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How to Conduct a Deer Census on Your Property — Part 2

by Dr. Harry Jacobson



It is easy to catch deer and other animals with an infrared triggered camera.

Editor's Note: The first part of this article by Dr. Jacobson was published in the December 2001 issue of Wildlife Trends. It covered the traditional means of estimating white-tailed deer populations. This second part covers a new technique which uses infrared-triggered cameras to measure deer numbers.

Infrared-Triggered Camera Census

For the past 10 years, I have been directly involved in the development of census procedures for white-tailed deer using infrared-triggered cameras. The technique has proven to be extremely easy to use and very effective. In studies involving marked animals, results have shown that greater than 90 percent of the population is generally photographed in a period as short as 10 days. Essentially, almost all bucks on a study area are photographed and a high percentage of does.

The use of infrared-triggered cameras involves a true census of bucks, because these are individually identifiable by antler and body characteristics. Since does and fawns are not easily identified as individual animals, their numbers are estimated based on the relative proportion of photographs taken of bucks to does to fawns. Currently, it is known that there is bias during some periods because bucks have higher frequency of bait use than does or fawns. Therefore, doe and fawn numbers are generally underestimated by the technique. However, the bias generally remains constant from one year to the next, and therefore relative changes in doe and fawn density are readily detectable with the technique.

If possible, I recommend two annual censuses be conducted, one in the early fall before the hunting season begins and one immediately following the hunting season in the early winter. The fall census underestimates fawn counts, but does allow identification of almost all bucks and is used to determine which bucks should be harvested. The winter count provides a more accurate census of does and fawns, and I generally use this census as the

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