

Mule deer distribution as important as overall numbers

It's frustrating to go hunting and not see the animals you're after. That's especially true if your expectations are higher than what you actually observe.

Many mule deer hunters in eastern Montana have been experiencing that disappointment in recent years. I understand how hard that can be. I hunt deer, elk, and waterfowl and know what it's like to not see as much game as I expect to see.

The mule deer population in eastern Montana is substantially down from the long-term average. That's due mainly to several consecutive years of extreme drought. Drought reduces food available to deer, especially fawns, which enter winter in poorer condition and are more susceptible to dying from cold or starvation.

But even if overall deer numbers aren't as depressed as some are claiming, the way herds are distributed can create the impression of a regionwide population even lower than it actually is. Here's why:

Because it's impossible to count every deer on the landscape, our biologists conduct aerial survey flights in representative areas to give them a good picture of the overall population (see our article "Eyes in the Sky" on page 24 to learn how that works). During the past two years, FWP biologists found that the state's largest regional mule deer population, in southeastern Montana (FWP Region 7), was down 41 percent from the 10-year average. But that decline isn't uniform on every ranch and tract of public land.

Some hunters accustomed to driving out to public lands in eastern Montana and seeing 100 to 200 deer in a day may now see only 10 or 20. Or fewer. Yet mule deer herds could be abundant on nearby private land or in other parts of the hunting district where those disappointed hunters don't hunt. Distribution varies greatly. Some areas may have as many deer as in previous years, while others could have almost none.

The 41 percent is the *average* across the region.

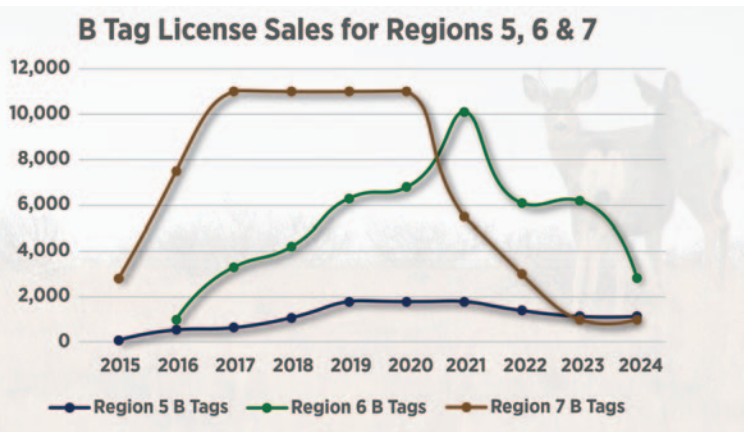
Still, that's a significant regionwide decline. Concerned about the herds, hunters have asked us to reduce doe harvest, and we and the Fish and Wildlife Commission have listened and responded with scientifically sound management adjustments. We began issuing fewer Region 7 Antlerless (B) Licenses starting in 2021 and have scaled back antlerless license quotas by 91 percent since then. Throughout Regions 6 and 7, antlerless mule deer can now be harvested on private land only. Nonresidents can buy only one

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Deer B License instead of several as in years past, when deer numbers were overabundant and causing farmland depredation. And resident hunters can no longer purchase additional antlerless mule deer licenses during the general rifle season, as before.

We're hoping these regulation adjustments are only temporary. It takes only a few consecutive mild winters followed by wet springs for mule deer populations to quickly rebound. Though we were encouraged by this past warm winter and rainy spring, much of southeastern Montana was in severe or extreme drought this summer. We at FWP can't do anything to make beneficial weather happen, but we are doing all we can to help mule deer populations stay as healthy as possible until favorable conditions return.

—**Dustin Temple**, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks



For the past few years, FWP has been reducing antlerless quotas throughout eastern Montana in response to biologists' aerial surveys and hunters' observations of declining mule deer numbers. SOURCE: MONTANA FWP

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