



Ask MassWildlife:

Common Hunting Questions Answered

Questions taken from MassWildlife's annual hunter survey

[Why doesn't DFW change the law to allow hunting on Sundays?](#)

[Why doesn't DFW change the law to allow moose hunting?](#)

[Why doesn't DFW change the law to allow all hunters to use a crossbow?](#)

[Why doesn't DFW change the law to reduce the discharge setbacks from 500 ft to 150 ft for archery?](#)

[Can you put some graphs and figures on your website for deer numbers?](#)

[There are no deer where I hunt and DFW doesn't give out enough antlerless deer permits for where I hunt.](#)

[I am not seeing as many deer on my property as I used to, is it because there are fewer deer, fewer hunters on the ground moving deer, or is it because my woods are not good for deer?](#)

[Do moose and deer compete for the same foods and areas?](#)

[Do deer numbers go up when there are lots of acorns and down when there are none?](#)

[Why is it so hard to find a place to hunt in eastern MA?](#)

[When is the rut?](#)

[Why does DFW only allow online deer checking during archery and primitive seasons?](#)

[Why does DFW keep changing the deer season dates each year?](#)

[Has the restriction on importing whole deer carcasses from NY into MA been lifted?](#)

[Why doesn't DFW make a year-round season on coyotes?](#)

[How do I report a violation, if I see one?](#)

[Massachusetts should implement antler point restrictions or only give out one buck tag.](#)

[I see a lot of does without fawns; did the coyotes kill them?](#)

[I saw a deer with black wart-like things on it, what is wrong with it?](#)

[What happens to deer in nature preserves and other areas that don't allow hunting?](#)

“Why doesn’t DFW change the law to allow hunting on Sundays?”

Sunday hunting is prohibited by a *Statute*, often referred to as a General Law. [Click here to view the Statute.](#) (See Statute vs. Regulations box below.)

A bill to allow archery hunting on Sundays had been passed by the House in June of 2014 but did not get passed by the full legislature.

“Why doesn’t DFW change the law to allow moose hunting?”

Moose hunting is prohibited by a *Statute*. [Click here to view the Statute.](#) (See Statute vs. Regulations box below.)

“Why doesn’t DFW change the law to allow all hunters to use a crossbow?”

The law prohibiting general use of crossbows for hunting is a *Statute*. [Click here to view the Statute.](#) A bill to expand the eligibility of those that can use a crossbow is introduced almost every year, but has yet to pass. (See Statute vs. Regulations box below.)

“Why doesn’t DFW change the law to reduce the discharge setbacks from 500 ft to 150 ft for archery?”

Discharge setbacks are defined by a *Statute*. [Click here to view the Statute.](#) A bill to reduce setbacks is introduced almost every year; but, so is a bill to expand setbacks to 1000 feet. (See Statute vs. Regulations box below.)

Statute vs. Regulations

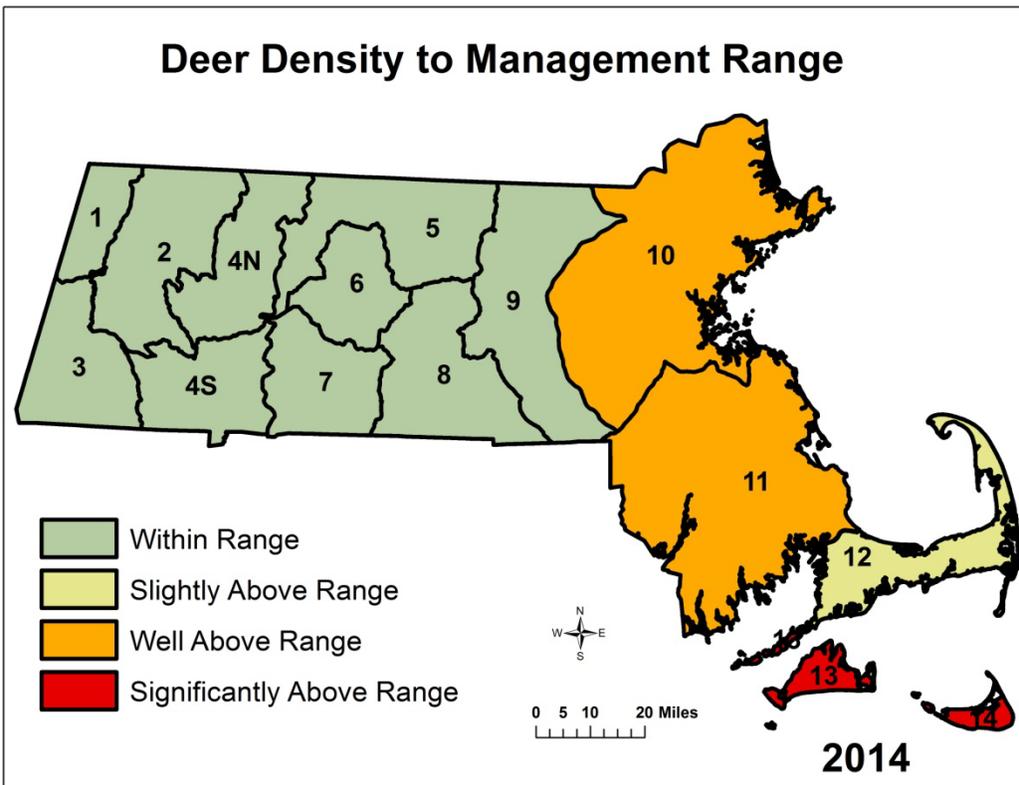
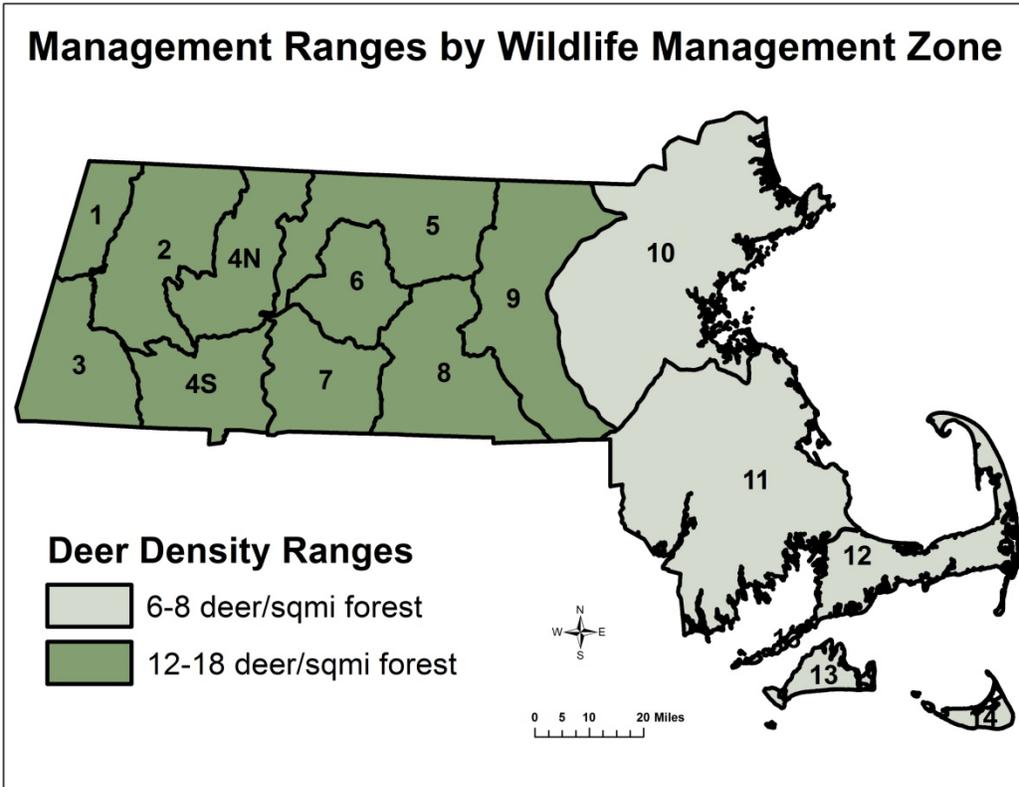
The only way to change a *Statute* is for a bill to pass in the legislature. The bill could either address the issue through the bill language or have language that gives DFW the authority to make regulations. To learn more about any current hunting-related legislation you can [contact your local state representative or senator.](#)

The Fisheries and Wildlife Board has the authority to change hunting *Regulations*, which are referred to as CMRs (Code of Massachusetts Regulations) but cannot approve regulations which contradict *Statutes*.

[back to top](#)

“Can you put some graphs and figures on your website for deer numbers?”

Our deer management goal is to maintain a healthy deer population at levels low enough that we don't see major impacts to the habitat and other species that we are responsible for managing, but in balance with public desires and tolerance. See figures of management ranges and where deer numbers are with respect to those ranges below.



“There are no deer where I hunt and DFW doesn’t give out enough antlerless deer permits for where I hunt.”

While this is an obvious contradictory statement to a wildlife manager, it may not be so apparent to most people. DFW manages deer numbers through regulated female harvest (allocation of antlerless deer permits). Permit allocation is lower in regions where DFW is trying to increase deer densities. Distributing *more* permits in these areas would be counterproductive and cause deer densities to fall even further from target goals. In areas where there are fewer permits allocated and many hunters, the odds of drawing a permit will be low. However, allocating zero antlerless permits for an area to increase deer density is also not a good idea because we would not have any biological data to review, which is critical for evaluating the deer population.

In some areas of western and central MA - there is no easy way to increase antlerless deer permit allocations *and* increase deer densities. However, altering the available habitat to improve food availability and cover for deer would certainly help support more deer on the landscape (i.e., cut trees to create a thick young understory, which provides bedding and fawning cover and year-round food).

“I am not seeing as many deer on my property as I used to, is it because there are fewer deer, fewer hunters on the ground moving deer, or is it because my woods are not good for deer?”

It could be any combination of these factors. This is a common concern from hunters in the western part of the state who remember seeing more deer in the past.

Forest age and structure has changed over the past 40 years in Massachusetts, such that some areas that once supported large numbers of deer are no longer able to do so. Forests in the state, and especially in the west, have matured due to lack of cutting. This change in structure affects species (ruffed grouse, deer, moose, cottontails, many songbirds, etc.) that require a diversity of forest ages, including young forests, to thrive. For example, a large tract of mature forest can only healthily support about 10-15 deer per square mile. If your property lacks quality year-round food and cover, then deer are not likely to frequent your property very often.

The number of hunters on the ground can also affect the number of deer being seen during hunting season. Many western MA hunters have noted a decrease in the number of hunters in the woods during the shotgun season. In general, the more hunters there are moving deer, the more deer will be seen. If everyone is waiting in tree stands during the shotgun season, the deer can simply stay bedded all day.

[back to top](#)

“Do moose and deer compete for the same foods and areas?”

Yes, for the most part deer and moose rely on many of the same resources. Moose have a height advantage and can reach higher than deer when browsing. Unlike deer, moose don't thrive across the state. Massachusetts and parts of Connecticut represent the southernmost extent of moose range and is related to climate. Moose can suffer from heat stress in the summer, so they do best near higher elevations (Berkshires and Northern Worcester County). Habitat within Massachusetts' moose range is generally not very productive (nutrient poor soils with few young forest stands) and also must support both deer and moose.

“Do deer numbers go up when there are lots of acorns and down when there are none?”

Acorns are an important food source for many wildlife species, but they are not the only food for deer, nor should they be. Mature does typically have 2 fawns per year, regardless of whether acorn mast is abundant or absent. In addition to acorns, deer eat other forms of hard and soft mast, such as beach nuts, hickory nuts, apples, etc. Acorn availability changes from year to year and deer require consistent food sources to carry them through the winter. An abundance of reachable preferred browse (twigs from red maple, white oak, etc.) provides year-round food and cover that deer need. In years that acorns are abundant, deer are able to store more fat, but will still need to rely on browse throughout the winter. Acorns simply supplement and benefit a deer's diet when available, kind of like cake for humans.

“Why is it so hard to find a place to hunt in eastern MA?”

One of the biggest challenges for managing deer in eastern MA is the lack of access for hunters. Many of the towns within I-495 have by-laws that restrict hunting such as requiring written permission or not allowing discharge of firearms. Further, much of the forested land in these towns is closed to hunting or it is near impossible to get permission from all the homes within 500 feet to hunt it. It may be very difficult and time consuming to find the huntable areas and get the necessary permission, but all that effort may land you a very productive spot and help to reduce densities of deer in those areas. Many towns are starting to realize how important hunting is for controlling deer, turkey, and other wildlife and are starting to open town owned lands for hunting. DFW does not have authority over whether landowners (DCR, town, land trust, private, etc.) allow access or hunting on their property or not. However, we are available to speak with landowners to provide information about hunting and wildlife issues. The town clerk for each town should be able to provide you with that town's written bylaws.

“When is the rut?”

The rut is the common term to describe the breeding season of deer. Changes in the daily length of daylight serve as the trigger for hormone changes in deer that bring on breeding and the behaviors seen during the rut. Deer naturally become less active during daylight hours in the early fall, especially when the days are warm because they now have a winter coat. Also, bucks are storing up energy to use during the rut. However, there can be a lot of daylight deer activity during the weeks leading up to and during the rut as bucks search for receptive does. The peak of breeding typically occurs between the 1st – 3rd weeks of November in Massachusetts, but rutting behavior can be seen before and after this period.

[back to top](#)

“Why does DFW only allow online deer checking during archery and primitive seasons?”

We allow online checking for archery and primitive seasons because we don't need to collect biological data during those times at checkstations. We need to collect biological data in a way that balances our staff's time and allows for enough data to be collected in each zone. The deer harvest during the shotgun season provides a good “snapshot” of the harvest for biological data (e.g., we can't combine weights from October with weights from December) and best balances our staff time (we send out staff to over 40 checkstations statewide).

“Why does DFW keep changing the deer season dates each year?”

DFW does not change the season each year. It depends on the date of Thanksgiving. ([Click to see CMR 3.02](#), go to section 4b)

“Has the restriction on importing whole deer carcasses from NY into MA been lifted?”

No – New York is still considered a CWD positive state.

DFW regulations [CMR 2.15 \(b\)](#) prohibit bringing in a whole carcass or deer parts from CWD positive states. *You can bring in meat which has been cut and wrapped (commercially or privately), deboned meat, hides with no head attached, cleaned skull caps (no muscle or brain tissue attached) with attached antlers, antlers with no muscle or brain tissue attached, and fixed taxidermy mounts.*

As of 2014, CWD positive states include: Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Virginia, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. See <http://www.cwd-info.org> for more info.

“Why doesn't DFW make a year-round season on coyotes?”

The coyote season was extended several years ago to provide extended hunting opportunities, but maintain the timing to when the pelts have the most value, which limits waste of the resource.

“How do I report a violation, if I see one?”

For the fastest response, call the 24/7 Environmental Police Dispatch number **1-800-632-8075** to report a violation. You can also report it through their website <http://www.mass.gov/eea/grants-and-tech-assistance/enforcement/environmental-police/report-a-violation.html>

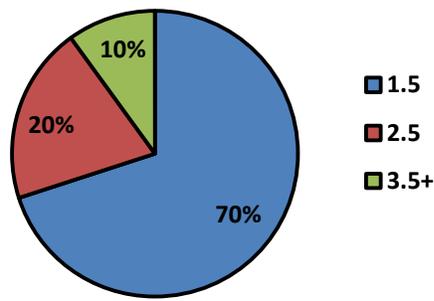
[back to top](#)

“Massachusetts should implement antler point restrictions or only give out one buck tag.”

In states where more than half of the yearling bucks (1.5 yrs old) are killed each year, antler point restrictions are important to ensure that enough of them survive to reach older ages. A balanced age structure is important for a healthy population. Here in MA (mostly because hunter densities are low), harvest rates on yearling bucks are low enough that we have plenty of bucks reaching those older ages classes. We also have low harvest rates on all bucks, so offering 2 antlered deer tags to every hunter does not negatively impact age structure or lead to an overharvest.

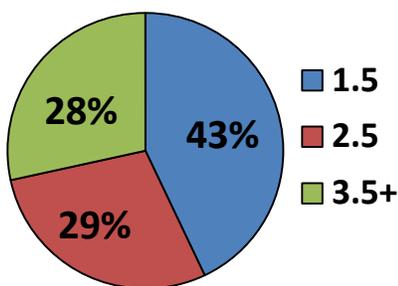
If male harvest rates are too high (especially yearling male harvest rates), you can tell from the ages of deer in the harvest. Over time, you would see the age distribution in the adult male harvest look like the figure below.

Example of a Population in Need of Antler Point Restrictions

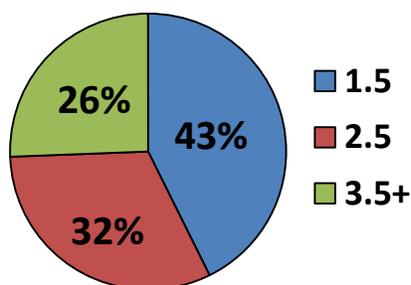


Here in Massachusetts, because our male harvest rates are low, we have a very well balanced age structure in the population (see figures below). Many of the states that implement antler point restrictions strive to have what we already have.

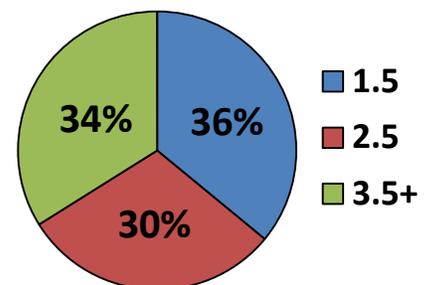
Western Zones
(zones 1-4)



Central Zones
(zones 5-9)



Eastern Zones
(zones 10-12)



[back to top](#)

“I see a lot of does without fawns; did the coyotes kill them?”

Not all antlerless deer will have a fawn or fawns when you observe them in the hunting season. Most of the females 2.5 yrs and older will have fawns, but very few yearling females will have fawns (typically less than 15% will breed as fawns: puberty is related to their weight). Again, regardless of predators, only about half of the antlerless deer seen can even have fawns. However, predators do take fawns. Radio collar studies in the Northeast found that predators (black bears, coyotes, and bobcats combined) take about 20-40% of the fawns each year. When predator levels dropped, other mortality (vehicle collisions, natural mortality, etc) tended to make up for it. Regardless of high or low predator levels, about 40-50% of the fawns will not survive each year. In these studies, even though almost half the fawns died, the deer populations were still growing. Why? Because the survival of reproductive females is very high (typically over 90%, even with regulated hunting), and these females continue to produce fawns year after year. Also, the fact that fawns and yearlings show up in the harvest indicates that fawns are surviving and reaching older ages.

“I saw a deer with black wart-like things on it, what is wrong with it?”

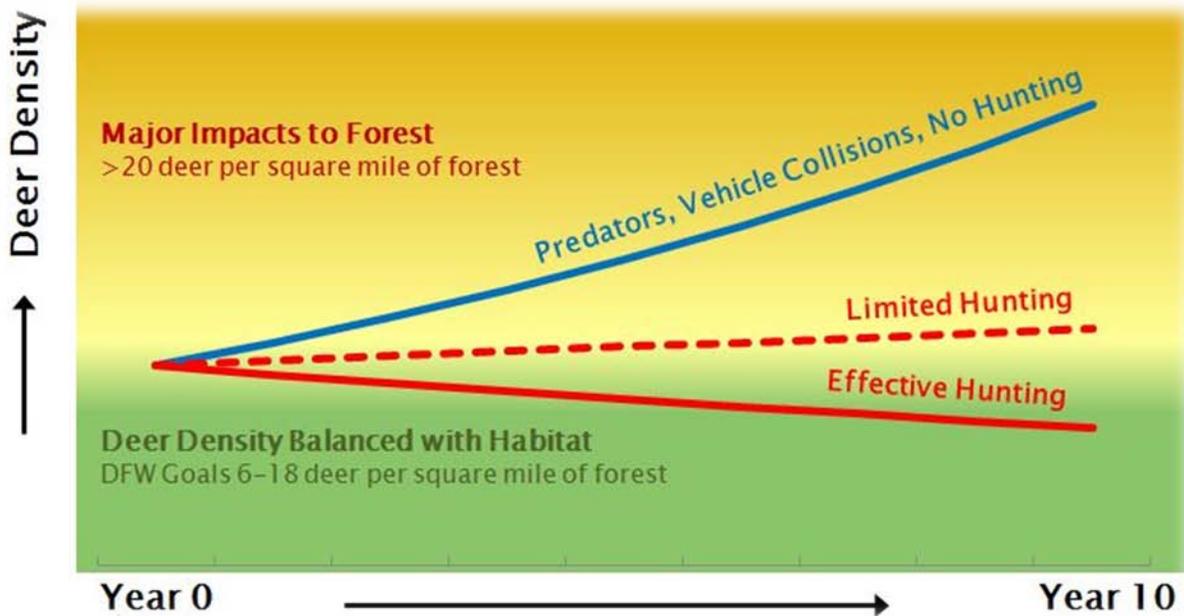
They are called cutaneous fibromas (commonly referred to as deer warts), which are caused by a virus. The virus only affects the deer’s skin and poses no known threat to people or domestic animals. Transmission is thought to occur through biting insects and/or possibly by direct contact with contaminated materials that might scratch the skin. While unattractive, these fibromas are only on the skin surface and only cause concern to a deer when they interfere with sight, respiration, eating or walking, or lead to infection. While fibromas themselves are harmless, hunters should be alert for signs of secondary infection (strange color or odor) while processing meat.



[back to top](#)

What happens to deer in nature preserves and other areas that don't allow hunting?

Historically, top-level predators of deer that could actually keep their numbers in balance were humans, wolves, and mountain lions; only humans remain. Even with existing predators (coyotes, black bears, bobcats), vehicle collisions, and other sources of mortality, deer numbers continue to grow in areas without adequate hunting access (the population can double in as little as 3 years: see blue line in figure). Also, some areas can have restrictive laws such as no discharge of firearms within town limits, which can further limit the effectiveness of hunting.



[back to top](#)