

NORTHERN MICHIGAN DEER WINTER RANGE PROJECT

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After the devastating winters of 2012/13 and 2013/14, the Upper Peninsula (U.P.) of Michigan deer population was drastically reduced. Malnutrition and lack of fawn survival sent the population plummeting. No surveys for dead deer were done after the winters of 2012/13 and 2013/14. However, to put these losses in to perspective, overwinter mortality studies were done after two severe winters in 1994/95 and 1995/96. During those two winters 200,000 and 100,000, respectively, died of malnutrition. Since that time, deer hunter numbers in the U.P. have declined by more than 40%. By coincidence, studies by Mississippi State University and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) were ongoing and it was becoming increasingly apparent that quality winter deer habitat, particularly the lack of suitable shelter from bitter weather conditions, was a major factor contributing to widespread malnutrition deaths and fawn mortality. It has become clear that unless a major effort is started to get deer through winter's "pinch period" the future of all deer related recreation in the U.P. is in jeopardy.

In June of 2014, (then) Michigan Natural Resources Commissioner, J. R. Richardson, formed the U.P. Habitat Workgroup (UPHWG). The 13 member group is composed of foresters, wildlife biologists, state and federal land managers, private land managers, and representatives of Michigan United Conservation Clubs (MUCC) and Upper Peninsula Sportsman Alliance (UPSA). The mission of the group is to improve wintering conditions for deer by working with private landowners who own critical winter habitat. Private industrial and non-industrial landowners have been identified as high priority for habitat improvement, since they control roughly one half of U.P. deer winter range. An immediate need was to map and analyze habitat in all winter deer range. This important project was completed quickly (see map on Page 3), and funded by MDNR Wildlife Division and a Safari Club International Foundation (SCIF) grant of \$30,000. Since then we have continued to receive financial support from MDNR, SCIF, Safari Club International Michigan Involvement Committee, U.P. Whitetails, UPSA, and MUCC. In addition, we have applied for and received two large grants from MDNR Wildlife Division. Together, these grants amount to \$210,400. Of that amount, more than \$35,000 has been spent for "on the ground" habitat improvement. Currently these funds are "frozen" due to the COVID-19 economic stress inflicted on all state government assets. We are hopeful and confident that when the current crisis is behind us, we will be made whole again.

The habitat goal of this effort is to create habitat conditions across all ownerships that will result in better overwinter survival for deer. In addition, we're convinced that this work will more widely distribute deer, a big plus in the efforts to control Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD). We're hoping to work with landowners to create a 50-50 mix of shelter and food on deer winter range. Some of the forestry practices we plan to employ are: 1) Direct planting of conifers; 2) Planting of high value hard and soft mast; 3) Scarification followed by planting or seeding of conifers, 4) Partial commercial cuts retaining conifer seed trees; and 5) Retention of important shelter species. All these practices would be at no cost to the landowner.

We currently do most of this work by using two contracted land managers: a Forester (Stu Borne), and a Forester/Wildlife Biologist (Jake Walcisak). Both of these resource professionals are experienced and have exceptional skills in forest management and data analysis. We intend much of the on-the-ground work in the future to be done by consulting foresters directed by Stu and Jake.

We are exploring every opportunity for funding this project. Actual forest work requires fairly large financial inputs. For this we intend to primarily use grant funding (noted above). However, grant funding does not cover grant request development, travel, landowner contacts, field visits, or proposal development. For these activities we depend on our contracted workers, whose work is funded by donations. This is an essential part of our program which we continually struggle to keep funded. Any financial support we can get for these purposes is greatly appreciated. Think of our program as having two segments. Segment one is funding generated by donations and used to develop proposals, visit landowners, and document needs. Segment two is the funding acquired through grants and used for actual proposal completion (planting, scarifying, etc.).

Actual habitat work accomplished by grant dollars cannot be realized unless segment one funding is acquired. This is where we need help from those groups and individuals who care about the future of deer and deer hunting in the Upper Peninsula.

In summary, this is a “first of its kind” effort to ensure the future of our U.P. deer population by focusing on their greatest need across all landownership categories. Funds for this work are held by SCIF at our Washington, D.C. office. We welcome you to be a partner in this work. The future of U.P. deer hunting is in our hands and depends on our success.

