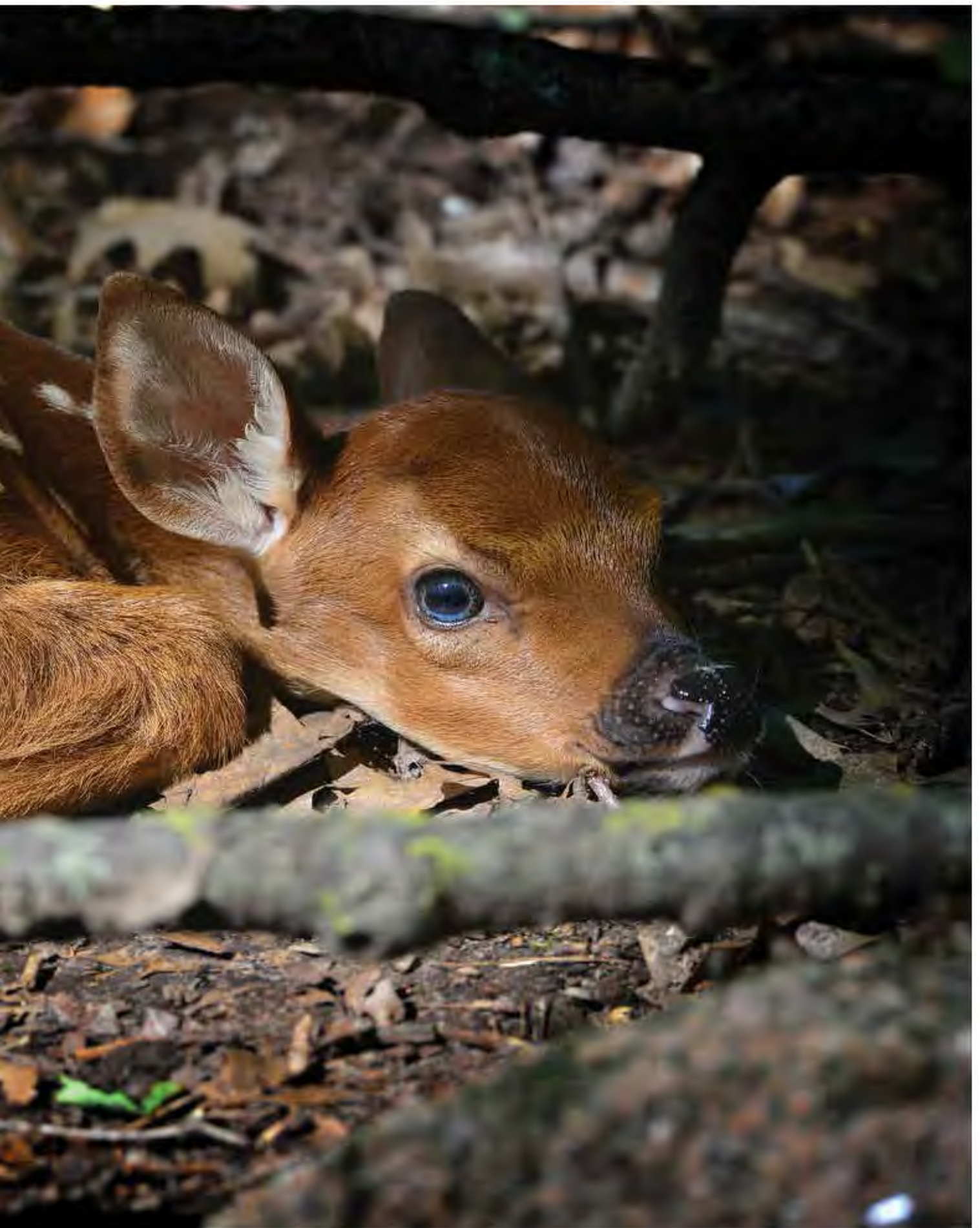




START 'EM YOUNG

Most folks know the basics of managing for big bucks,
but keeping fawns thriving is critically important to the
long-term health of your herd.

■ by *Matt Harper*



If you considered the University of Alabama, Duke University and the Chinese Olympic ping pong team, what characteristic ties them together? All have been dominant in their respective athletic programs, consistently at or near the top year after year.

The word commonly used for such success is dynasty. To be considered a dynasty, a team or organization must consistently be at the pinnacle of its endeavor and continually rise above its contemporaries. Teams that have an exceptional season or even two or three consecutive years of success do not constitute a dynasty. The key is to develop a program that produces wins even when personnel changes. Great players come and go, and without equal or better replacements, dynasties are not born.

Dynasties also exist in the hunting world, and I'm not talking about some superstar who travels the world collecting exotic trophies or a celebrity live-streaming the newest face paint. The dynasties I'm referring to are those coveted properties that seem to produce monster bucks year after year. You know the properties I'm talking about — the ones where you bemoan the first pictures of velvet-racked bucks from the lucky guy who hunts that place. But those properties don't evolve by luck or destiny. Multiple factors result in a perfect buck growing paradise. Food, cover, herd density, hunting pressure and age class are parts of the equation, but there's one critical piece that must be present: A new crop of future taxidermy debt makers must be managed and cultivated to assure the big brute flow is maintained.

A few years ago, I had a bad case of epizootic hemorrhagic disease at a couple of my farms. It wiped out most of the 3-year-old and older bucks, and for the next three years, finding a mature buck was difficult. There's not much you can do about disease, but good practices and considerations can help ensure your young buck farm team is strong.

THE DOE HERD

The success of a fawn crop is directly related to the health and productivity of the doe herd, and that starts long before a fawn is born. When the rut is in full swing and crazy people like me are waking up early and staying up late, there's

also a critical step occurring in the journey to next year's fawn crop. I'm talking about conception, and although hunters fixate on lusty bucks, nature is preparing for next spring. Does in poor condition are less likely to "take" after breeding.

Take means a fertilized egg becoming an embryo and then blastocyst, and successfully implanting in the uterus. Although a doe must be in fairly poor condition for conception to be unsuccessful, it can happen and might at least take multiple cycles, which, if eventually successful, will lead to late-born fawns.

But simply having a prenatal fawn growing inside a doe's womb does not guarantee high birth rates or fawn survivability. If a doe is in poor condition during the first couple of trimesters of gestation, she's far more likely to reabsorb the fetus or abort it. Poor body condition can be caused by illness or extreme conditions, but it usually relates to the quantity and quality of food. Bad conditions and sickness can often be overcome if adequate quality food is available. When does enter the final trimester, massive fetal growth begins to happen. In fact, most fetal growth occurs in the third trimester, which draws greatly on the body of the doe. Two things can happen, independently or in tandem. Without adequate nutrition to support rapid fetal growth, a doe's body condition can suffer greatly and even to the point that when she gives birth, the mammary system cannot produce enough milk to support her fawn(s). That will lead to decreased fawn growth and vigor, and often results in the death of one or more of the offspring.

The other possibility is that fawns are born at a lower-than-normal birth weight. Whitetail fawns are typically about 7 pounds at birth. If a fawn has a birth weight of 4 pounds, it's far less likely to survive even the first few days or hours after birth. That fawn simply doesn't have the strength to nurse, evade predators and live in the harsh environment in which it was thrust. If decreased milk production and low birth weights occur, there's little chance the fawn(s) will survive. In fact, fawn abandonment is a common natural scenario if one or both of those factors are present, especially in younger does.

Finally, poor doe body condition often leads to fewer multiple fawn births

or multiple fawn early survivability. Prenatally, a doe in poor body condition carrying twins or triplets often absorbs or aborts one or more of the fetal fawns. That will normally occur earlier in the pregnancy, but if carried to parturition, one or more of the future offspring might grow less, resulting in one fawn born at a normal birth weight while one or more of its siblings are born at a sub-par weight.

Regardless, any of those situations lead to a decreased live fawn recruitment number. One of the data points wildlife professionals often examine is the number of early survived fawns per doe, as it indicates the overall habitat capacity as it relates to herd density.

As mentioned, the proficiency of doe lactation plays a major role in early fawn survivability, but it also plays a critical part in maximizing the first few months of fawn growth. For the first few weeks of life, a fawn depends on the milk supply from its mother, and it's not until three months, plus or minus, that a fawn has a sufficiently functioning rumen to make it on vegetation. Fawns require nutrient-rich milk to support rapid growth. Deer milk is far more nutrient-dense than cow milk, particularly in fat and protein, and it also carries high levels of minerals.

Density alone, however, doesn't guarantee maximum fawn growth. The quantity of milk a fawn receives is also important. The nutrient configuration of doe's milk does not change with her nutritional plane, but the quantity she produces is directly affected by diet. That is, if a doe is in poor body condition or lacks proper nutrition during lactation, she will produce less milk, resulting in stunted fawn growth. That will dramatically decrease the likeliness of fawn survivability and, at least, results in stunted growth.

THE FIRST YEAR

After weaning, fawns depend on the availability of high-quality food in their environment. Just because a fawn is not nursing doesn't mean the nutritional needs decrease. Rather, fawns must get them from a different source. Fawns are still growing rapidly, so their nutritional demand is still very high.

Digestibility is also critical at this transitional time as well, and although fawns have a functioning rumen, it's not devel-

oped to the point of an adult deer and therefore needs the food it consumes to be higher in digestibility. The size of a rumen dictates the number of microorganisms available to digest forages. A physically larger rumen allows for more microorganisms and, in turn, a greater capacity of digestion. Although little research has been conducted on fawn nutritional demands from the time of weaning to when the fawn becomes a yearling, it's biologically consistent that young, growing animals need a more nutrient-dense diet to support growth.

Nutritional requirements for young deer are likely far higher than for any other class in the herd, and rapid growth is important, because survivability to age 1 is daunting.

After the first big challenge of surviving from birth to weaning, fawns must survive summer and fall being more prone to predation than adult deer. Then they must prepare for their biggest challenge: surviving their first winter. Within a deer herd, the highest winter death numbers occur in fawns and mature bucks. Winter kill in bucks occurs because of rapid weight loss during the rut and the brief window between the end of rut and onset of winter to regain body weight.

For fawns, it's a matter of storing enough fat reserves to make it through the nutritionally lean and environmentally difficult winter. Further, they are physically smaller, making it more difficult to get around and avoid predators in areas with lots of snow.

Aside from survivability, there's another reason to maximize fawn growth. Fawns that are stunted their first year tend to struggle to catch up the rest of their lives. That ability is called compensatory gain, and some species have

a greater capacity to do so than others. Deer seem to have less of the compensatory gain trait, so a stunted fawn can result in a mature deer that never recognizes its genetic potential.

MANAGEMENT OF YOUNG DEER

At this point, you might think that managing for young deer can be difficult. The good news is that practices you enact to manage older bucks and does are not that much different from what needs to be done for fawns.

To ensure the best chance for a fawn to thrive from conception to 3 months old, you should manage for the healthiest, strongest doe herd possible. Does should be in good shape before breeding, which means high-quality food plots and mineral supplementation (where permitted), as well as good habitat management practices of natural food sources to ensure good body condition. During gestation, access to high-quality food is important for the growing fetus, with a special focus on the final trimester, when most fetal growth occurs. This can be challenging, considering it happens in late winter and early spring, when food is often at a minimum.

There are a couple of ways to manage this. First, plant sufficient acres of winter food plots, such as Imperial WinterGreens, to provide food for does all winter. There can be challenges, such as the acres available to plant compared to the herd density, so alternative management practices might include using a supplement, such as 30-06 Thrive, to bridge the nutritional gap between late winter and spring.

When fawns are born, it becomes important to have high amounts of protein, minerals and energy available for does to produce milk. High-protein food plots,

such as Imperial Clover, and mineral supplements, such as 30-06, help supplement natural food sources to provide these nutrients in the needed amounts. Further, after fawns are weaned, these food sources become vital for fawn growth during summer and fall, and in preparation for winter. Although it's important to have highly digestible, highly nutritious food sources for older deer, it's paramount for deer younger than 1. I'm a big fan of providing ample amounts of high-protein annuals when it comes to managing all age classes of deer, especially fawns. Perennials provide a constant source of nutrition (other than winter in some parts of the country), and products such as Imperial Whitetail Clover or Alfa-Rack Plus are designed to remain vegetative longer than other perennial clover and alfalfa varieties, which means digestibility and palatability stay high — a vital component for young deer.

Management practices such as clipping perennials to encourage new fresh growth can also help improve digestibility to young deer. Having fall/winter annuals to provide energy sources is equally, if not more, important for winter survival for fawns versus older deer. Finally, if you're using a free-choice mineral, does will often train fawns to know where those sites are located, and fawns will use those sites even when the does are not with them. That helps provide high amounts of minerals and vitamins for body development.

CONCLUSION

One of the enthralling aspects of deer management is that it resembles a puzzle with thousands of pieces. But nature is that way, so management practices must take into consideration all that's occurring and the components that make for a healthy, vigorous and productive deer herd. When done correctly, the results will manifest, and you can feel the rhythm you're playing along with in harmony with the deer herd and the environment in which they live. And although often overlooked, the fawns in a deer herd play a critical role in the consistent long-term quality of the herd. Spend a little time with that consideration, and I'm sure you will not be disappointed.



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