

FEEDING? BAITING?

What's the DIFFERENCE?



STORY BY LANN M. WILF

While the Mississippi Bowhunters Association (MBA) solicited this article for publication, it does not serve to represent MBA's stance on this topic.

Since I have been old enough to hunt in Mississippi, harvest of any game animal using the aid of bait has been prohibited. This practice has historically consisted of the conscious use of a high preference food source, depending on conditions, to lure a game animal into harvestable range. This practice has brought the ethics of hunting into the spotlight of non-hunters and anti-hunters alike. Among non-hunters, hunting without bait has a high rate of approval. However, when hunting with the aid of bait is included, non-hunter approval plummets.

Another chilling fact is that several studies exist providing strong scientific evidence that baiting and feeding can make hunting quality worse. How is this possible? How can a practice that makes the harvest of a deer easier actually make hunting worse? The answer can be found by looking at a natural occurrence that doesn't involve bait.

When I was a deer biologist with a state agency, I regularly fielded questions about decreased deer visibility and limited food plot use. In my memory, two years stand out, 2007 and 2011. In 2007, I was living in Yazoo County, and mast crops along the Big Black, in the Loess Hills, and in parts of the Delta were absolutely record breaking. One property along the Big Black had total deer harvest reduced by half and most hunters threw in the towel in early January. That was the wrong answer. A good friend of mine hunted this property on the last day of the season in January 2008. He wrote down over 170 deer in his observation book that day. In 2011, the great Mississippi River flood occurred. In other portions of Mississippi, conditions were optimal and produced one of the greatest mast crops in history. That year it seemed like even the sweetgum trees made acorns and the season proceeded similarly to 2007. Hunter discouragement abounded,



and it was a miserable year to be a deer biologist. At my small acreage home place in Monroe County, I had only two opportunities to harvest a doe that season. Most of the deer I harvested came from hardwood stands close to bedding areas. Not in food plots. Since I keep cameras on food plots until spring green up, I was able to get a picture of over 15 deer in one food plot during daylight, during February. Obviously, this was a small plot because it was on a small property. Deer visibility was less than stellar most of the season on both years. Also, the rut was over, so what happened? In short, the deer got hungry.

Those of us that are experienced hunters understand that two factors make a deer move. First is the rut. Second is their stomach. If high preference food is abundant, like on heavy mast years, deer will not move much in daylight. On years like this, deer can forage over less than a

half acre, get full, and go back to the bedding area. Years like this teach a valuable lesson. When deer don't have to hustle for food, hunters are waiting on the rut for decent deer visibility.

Since 2008, feeding opportunities have been liberalized. Feeders can now be in plain sight at 100 yards. This liberalization of feeding has exponentially increased the number of feeders across the landscape. This abundance of food adds up to deer not needing to go far to fill their rumen. Therefore hunters see less. Simultaneously, one property making a choice not to feed will likely be met with a neighbor or two that feeds heavily. This can drastically reduce deer presence and use of the property that does not feed, especially if it is a small property. This scenario results in hunters being forced to combatively feed, even when they'd rather not.

Biologists are often asked, "What is the difference between baiting and



feeding?” In my opinion, the answer is based on the intent of the practitioner. Supplemental feeding of deer, for the sake of this exercise, could be defined as feeding a high protein ration at a high enough rate and distribution to have a positive impact on the overall herd’s physical condition. This would also be done with no intentional hunting or harvest benefit in mind. This practice would mean feed is provided during peak stress periods, which include late winter and late summer, and ad libitum. Therefore the deer would have access to as much high protein forage as they desire, and the feed would be spread across a property at a high enough density to benefit bucks, does, and fawns.

Supplemental feeding will not benefit all soil regions and properties equally. Properties in high fertility soil, with a low deer density and good habitat, will not benefit as much as properties in low fertility soils, like extreme southeast and northeast Mississippi. Properties along the Coldwater River, Big Black River, and in the Delta may not see the significant impacts of a feeding program like a property under intense management in Pearl River County. Feeding and intense habitat management can make

a huge difference in lower fertility soils, whereas, in the Delta, the impacts may literally be as small as one to two inches of B&C score on a stress year.

Conversely, baiting can be defined by different forages, which are fed with different intentions. Baiting could be classified by the feeding of lower protein and higher energy feeds, such as corn and sweet potatoes. Also, baiting is considered, by wildlife management professionals, as a feeding program that is designed to almost entirely benefit the hunter in the harvest of a game animal. Baiting has its place and is commonly used to control wild swine populations of trap game animals for research purposes.

Another commonly asked question is, “What’s the difference between planting a food plot and feeding corn from a feeder?” The answer is complex and almost always involves opinions about ethics, integrity, and can include personal attacks. However, once again I’ll try to objectively answer this from a standpoint of practicality. Most of us that have children remember taking them to daycare and had them promptly get sick. In addition,

most of us have flown on an airliner and soon woke up ill. These two situations stem from the abnormal concentrations of people in a confined space. Obviously, a feeder is out in the woods and the overall space is not limited, but deer are eating off the same “plate” and nose to nose contact is encouraged. Also, hoof to feces contact is encouraged as deer stand around the feeder or approach it. This can accelerate or facilitate disease spread. Furthermore, bait is available for wildlife only during a limited amount of time. This makes it easier to pinpoint when the animals are coming and facilitates harvest. On the other hand, a food plot or acorn flat is available to wildlife for months and is not dependent on a human to “fill the feeder.” This makes the food plot and acorn flat more beneficial, from a long-term perspective, than the corn feeder.

This topic is confusing and can become convoluted with ethics, but with Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) now a reality in Mississippi, hunters and managers should really consider the consequences of a feeding and baiting program. Supplemental feeding and baiting have not caused or brought CWD to Mississippi, but these practices have and will facilitate the spread of the disease through increased contact between animals. Therefore, feeding and baiting should be approached cautiously throughout the State to protect our valuable natural resource. Our deer herd cannot be replaced after CWD.

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