

HOW SEASONS AND BAG LIMITS ARE SET

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Many hunters may wonder why a particular hunting season opens on a certain date. Many factors are considered, however, they can be grouped into two broad categories: sociological and biological. Season dates are often a compromise between the two.

The Natural Resources Commission, a seven-member panel appointed by the Governor, sets season dates and bag limits. The reason for the Commission is to provide balance between the biological needs of the resource and the public desire to use the resource. By the time you read this article the season dates and bag limits for the 1998-99 season will already be set. The process actually began in January 1997 when Wildlife Resources and Law Enforcement sections representatives met to finalize their proposed regulations into a single Division of Natural Resources proposal.

Proposed changes to the 1998-99 hunting seasons and the 1997 antlerless deer season were reviewed by the commissioners in January and presented to hunters in March. Hunters are encouraged to comment on the proposed changes at 17 "sectional" meetings held throughout the state or through questionnaires distributed by the Division of Natural Resources. The public comments are summarized and presented to the commissioners in April. The Commission approved the county specific antlerless deer regulations for 1997 and the general season dates and bag limits for 1998-99 at the April meeting. The process of getting *the 1997 Deer Hunting Seasons and 1998-99 Hunting and Trapping Regulations* publications designed and printed begins immediately after the commissioners approve the proposals. Setting the hunting season dates and bag limits (fishing regulations are set the same way) is a long, complicated process but it does insure that all interested persons have an opportunity to participate.

Regulations other than season dates and bag limits go through a similar process before being submitted to the legislative rule-making process. The state legislature is the final authority for regulations that do not involve season dates or bag limits. For example, the legislative rule-making process prescribes uses on public lands and hunting methods.

Regulation changes proposed by the Wildlife Resources Section are generally due to biological considerations. Season dates and bag limits are used to regulate harvests so population levels may be increased, reduced, or maintained at current levels. The goal is to allow as much hunting as possible but still allow for population growth as needed.

Sociological concerns such as tradition and the desires of the hunting public also play important roles in determining hunting season dates. Opening the two-week, bucks-only firearms deer season on the Monday before Thanksgiving is a good example of combining biology and tradition. The Thanksgiving holiday allows more people to participate and most deer breeding has already taken place so hunting will not disrupt reproduction.

Spring gobbler season is a good example of a season based purely on biological considerations. When first implemented, spring hunting was controversial. But from a biological standpoint, it is the safest and most efficient season to harvest surplus male turkeys. The only function of the gobbler is to fertilize eggs and a single mating is all that is necessary, even if a hen must re-nest. The season is set to open after most breeding has taken place and most nesting hens have begun incubation. Legal shooting hours end at 1 p.m. because nesting hens frequently leave their nest for a short time in the afternoon to feed and get water. This season takes advantage of reproductive behavior to make surplus gobblers easier to harvest and the date and time are set so that nesting hens are seldom moving about when hunters are in the woods. Advocates of an earlier season opening or all-day hunting are often unaware of these biological considerations.

Black bear season provides an example of biology overruling tradition. When bears were finally recognized as game animals instead of varmints in 1969, the initial firearms seasons were set for one week in

November and two weeks in December. This season structure was based on the desires of bear hunters to have both early and late hunting and to not conflict with other hunting seasons. Unfortunately, bear populations did not increase and may have even declined slightly.

The traditional approach to correcting this situation would have been to reduce or eliminate bear hunting, an option many people favored. However, a careful review of biological information collected from radio telemetry studies and harvest data revealed a better solution. Sow bears, especially pregnant ones, nearly always go into their winter dens in late November. By moving all the bear firearms hunting days into December, many female bears could be saved without reducing the number of hunting days available. This was done in 1979 and has resulted in a healthy, expanding bear population with no loss of hunting opportunity.

Sometimes tradition and biology conflict, and compromises must be found. Squirrel and fall turkey seasons are a good example. Traditionally the fall turkey season opened in mid-October on the same day that squirrel season opened. Biologists determined that the fall turkey harvest, comprised mainly of hens, was slowing the turkey population growth. They believed that a small reduction in the harvest of hens would, in a few years, result in larger turkey populations in those counties with a fall season. Biologists recommended a split in the opening of squirrel and fall turkey season to reduce pressure on the hen segment of the wild turkey population. Hunters expressed their desire to maintain the traditional opening day for squirrel season, and the Natural Resources Commission did not approve the DNR recommendation to change the fall turkey season opening to a later date.

The Wildlife Resources Section tried a different approach and suggested opening squirrel season a week earlier instead of changing turkey season. This approach was successful and in a few years the turkey population had increased noticeably. With proof in hand, biologists again requested that the fall turkey season be opened a week later. The Natural Resources Commission responded to the biological evidence and increased public support and established our current season structure for squirrel and fall turkey hunting opening dates. The result has been a faster rate of growth for turkey populations in fall hunted counties.

Biologists also use bag limits to regulate harvests. Deer hunting is a good example. Antlerless deer harvests are the major tool used to regulate deer populations. When the deer population in a county exceeds the goals established for that county, antlerless harvests are liberalized. If a county deer population is below the goal, opportunities to take antlerless deer are limited. McDowell County, for example, has a low deer population. There are no deer firearms seasons in McDowell County and hunters may take only one deer of either sex during the bow season.

In counties with high deer populations the yearly bag limit is larger and many antlerless deer may be harvested. Marshall County has a high deer population and bag limits for this fall are liberal. Using all the optional licenses and hunting during all seasons, a hunter could take seven deer in Marshall County in 1997, six of which could be antlerless deer.

Hunting has little effect on most small game species such as squirrel or rabbit. These species have higher reproductive rates and populations go up or down depending on weather and habitat conditions. Bag limits on these species are mostly used to distribute the harvest among more hunters and to discourage waste.

These are just a few examples of how season dates and bag limits are used to manage wildlife. These examples demonstrate how a process involving the public, the Wildlife Resources Section, and the Natural Resources Commission can produce seasons and bag limits based both on sound biology and the desires of the hunting public.