by Barnett Lawley, Commissioner of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, hunters must record the date when each buck or turkey is harvested and must have that information available when in the field.

"This mandatory hunter harvest record is to implement the three-buck limit and further account for the five-turkey limit that has been in effect for several years," said Allan Andress, Chief of Enforcement with the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division. "If a hunter takes an antlered white-tailed buck or turkey the harvest record must be filled out before the animal is field dressed or moved."

The limit will apply to white-tailed buck deer with bare antlers visible above the natural hair line. Hunters will be allowed two bucks of choice and the third must have at least 4 points one inch long or longer on one antler.

The form, which is available on Page 62 of the ADCNR's 2007-2008 Hunting & Fishing Digest, will also be printed on the hunting license when it is purchased from a retail outlet. Licenses purchased over the Internet will include the harvest record form, as well. For those exempt from the yearly licensing requirement, the form can be clipped from the Digest or printed off the Internet.

"It is unlawful to have more than one harvest record," Andress said.

Andress said conservation enforcement officers will be inclined to give warnings this season.

"If we find somebody who is obviously trying to evade the rule, we're going to write them a ticket," he said. "If it's obviously an oversight or unfamiliarity with the rules, a certain amount of grace will be extended. It just depends on the circumstances. We do understand that the success of this is going to depend on hunter ethics and voluntary compliance with the rules.

"Anyone who donates a deer or turkey to another person must fill out and sign a donation record that must be kept with the animal until it reaches the processor or the person gets home with the animal."

The donation certificate is also available on Page 62 of the Digest or can be printed off the Internet, although Andress said any piece of paper that includes name, address, license number (if applicable), telephone number, date of harvest and signature of the donor will suffice.

"Transporting deer for other people and giving deer away is common in Alabama, so that situation needed to be covered to be able to enforce the harvest record," Andress said. "It's the same thing as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service requires with doves and ducks. They can use a piece of paper with the information on it or use the form in the Digest. The Digest is available all across the state and we print plenty of them."

Commissioner Lawley said the mandatory harvest record is just the next step in the education of the public in successful deer management, and he believes Alabama's hunters will respond.

"Basically, the hunters are going to have to regulate themselves," Lawley said. "We're not going to have check stations. If you have a buck in the truck and you don't have a hunter harvest card, you could be issued a ticket. But most of the time it's going to depend on how well the hunters police themselves.

"We have seen that education is working. Most people now understand why we need to harvest more does. You increase the quality of the herd when you increase doe harvest. We still have folks who don't want to kill does. Most of them came up when we had no deer, but now we have much more knowledge and science and it is the necessary thing to do. When buck-doe ratios get closer, your rut moves back. You see more competition. You see more buck movement. Fawns are born earlier. It just leads to healthier deer."

Lawley said Alabama needs to let bucks reach an older age class to be able to determine which genetics get passed on to the next generation.

"A doe will breed the dominant buck," he said. "Now there is no telling how many year-and-half-old deer we have with superior genetics that don't survive hunting season. If you have more strong breeder bucks, it will increase the quality of the herd. And the vast majority of hunters I've talked to are very much in favor of taking these steps in trying to improve our herd. And most hunting clubs already have more stringent restrictions than what we're doing."

Of course, Lawley said there are those who are adamantly opposed to the buck limit.

"I talked to one man who had killed 27 bucks off one wildlife management area and the largest was a six-point," he said. "That's abusing the land and the herd. He was legal in doing that, because that's what our laws allowed until now.

"My biggest fear is to wind up with small deer like Florida. Every state with buck restrictions has had mostly positive feedback. Even Mississippi has realized their antler restrictions has caused high-grading of the herd. Now they're looking at a three-buck limit and possibly even a beam restriction, which has an 88-percent acceptance from hunters. I asked (wildlife professor) Steve Demarais at Mississippi State if they would have been able to even consider a beam restriction if they hadn't had the antler restriction in place. His answer was 'absolutely not.'"

Lawley compared the buck limit to the catch-and-release revolution in bass fishing.

"Twenty years ago, people just wanted to catch A bass," he said. "Now they want to catch big bass. Fishermen assumed the responsibility to practice catch-and-release and that has helped the bass get bigger.

"Just like with bass, the buck limit will be regulated by peer pressure. Everybody has to participate and try it. If they do, I think between three and five years from now people will see a huge difference in our deer herd."

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