



Many of us bowhunters have our own patches of private ground where we pursue whitetail. Whether it's a big lease, a hunting club, a family farm, or a smaller parcel of urban woodlot, we have our core hunting area. One option that is often underutilized by archers is Mississippi's public land offerings. As bowhunters we have some great opportunities to hunt new grounds in different areas of the state that we may not hunt otherwise. These areas can also be used as a mid-season getaway when you don't want to over hunt your typical hunting area.

Currently the state of Mississippi has roughly 1.9 million acres of huntable public lands. That is 6% of the total landmass of Mississippi that everyone of us has the opportunity to hunt. This land is comprised of National Forests, National Wildlife Reserves, Corps of Engineers land, and state managed Wildlife Management Areas. According to the latest Mississippi Department of Wildlife hunter survey, only 11.3% of licensed Mississippi hunters took advantage of our public land offerings during the 2016-2017 season. According to the same survey only 42% of hunters

participated in archery hunting.

Wildlife Management Areas

The Mississippi Department of Wildlife currently manages 54 Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) which cover 665,000 acres. Out of these 54 WMAs, 48 of them allow some form of archery season for whitetail deer for general hunters. Of the remaining six WMAs, three of those offer youth or handicap archery hunting opportunities. WMAs are under year round management for various game animals. This means that there are seasonal burns, planted



food plots, timber and field flooding, and timber thinning for the benefit of the wildlife that lives on the WMA. WMAs are ever changing, so season to season scouting can be necessary to be successful. These WMAs are managed differently than National Forests or private land. Some may have areas off limits to deer hunting, some may have areas with weapon restrictions, and some may be flooded depending on river levels. They may also have different bag limits, season dates, or antler regulations. Make sure to read the rules for the WMA you plan to hunt prior to hunting it to make sure

you are up to speed on the rules and regulations.

Some of the WMAs offer draw hunts for archery. This is a great option for those that want to hunt a specific part of the season in one of the WMAs with limited pressure from other hunters. Interested parties can apply for up to three different WMA draws, with several date options for their desired hunts. The applicant can also add another hunter to their application in case they have someone with whom they would like to share the hunt. These draw hunts are in some of the more desired WMAs in the state and offer great opportunities at a trophy whitetail. Some of them also offer special buck tags made to target a certain number of bucks with at least one unforked antler to aid in deer research and herd management on the WMA.

Another option that archery hunters have is a late season archery only WMA hunt. Several of the WMAs go back to archery only toward the end of season, usually for the month of January. Some WMAs that are draw only at the beginning of the season are open to the general public at the end of the season for archery hunting. This is my personal favorite hunting opportunity that our WMAs have to offer. I have hunted a specific WMA for the entire last two weeks of season and seen less hunters in those two weeks than I did on the opening day of archery season. Typically after the hunting pressure on the area subsides, deer tend to be more at ease. These hunts are also after the rut so bucks are more worried about feeding and recovering from the rut. They will more readily utilize food plots and be

less cautious than most other times of the year.

National Wildlife Refuges

Mississippi hunters have opportunities to hunt several National Wildlife Refuges (NWRs). These NWRs typically have different season structures than the other land in their area. All of the NWRs in Mississippi offer archery only hunts, with some of them being archery only for the majority of the season. Another difference with the NWRs is that they typically limit motorized vehicle traffic. This makes hunting the NWRs a little more difficult, but also leads to less pressure from other hunters. Just like the state managed WMAs, the federally managed NWRs have their own set of season dates, weapon regulations, and permitting processes. Make sure to know the rules as you plan your hunt.

The Theodore Roosevelt Complex is a series of NWRs in the delta region. This complex is comprised of roughly 100,000 acres of huntable land split between Hillside, Holt Collier, Mathews Brake, Morgan Brake, Panther Swamp, and Yazoo National Wildlife Refuges. These NWRs are in the heart of the delta, which is also one of the most desirable whitetail hunting destinations in the state of Mississippi. These NWRs are archery only for whitetail except for a few small draw hunts for youth gun and primitive weapon. These NWRs are some of the hottest public land spots in Mississippi so they may be a little crowded. If you take the time to do some scouting and don't mind walking, there are some true public land monsters to be had in the Theodore Roosevelt Complex.

The North Mississippi Refuges

Complex is made up of Coldwater, Dahomey, and Tallahatchie NWRs. They offer over 15,800 acres of public land. This complex is located in the northern end of the Mississippi delta north of Highway 82 and West of I-55. These NWRs do offer gun and primitive weapon hunts but there are archery only seasons that coincide with the state season dates as well.

Noxubee Wildlife Refuge is located in the north east portion of the state. It is a very large piece of ground at 42,500 acres. The Noxubee NWR offers archery hunting during the state's archery season.

Saint Catherine's Creek NWR is the only NWR in the Lower Mississippi River Refuge Complex that is located in Mississippi. It is located just south of Natchez in an area of the state that has long been known to produce trophy whitetail. It is roughly 24,000 acres of huntable land. It does have some dates set aside for primitive weapon and

youth gun hunts. The remainder of the season is archery only.

Those hunters in the southern portion of the state have some opportunities at hunting a National Wildlife Refuge close to home. Bogue Chitto NWR is located on the Pearl River in both Mississippi and Louisiana. Grand Bay NWR is located in Jackson County and also in parts of Alabama. Both of these NWRs offer archery hunts that follow the state season dates.

National Forests

When someone mentions public land hunting most people immediately think of our National Forests. That is for good reason too. Mississippi has over 1.1 million acres of National Forest lands available to hunt. No matter what region you happen to live in, there's likely a National Forest nearby. Our National Forests are typically open to any legal methods

of hunting under the same rules and regulations set forth by the Department of Wildlife for the area. National Forest land is probably the most utilized public hunting resource we have. It is also the largest so there is still ample opportunity to get away and have a hunt without the fear of running into another hunter.

Those hunters in the northeast zone can enjoy 156,000 acres in Holly Springs National Forest. The Delta zone has 61,000 acres in Delta National Forest. The East Central zone has 67,000 acres in the Tombigbee National Forest and 180,000 acres in Bienville National Forest. Homochitto National Forest offers 192,000 acres to hunters in the Southwest zone. Finally, you can find Mississippi's largest national forest, Desoto National Forest, with a whopping 518,000 acres entirely within the Southeast zone.

As you can see, there is a lot of National Forest acreage open to the general public for all recreational opportunities. Mississippi archery hunters have ample National Forest land to scout and find a new hunting spot. Some of these National Forests contain some of Mississippi's finest hardwood bottoms, which make for some great early season hunts when the acorns start to fall.

Corps of Engineers Land

The United States Corps of Engineers owns a good bit of land in Mississippi. Most of it is huntable as well. The areas around the Tennessee Tombigbee Waterway are almost exclusively managed as Wildlife Management Areas by the state. The areas around Enid Lake, Sardis Lake, Grenada Lake, and Arkabutla Lake are managed under state rules similar to





WMAs. These areas are great for the hunter not afraid to take advantage of the water to transport them to and from their hunting area.

These areas are typically only accessible by foot or boat. They usually follow the state seasons, bag limits, and weapon restrictions. However in some cases there is a variation. Some Corps of Engineers land, like the land around Sardis Lake, has state WMAs mixed in. Be sure to check the regulations and know the property boundaries before hunting on Corps of Engineers land.

Early and Late Season Hunts

Mississippi has several deer hunting zones. Different zones have different season beginning and end dates. Those hunters that live in the southeast zone can enjoy the same season start date as

the rest of the hunters in the state by taking advantage of one of the public land opportunities mentioned in this article. There are a lot of places that a southeast zone resident could make an early season hunt within a reasonable driving distance of home.

Those of us who live in any of the other zones have the same option. When our season concludes at the end of January, we can drive south and extend our season by two weeks. Desoto National Forest offers plenty of open public land. Bogue Chitto and Grand Bay NWRs offer public land hunting in the southeast zone as well. Lastly, Marion County WMA is archery only from January 4 through the end of the season on February 15th.

Conclusion

Mississippi has many public land opportunities for whitetails. Whether it's a white oak that's dropping acorns in the early season, a late season food plot on a WMA, or a mid season change of scenery you are looking for, Mississippi hunters have public land options for all of the above. Our federal and state lands are here for your enjoyment. With a little time, preparation, and scouting you may find your next honey hole on a piece of nearby public ground.



About the author: JOSH WATTS is a board member of the Southeast Chapter of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, a nonprofit group that acts as a voice for our public lands. He is a lifetime Mississippi resident that loves to enjoy the opportunities that the state's public woods and waters have to offer.