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Comprehensive Deer Study Enters Third Harvest Season

The number of deer harvested during the archery and firearms hunting seasons are a major component of a five-year study to benefit Missouri's deer herd and hunters. Biologists from the Missouri Department of Conservation (MDC) and the University of Missouri-Columbia (MU) are using computer and satellite technology to track collared deer in specific northwest Missouri and Ozark counties. Hunters are asked to harvest collared deer if it is an animal they would normally take during the legal hunting seasons.

White-tailed deer wearing GPS collars are giving biologists data on how deer use habitats, their home ranges, movements, and survival rates. Biologists are tracking 108 deer in four northwest Missouri counties dominated by agriculture and 101 deer in four counties in the Ozarks where forest habitat prevails. Hunter harvest and natural mortality are both factors in how the state's deer populations fare in varied habitats. So hunters should not let a collar on a deer influence their decision on whether or not to harvest the animal.

"We want the study's sample group, the deer wearing the GPS collars, to reflect what is going on with the state's entire deer herd," said Kevyn Wiskirchen, MDC deer biologist.

Biologists trap the deer during the winter months, collect data from them such as size, sex and age, place tracking collars on them, and then release them. GPS collars then send regular data about the deer's location and movements to the satellite, which relays that information to computers. The study is nearing almost one million data points on file.

"Over a span of five years, it's setting us up to have a large set of data to answer a lot of questions," Wiskirchen said.

The information will be used in years ahead to help make management decisions about the state's deer herd. For example, regulations may be adjusted according to a region's rise or fall of deer numbers due to disease or harvest pressure.

Deer were trapped and collared last winter in Douglas, Howell, Texas and Wright counties in the Ozarks; and Nodaway, Gentry, Andrew, and DeKalb counties in northwest Missouri. Crews also use technology to track pregnant does, find fawns after they are born, and put tracking collars on fawns. MDC and research partners have long studied deer. But this five-year study is one of the most comprehensive deer research projects ever conducted in the state. The study is funded with assistance from the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Funds.

The GPS collars provide regular updates on deer locations, so it is not necessary for hunters or the general public to report spotting deer with collars. But if anyone should spot a deer with a collar where something seems out of the ordinary with the collar, they are welcome to report the sighting.

MDC will begin trapping deer again in the winters of 2018 and 2019 once hunting seasons are complete. Any landowners interested in hosting deer trapping and tracking are welcome to contact MDC. Private landowners are a key partner in the study, as 93 percent of the state's acreage is privately owned. White-tailed deer are among Missouri's most popular watchable wildlife, and deer hunting provides food, outdoor recreation and a $1 billion boost to the state's economy.

Landowner cooperation has been a positive and important component of the study, said Jon McRoberts, MU research scientist and project coordinator. Biologists have worked with more than 300 landowners in the study areas.

For more information about the deer study, contact Kevyn Wiskirchen at 573-815-7901 ext 2899, or by email at Kevyn.wiskirchen@mdc.mo.gov; or contact Jon McRoberts at McRobertsj@missouri.edu.

For more information about deer hunting in Missouri, visit http://on.mo.gov/2gLxZOR.