



By Karen Brasher

It is a cold January morning, the sun is just breaking through the trees, birds are chirping, and Marvell Howard sits in his favorite tree stand; about 500 yards away, his teenage son Christopher occupies his own tree stand. Both hope to get a shot at elusive white-tailed deer near their Oktibbeha County home.

Howard's father introduced him to rabbit hunting when he was 7 years old. He in turn introduced his son to hunting at the age of 7.

"I hunt deer, turkey, squirrel, rabbit and coon," Howard said. "However, the time constraints of work and home limit the amount of time I can spend in the woods."

Howard works for Mississippi State University's physical plant, and he is representative of many hunters who have to choose which species to hunt.

Survey Reveals the Nature of Mississippi Hunters

To better understand the hunting population, Mississippi State University's Human Dimensions and Conservation Law Enforcement Laboratory conducts an annual survey of Mississippi hunters.

Conducted since 1980, the survey is the state's primary means of collecting information on the number of hunters in Mississippi who hunt for various game species, how much time they spend in the field, and how many animals they harvest. The 2006 survey results indicate a decline in the number of hunters and a shift in species sought.

"In the early 1980s, hunters were opportunistic and hunted a variety of game including quail, squirrel, rabbit and deer," said Kevin Hunt, wildlife and fisheries assistant professor and director of the laboratory. "Currently, not as many people are hunting small game and upland birds."

Some of the decreased interest is due to changing land-use practices, which in turn affects species availability. Additionally, demands on leisure time and rising fuel and equipment costs are forcing some hunters to curtail their hunting activities and specialize in only one or two species.

"When given the choice, about 80 percent of Mississippi hunters choose the white-tailed deer over all other species," Hunt said.

Howard prefers raccoon hunting but can occasionally fit in a deer hunt with his son.



Marvell Howard, left, and his son Christopher hunt with their dogs Thunder and Snap in Oktibbeha County.

"There is something special about being in the woods in the early morning, the solitude and communion with nature," he said. "I wish I could hunt more often; it just seems that there are not enough hours in the day."

Determining hunter preferences and attitudes is an important part of MSU's studies of the sport and efforts to provide opportunities for landowners to capitalize on hunting enterprises.

"The key to state and private landowners' capitalizing on the economic benefits of deer and other types of hunting is to determine how hunters' preferences and attitudes toward land and wildlife management will change and how technology will change the hunting experience," Hunt said.

"Because of hunters' preference for white-tailed deer, researchers have devoted considerable research to the study of deer hunting in Mississippi," Hunt said. "Recent studies conducted by the laboratory include documenting hunters' opinions toward deer management on wildlife management areas and the economic impacts of white-tailed deer hunting to the state economy."

The survey revealed that in 2006 white-tailed deer hunting generated \$978 million in sales of equipment and other hunting-related expenditures in Mississippi. The sport also supports some 33,000 jobs in the state.

Additionally, the survey shows Mississippi hunters spent an average of about \$50 per day for deer-related trip expenditures and \$111 per day for equipment and other long-term expenditures, while nonresident hunters spent \$90 per day and \$138 per day for these expenditures in the state.

The annual survey also captures demographic information.

"Currently, the Mississippi hunter population is 94 percent white male with a median annual household income of \$50,000," Hunt said. "Hunters indicated they have been hunting an average of 29 years and hunted an average of 28 days in the 2004-05 hunting season."

About 60 percent of hunters consider hunting to be their most important outdoor recreational activity, and 20 percent belong to some type of hunting/conservation organization. Also, more than 65 percent indicated they live in a household with an ATV that is used for hunting.

"This type of information about the hunting population helps us provide hunting and other recreation businesses with the information they need to succeed. It also provides a baseline of data to better market hunting opportunities to existing clientele, as well as to identify under-represented groups," Hunt said.



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