

SOUTHEASTERN ALASKA has just had its most severe winter in many years and it's been tough on the deer herds in some areas. There have been colder temperatures and more snow accumulation for short periods during other winters, but uninterrupted snow cover from November through March is almost unprecedented.

The deer in Alaska are at the northern limit of their range in North America and limiting factors controlling survival are much more acute than in other areas. A slight difference in average winter temperatures determines whether deer will survive or die.

Some deer were lost in several areas. It is a very disturbing and saddening sight; however, it is one of the realities of natural game populations and there is little which can be done to help them. Available food is the controlling factor and when there is no food, deer die.

Deer utilize a variety of plants for winter food, but unfortunately most of these are of low nutrient value and are not adequate to maintain an animal for long.

The highest quality foods are the small green plants (such as ground dogwood) which grow on the forest floor. Deer remain in good condition as long as these plants are utilized, but a few inches of snow will make them unavailable.

Deer are then forced to utilize browse species of which blueberry is the most important. Deer can survive on browse for reasonably long periods, but not indefinitely. This is called a maintenance diet. The animal will gradually lose weight until higher quality foods again become available.

During a winter such as we just experienced, even the blueberry is covered with snow and deer utilize lower quality foods. This is when the trouble begins. Deer begin using any accessible food including dead beach grass, hemlock needles and kelp. The kelp has almost no food value and the others are also poor. In some areas, low-growing cedar is available. This has a fair food value, but for some reason deer do not use it extensively in some areas.

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Feeding No Solution To Deer Problem

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FEEDING DEER (continued from pg. 5)

We receive many calls from persons who ask why the Department of Fish and Game does not distribute food for these dying animals.

It's a good question, but winter feeding of deer is largely ineffective. The biggest problem is that deer are unable to quickly change diets and adjust to new foods. Even though

there is any question of land ownership, check with local Fish and Game Department offices for assistance.

The hard facts are that little can be done to save starving deer. It is not easy to watch animals die but only in a few local instances can some deer be saved. The best method of reducing losses from starvation is to maintain deer populations in reasonable balance with their winter food

CHECK WINTER KILL--Game biologists Don McKnight, left, and Dan Timm check winter-killed deer on Admiralty Island. Stomach contents indicated deer had been feeding on hemlock needles.



RMB photo

they will eat vegetables, hay and grain, they are unable to digest them and die with compacted stomachs.

The deer is a ruminant which has four stomach compartments, all involved in very complex digestive functions. When a deer consumes food, it is not digested directly by enzymes as in the human; a fermentation process controlled by bacterial action first takes place.

Specific types of bacteria are required to ferment different kinds of food. It takes time and a gradual change of diet to produce new bacteria for new foods. If a deer changes suddenly from natural to artificial foods, such as hay, the necessary bacteria are not present and the food cannot be digested.

Why not use natural foods such as trees and browse? Primarily, because you just can't provide enough to meet the animals' needs. A very few deer might be saved if the effort were made early enough, but it is usually too late to make any difference. The animal is in too poor condition to recover.

If you do want to attempt to save a few deer, what foods can you provide? Hemlock and cedar branches are best, particularly if they also have Spanish moss on them. Spanish moss is a fairly high quality food but it is usually difficult to find sufficient amounts in any one area to help a great deal.

Before cutting any trees, permission must be received from the landowner, whether private, state or federal. If

supply. The more food that is available during a tough winter, the more deer that will survive. If enough snow is present, deer will starve regardless of range condition; however, losses are comparatively greater in high population areas with poor range conditions than in areas of lower abundance with good range conditions.

In many areas of Southeastern Alaska, there is just not enough hunting to maintain the deer in balance with their food supply.

The deer herd actually benefits if some of the animals are utilized by hunting. This brings the herd into closer balance with its food supply and is better than allowing the animals to die because there is not enough winter food for all. ■

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