

Deer Lecture to Brooklyn Boosters' Club

May 18, 1937

I imagine a number of you men are deer hunters, otherwise you wouldn't have wanted to hear the Department's side of the deer story. Many of you are also farmers or are directly connected with farming. You may wonder how deer and farming are related. Well, I'm going to try and combine them for you this evening. But first, let's talk hunting.

In the early days before 1800 all of Michigan (52,000 square miles) was deer territory (Slide of State). Then the better agricultural soils were settled and cleared and by 1870 the deer were being pushed north. About 1900 there was little hunting south of a line between Bay City and Muskegon, leaving about 35,000 square miles of deer territory. Forest fires and land speculation soon pushed the deer herd still farther north and in 1920 the only good hunting was in the northeastern portion of the Lower Peninsula and of course the Upper Peninsula where hunting has always been fair-to-good. (Slide) About this time Michigan became deer conscious and clamped down on hunting restrictions. But what probably helped more was forest fire protection. Game cover began to come in on the vast pine plains that had previously been open grass areas.

At present deer again inhabit and are hunted on about 35,000 square miles in the State, 16,300 in the Upper Peninsula and 18,200 in the Lower Peninsula. (Slide 1936 deer area with new open area). Last fall 14 counties were opened to hunting, some of which had been closed for 19 years. According to the latest tabulations over 136,000 deer hunters were in the woods last fall. Estimates indicate that about 30% of these were in the Upper Peninsula and 70% in the Lower Peninsula. A normal year would see only 55% in the Lower Peninsula, but this was increased to 70% last fall due probably to the addition of the new territory. This means that there were about 5 hunters for each square mile of deer hunting area in the Lower Peninsula as compared with 2.5 in the Upper Peninsula.

I suppose you want to know where the best hunting is. First let's talk deer populations. Many of you hunters won't believe this; we wouldn't either until we had checked it so much we were ashamed of ourselves. Deer census drives on selected sample areas of average territory in seven different localities indicate that the deer population in the Upper Peninsula is about 15 deer per square mile and 30 in the Lower Peninsula. Also the sex ratio has been about one buck for each 2 does in the Upper Peninsula and one buck for each four does in the Lower Peninsula. Figuring on percent of herd, there are about 3 bucks per square mile in the Upper Peninsula and the Lower Peninsula also.

Now to get back to hunting. You know that the apple way out on the end of the limb always looks best; well, deer hunting is about the same. The best hunting is found way over in the west end of the Upper Peninsula. More than 40% of the hunters going to Gogebic, Ontonagon, Houghton and Iron Counties are successful. From there east and south hunting decreases in quality until only about 20% are successful along the southern border of deer area in the Lower Peninsula. Jackson County furnishes about 1500 deer hunters, 400 to the Upper Peninsula and 100 to the Lower Peninsula. About 47% of those hunting in the Upper Peninsula get deer while only 25% of those in the Lower Peninsula get deer. This means that the Upper Peninsula hunters brought back about 190 deer and the Lower Peninsula hunters brought home about 275. I can see a number

of you raise your eyebrows as if you are wondering how many deer we have in the State anyway. Off hand, I might say, oh, a million or thereabouts and right here is where the connection comes in between deer and farming.

Now you men who manage farms know how many head of stock you have and how much pasture and how much winter feed. From these figures you know ahead of time how many head of stock you can winter, so you also know how much you need to dispose of before winter feeding begins. It may be news to you, but we have the same problems with deer. There is an abundance of summer pasture and summer feed, but our wintering problems are just as acute as those on a farm and we have a 22,400,000 acre farm instead of 160 or 300 acres as you have. Now we have, roughly, the number of head of stock on our farm, we know how much summer pasture we have (for all of our deer area is summer pasture), but we do not know how much winter food we have or the number of head of deer which it will carry. We do know, however, that our deer herd is too large for our winter range in a number of counties, because deer that have died from starvation have been found in many places. You see, deer bunch up in swamps and areas of heavy cover in the winter and only about 10% of our deer country is suitable for this. This makes a winter population of from 150 to 300 deer per square mile. Now, deer can't eat everything that grows, just as cattle can't live on corn stalks. With the ground cover under three to five feet of snow, only coarse browse is available.

Now you can begin to see what we are up against. With deer dying from starvation, no way to increase winter feed, more and more yards being over-browsed every year, the condition is continually becoming more serious especially during severe winters. The logical solution would be to reduce the deer herd to the carrying capacity of the winter yards. This is what you do on farms each fall when you know how much winter fodder you have on hand. But we can't do this with deer. Of course the herd is reduced by the annual kill during the regular hunting season each fall, but on many pastures this is not sufficient. More deer should be removed for they die from starvation before spring anyway. Also, because of the buck law only males can be taken leaving the does which does not reduce the rate of reproduction and a more serious condition develops the following fall.

Suppose we look at some pictures of these deeryards and see just what the conditions are.

- 351a. Here is the extent of the present summer range. This is my farm.
- 353a. These black areas are winter yards or barns, we might call them.
- 350a. Some of the winter yards have plenty of food for the deer using them. The black areas on this map show the location of some of them.
- 381a. Yards in good condition have this appearance, plenty of green cedar browse within easy reach of the deer.
- 352a. But many yards have been overpopulated by deer during the past and all available food has been browsed out. These black areas are yards in poor condition.
- 363. and have this appearance, Alpena County.
- 364. Deer have to stand on their hind legs to reach food here. The little one so hungry. Newaygo County.
- 382a. Another scene, Montmorency County, where many dead deer were found in 1930.
- 377a. The change comes quickly. Scene in Baldwin Creek Swamp, Lake County, February, 1932.
- 378a. By May, 1935, it looked like this. Food all gone and dead deer being found.

The following year, 1936, which was severe found scenes such as this:

- 380a. Dead deer from Longore Swamp, Alcona County.
- 417. Dead deer from Styles Swamp, Newaygo County.
- 360a. Overbrowsed yard, Drummond Island. 40 dead deer found.
- 355a. Sometimes deer attempt to yard in jackpine thickets. Here is one that didn't quite pull through. Notice browsed jackpine limbs.
- 385a. Deer sometimes yard where they can browse an second growth hardwood. This might almost be in your back wood lot.
- 375. During logging operations deer sometimes find an abundance of food in the tops of cedars cut for posts.
- 354a. But with a bunch of deer like this working on the tops, they soon look like
- 376. this. All cleaned out in 48 hours.
- 433. It doesn't do much good to plant browse either. See what happened to this pine and it should have been five feet high.
- 432. Here is a cedar killed in two years. No chance to grow.

Feeding doesn't do much good because it is too expensive over large areas. It has been tried in a number of places. In Alcona County a hunting club fed piles of alfalfa hay in that jackpine country and 14 dead deer were found within sight of the hay.

But don't be too alarmed. I have only told you the dark side of the story. Why, this past winter I counted 117 deer in about an hour in Ontonagon County. Another place in Ontonagon County five of us made a drive in a yard and counted over 200 in about 30 minutes. One man counted 42 deer cross a trail, one behind the other. In Alpena County about the first of May Mr. Zettle and I counted 270 deer in about two hours. Reports repeatedly come into the office of 100 to 150 deer in alfalfa fields, and so on.

The winter losses are comparable to your losses of sheep and cattle during the winter. It is to be expected that with a shortage of food in some areas and a herd of nearly a million deer, some loss is bound to result.

Oh, yes, deer have parasites too.

- 443. The cattle liver fluke infests deer and sometimes causes trouble.
- 391. Nose bots similar to those in sheep are common in deer and are serious in some areas.
- 146. Lung worms also are prevalent and under severe weather and poor food conditions may cause pneumonia.
- 141. Yes and they have lice too. This fawn had rubbed the hair all off his nose.

The winter just past has been very light and the winter losses almost insignificant. A few dead deer have been found in the west end of the Upper Peninsula where snow was from three to five feet deep. Conditions now indicate that next fall Michigan will enter the deer season with the largest deer herd in the history of the State.