

The Next Level consulting crew will examine proven tactics to maximize your land's potential. ■ by Jody Holdbrooks

WHITETAIL INSTITUTE CONSULTING:

LET US HELP YOU GET THE MOST FROM YOUR PROPERTY

Whitetail Institute Consulting can take your property to the next level. We incorporate the newest deer science and university studies about genetics and how they can affect the growth of deer on your land. After all, a healthy deer herd is correlated with a good age structure, herd size and plenty of groceries. Here's how we get started.





THE BASICS

Every property is different, and what works at Property A might not fit Property B. We start by examining the habitat to determine what can be done to improve it for wildlife. Issues we consider include:

- A. Timber cutting, including thinning or creating cutovers.
- B. Deer herd numbers. This is very important to understand on each property.
- C. What kind of natural food is available.
- D. Introduction of prescribed fire.
- E. How many acres of food plots the property has or that will be added.
- F. Soil testing.

Supplying as much natural food and cover in the right places is indispensable to killing big bucks, and supplying that extra food with a high-protein chicory and clover will take it over the top. Annuals can also produce additional tonnage for deer season, and Whittaker Institute has outstanding annuals that will work well in such situations. Cats Plus and Pure Attraction, for example, can be exceptionally good options for kill plots for bow or gun season.

TIMBER CUTTING: THINNING OR CREATING CUTOVERS

This can create some of the most dramatic changes to a property. Whether you make small cutovers to open a space for native plants or open areas for food plots, cutovers will create new growth and cover on a property, and deer love them. Prescribed fire on a good thinning rotation provides excellent benefits for wildlife. Most pines will be ready for thinning at about 18 to 20 years. This helps the growth of pines as well as habitat. Creating the lowest number of basal area within your pine stands is best for wildlife habitat. Always talk with a forester when thinning or planting cutovers to determine what methods are the most productive in your situation. Also, let the forester know if your goals mainly concern wildlife or forestry. If possible, try to take any money you make off the land and put it back into wildlife. This can help you add plots, mulch unwanted hardwoods or put fire down to create new habitat.

DEER HERD NUMBERS

Being from the South, I have properties where I might see five deer one day and 25 the next. It's all about being mindful of the wind direction and hunting between cover and food. Deer numbers can negatively affect a hunt. The buck-to-doe ratio can get out of whack. That results in easy breeding and less hoof time for mature bucks. That's a problem many of us face, and we need to look seriously at herd management to get the most out of our hard work. You can introduce the concepts I mentioned, but if you don't control your deer population density to lessen the buck-to-doe ratio, your bucks will never reach their true potential.

WHAT KIND OF NATURAL FOOD IS AVAILABLE

The quality of native vegetation is important on any property. Whether you have hardwoods, pines or a mixture, the quality and consistency of food available to whitetails is very important. Acorns are really all you get from hardwoods, and pines can be a monoculture unless you're thinning them and fire has been introduced. Fire can also be used in hardwoods if the canopy is open. It will produce new plants that will help more than acorns alone.

PRESCRIBED FIRE

This is the cheapest wildlife management tool. Prescribed fire can also be the most beneficial method of wildlife management. Whether you get certified or hire this out, it will be one of the best decisions you make — if done correctly, following proven rules, or hiring a good, experienced crew. The number of native grasses, legumes and forbs that can flourish after a fire can greatly increase natural tonnage whitetails and other wildlife have for food and cover. A solid thin-and-burn approach will also give turkeys and quail improved nesting and brood rearing habitat. It opens up the canopy and gets sunlight to soil, where fire has burned off layers of leaves and needles that have might prevented new growth for years.

FOOD PLOTS

Used correctly on the right property, food plots are a true supplemental source that attracts deer. When you supply a smorgasbord of perennials such as Fusion and surround it with plots of Winter-Greens, Beets and Greens or Tall Time Tubers, you're supplying an unbeatable combination of tonnage and attraction for deer. Planting Pure Attraction in my kill plots has been a great addition to my setup. I'm also a huge fan of planting Cats Plus as a nurse crop with Imperial Whittaker Clover, Fusion or any other fall-planted perennial. This will work with any perennial. It gives deer a food source while letting the perennial establish and develop its root system. On some places, food plots are the only answer because of the property's size or shape. At others, food plots simply attract wildlife. I can answer that question by looking at maps and walking and studying your property.

SOIL TESTING

The characteristics of your soil can be the most important piece of the wildlife puzzle. Soil quality and health determine how crops grow and survive to produce the end result, which is food for wildlife. Soil health can be determined at the food plot level by sending our labs a soil test of each food plot. I recommend taking as many soil tests as you have food plots. You will need one soil test per food plot — no skimping. The soil on a property can change from one ridge to the next. Soil health can drive the overall conditions that determine buck size and how much nutrition deer can gain throughout the year. We can help you understand your soil tests.

CONCLUSION

These are just a few of the items that seem to work rapidly and consistently to produce better habitat on a property. Not all properties can sustain all of these habitat changes, but I'll investigate all of them when I visit your place. You can contact me at (205) 269-5228 to talk about setting up a visit from Whittaker Institutes Next Level Consulting.