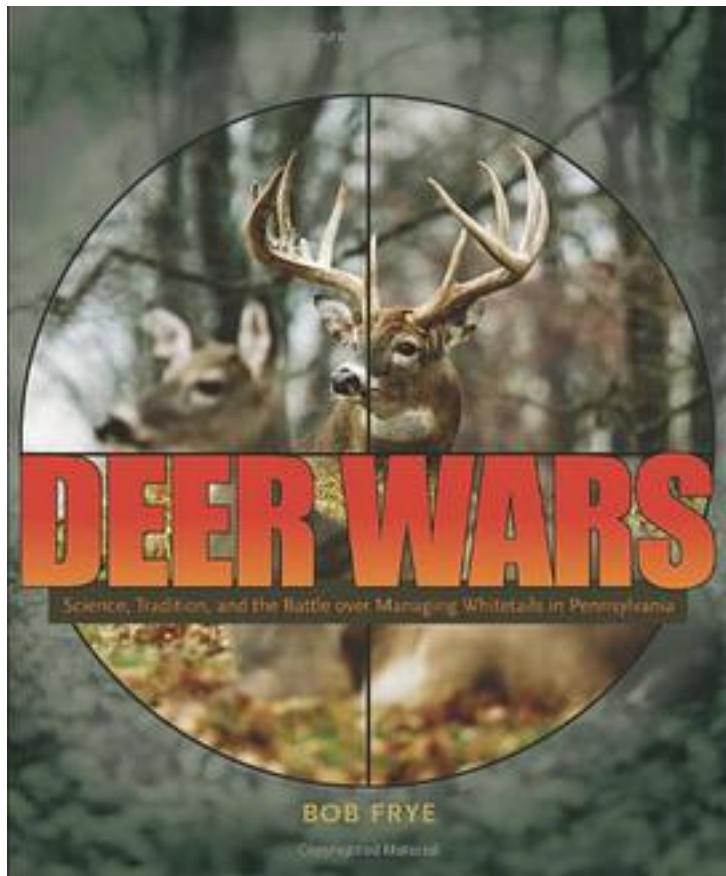


Deer Wars



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In 1931, when Charlie May was a teenager, deer were a rare thing in Pennsylvania. When one of his classmates burst into their one-room schoolhouse in Schuylkill County saying that he had seen a deer track - not a deer, mind you, but just a track - their teacher took everyone out into the snow to see it. Things have certainly changed in the decades since then. Sportsmen and biologists brought deer back in a big way in

the early 20th century, growing the herd until it was considered to be among the two or three biggest in the nation. Indeed, May's son, who retired from the Pennsylvania Game Commission as a wildlife conservation officer in 2005, spent most of his career dealing not with a shortage of deer, but with an abundance of whitetails. That abundance - even overabundance, to hear some tell the story - has had severe consequences, though.

You can have too much of a good thing when it comes to white-tailed deer, say some of the farmers, foresters, bird watchers, auto insurance agents, biologists, and even hunters who have to deal with the deer that roam Pennsylvania from the big woods of the northern tier to the suburbs around Pittsburgh and the parks within Philadelphia. All agree they want deer in Pennsylvania, but in manageable numbers in the right places.

There have been and will continue to be problems until that balance is achieved. That's because deer, though beautiful, can also be devastating. 'Deer are second only to humans in their impact on a forest ecosystem,' says Dr. Gary Alt, who headed the Game Commission's deer management section until the constant battling over whitetails drove him to quit. 'They can, and will, dictate what other animals will survive there.'

Knowing that is one thing. Being able to do something about it - especially in Pennsylvania, where deer hunting traditions are as deeply rooted as 100-year-old white oak - is something else. A number of people, some Game Commission officials included, say they deer herd has been mismanaged for 80 years. That must change, they say, if deer populations are to finally be brought into balance with their habitat and if hunting as we know it is to survive.

Can that battle be won? People across the state and the nation are waiting to see. Virtually every state east of the Mississippi is dealing with this same issue - too many deer for the available habitat and a public that's come to believe having that many deer is not only OK, it's desirable. Pennsylvania may be the model for solving that problem.

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