

What happened to the deer?

Ira Hansen

Are you one of the more than 20,000 hunters who applied for — but failed to receive — a deer tag this year?

In my family, eleven of us applied. One was successful.

In the early 1960's, my grandfather calculated that it was possible for a single individual, using all the legal means available, to kill as many as seventeen deer in a single season here in Nevada. Deer were abundant; heavy harvests were encouraged to help keep the population in check. The human population of Nevada at that time was only about a fourth of what it is now, but a much larger percentage of the population hunted; the number of hunters was about the same as today; 50,000 to 75,000. What happened? Why aren't deer as abundant as in the "good old days"?

Some very interesting historical and biological pieces of evidence help explain the population changes for deer in Nevada. First of all, deer were scarce when white men first came here. I had the good fortune to meet, when I was a boy, an old man named Bob Prunty. Bob Prunty had lived his whole life at the bottom of Copper Basin in northern Elko County, his ancestors had been miners and ranchers at the site of what's now the ghost town of Charleston. Prunty's relatives still live in this remote part of Nevada. This area is one of the best deer areas in the state; in fact, I met Bob Prunty when we went deer hunting near his ranch in the early 1970s. He related the changes in deer populations as seen by himself.

As a boy, he herded sheep and cattle in the hills around Charleston and Jarbidge. He saw his first deer when he was 11 years old. They were very scarce in the 1920s. In the early 1930s, the population began to expand slowly. Then, after World War II, the deer herd exploded. In the 1950s and '60s, deer were everywhere, abundant almost beyond belief. Bob's brother, "Shorty" Prunty, told me how, during that time, it was no big deal to see trophy sized bucks in virtually every canyon in the mountains surrounding their respective ranches. This was not a localized phenomena; Elko County and most of northern Nevada became known throughout the west as a deer hunters paradise.

In 1932, 3,054 hunters killed 488 deer, a success rate of about 15 percent. In 1939, 6,563 hunters killed 1,026 deer, a success rate of about 18 percent. In 1955, 43,994 hunters killed 34,500 deer, a success rate of almost 80 percent.

That's a dramatic, almost unbelievable change. What happened?

Several factors; however, the most significant — and controversial — was the widespread reduction in predators, especially coyotes.

In the "New Deal" era of the 1930s, the federal government hired large numbers of predator control agents, more commonly known as "government trappers." A widespread and systematic program was instituted throughout the West. Huge numbers of traps were spread all over Nevada; the poison strychnine was also widely used. This resulted in the gradual upward movement of the deer herd in the 1933-1941 period. World War II sharply reduced the available manpower. After W.W. II, the program was reduced, but still viable. The most dramatic change came between 1948-1951. In 1948, 8,845 deer were killed by 23,509 hunters, a success rate of about 35 percent. Suddenly, within three years, the harvest jumped to over 20,300 with a success rate of 70 percent.

What happened between 1948-1951? One dramatic change — the introduction of the poison "1080." "1080" unlike strychnine, is odorless, tasteless and a very deadly poison to canines. In 1947, Eddie Debernardi, a government trapper here in Nevada, was the first experimental trapper in the U.S. to use it in the field. In the colder areas of the west, where coyotes often survive on carrion in the dead of winter, "1080" proved to be amazingly effective.

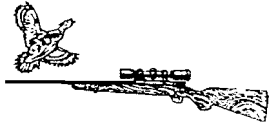
The debate has raged for years in wildlife management circles about predators and their effect on game populations. The general consensus is that predators have little impact on healthy wildlife populations.

In political terms, "predator control" is a hot potato. NDOW will not publicly admit that there is a place for predator control in wildlife management, but private acknowledgment is made that indeed there is — NDOW will not "rock the boat."

What's really stupid about this is that predators ultimately benefit

from predator control, through expansion of their prey species, their "food supply." Case in point: from 1916 to 1933, only 56 mountain lions were killed in Nevada, an average of only three a year. Today, lions are harvested at rates approaching 200 a year. And that harvest is still conservative, taking less than 10 percent of the available population. The lion population skyrocketed when their favorite food source — deer — also skyrocketed. However, left unchecked, predator populations can expand to the point that their prey bases are held in check, not allowing expansion beyond minimum levels. This is especially true for animals with relatively low reproduction rates, such as deer, bighorn sheep, and antelope. That may explain the almost non-existent status of big game in early Nevada history.

Controlling predators is good for all involved — hunters, deer, and even the predators themselves. It is time to quit ignoring the truth. Predator control should be a strong component of a well balanced wildlife management program.



Wildlife Commissioners should resign!!!

It keeps getting worse for Nevada deer hunters. Of course, the Wildlife commissioners are oblivious to this problem. They could care less about our declining deer numbers. **That is a fact.** In addition, they don't know what to do about this. Because of their gross negligence, if they had any conscience at all, they would tender their resignations. Here is proof of their failure to act.

In NDOW's own Big Game Status Books, here are the facts:

From 1970 to 2001, the 32 year average of deer tag sales is 30,653.

The last 4 year average (2002-2005) is 16,326.

This is a loss of 14,327 per year from 2002 to 2005.

A Nevada resident spends \$78 to hunt deer:

- \$33 for a license
- \$30 for a deer tag
- \$10 for an application fee
- \$3 for a predator control fee
- \$2 for an online fee

If you take the lost sales of 14,327 and multiply it by the total resident cost of \$78

(non-residents pay even more), it amounts to \$1,117,506. However, when you put that to 3 times matching funds, the amount is now \$3,352,518.00 a year, which is about 15% of NDOW's total budget. **Is it any wonder they are broke?** In essence, just on the mule deer sales in the last four years, they have lost \$13,410,072.00. **Now do you see why the Wildlife commissioners should tender their resignations?**

Let's put names to the sportsmen's representatives who are responsible for this in the last four years. As sportsmen's representatives, they have failed the sportsmen miserably. **Bill Bradley** is absolutely one of the worst. As a commissioner for ten years, he bears a lot of responsibility for our declining deer numbers because for ten years he did nothing about it. **Tommy Ford** was on the Wildlife Commission for six years. Sportsmen expected him to be a standup guy, not a standup comedian. He did whatever Terry Crawford and NDOW wanted. The job was over his head. On numerous occasions, he stated that Terry Crawford gave us everything we wanted. Apparently, Commissioner Ford did not ask Terry to do something about our declining deer. **Clint Bentley** is still on the Wildlife Commission, but never should have been appointed. He failed to do something about our mountain lion problem more than once.

He fails to recognize the number one food for mountain lion is mule deer. In addition, he is a very selfish individual. If it isn't something that pertains to sheep, he could care less. In other words, to hell with the 35,000 people who wanted to get a deer tag. **Chris Mackenzie** is the current chairman of the Wildlife Commission. In addition, he is also chairman for the Committee to Establish Policy for the Management of Mule Deer. This is a long titled committee which achieves nothing. It is basically one plan after another plan after another plan. However, none of their plans are going to bring our deer back. **Oh, but their plan will be revised every five years!**

Fortunately for Nevada deer hunters, Tommy Ford and Bill Bradley are no longer on the Wildlife Commission. However, Bill Bradley is still hurting sportsmen as a member of the Wildlife Commission's Legislative Committee. This still leaves Clint Bentley and Chris Mackenzie as the worst commissioner's who are supposed to represent sportsmen. Their inability to recognize and act upon the loss of our deer and the millions of dollars that go with it, is grounds for them to resign. **But when your head is in the sand, it's hard to see the piece of paper to sign your letter of resignation.**

Wildlife commissioners putting their heads together to bring back our deer.



Names left to right:
Clint Bentley, Bill Bradley, Tommy Ford, Chris MacKenzie