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White-tailed Deer Monitoring at Wilson's Creek National Battlefield, Missouri: 2008 Status Report

Natural Resource Technical Report NPS/HTLN/NRTR—2008/102

ON THE COVER
White-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)
Photo from The Heartland Inventory and Monitoring Network and Prairie Cluster Prototype Monitoring Program files.

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Executive Summary

White-tailed deer were monitored on Wilson's Creek National Battlefield, Missouri (WICR) using methods developed between 2005 and 2007. The index of deer density has not changed significantly from values reported in 2006 and 2007. In previous years, the deer population was in decline from an outbreak of hemorrhagic disease. However, our monitoring suggests this may have reversed. A late frost during the spring of 2007 may have affected hard mast available for deer. However, other foraging opportunities (i.e. corn) were available on the battlefield. In 2007, disease was not reported in deer populations in and around the battlefield, and by visual observations, deer appeared healthy during surveys. Deer density increased 33.38% from the population low reported in 2007, at Wilson's Creek National Battlefield.

Introduction

Since European settlement, white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) populations in North America have experienced enormous changes in size and distribution. Once abundant, deer numbers declined to near extinction by the early 1900s. Clearing of forested lands and unrestricted hunting contributed heavily to the decline of this species (Stoll and Donohoe 1973, Dennis 1983). Declines in deer numbers were especially prevalent in the East and Midwest sections of the country where much of the land was converted for row-crop farming.

Regulated white-tailed deer hunting and extermination of most of their natural predators has led to unprecedented population growth throughout their range. With natural deer habitat severely reduced, row-crop agriculture and other agriculture practices provide artificial food sources that deer utilize. The ability of white-tailed deer to adapt to human disturbance has also aided in the recovery of this species. Urban sprawl benefits deer by fragmenting continuous blocks of forested lands into small sections with increased edge habitat, which is favored by deer and rarely available for hunting. Therefore, deer experience high rates of population growth as long as food is available in these small blocks of patchy habitat. Grass and forb production is greater in these areas as is mast production by oaks, hickories and other trees when compared to larger blocks of forested land (Peitz et al. 2001). Urban sprawl also redistributes deer by eliminating habitat in one area, thereby concentrating deer in available habitat in another (Shafer-Nolan 1997).

Deer become vulnerable to overpopulation, disease and starvation in the absence of natural predators and hunting. When deer occur in high densities, diseases are transmitted more readily. In years when forage or mast production is restricted due to climatic conditions, starvation or poor herd health can occur. Deer browsing from high density herds also has a negative affect on vegetation. Research has shown that high deer populations contribute to over-browsing of vegetation, which leads to plant mortality, decreased plant reproduction and may tend to favor less preferred exotic species (McShea and Rappole 1997). This shift in species assemblages can reduce plant diversity at a local level and cause changes in the functioning of prairie and woodland communities. Rare and sensitive plant species such as the Missouri bladderpod (*Lesquerella filiformis*) found on WICR may be influenced negatively by deer foraging. However, the influence of deer on the status of most rare and sensitive plant species is largely unknown. Many studies have shown that deer can have a negative effect on developing

forestland (Crouch and Paulson 1968, Horsely and Marquis 1983, Marquis 1981). Browsing on young tree seedlings causes stunted growth as well as mortality (Michael 1992, Mladenoff and Stearns 1993). Research has shown that in some situations damage from deer as well as mice and rabbits may be a key impediment to forest restoration projects (Crouch and Paulson 1968, Strole and Anderson 1992).

White-tailed deer are often viewed as an important component of park ecosystems. Deer have a tremendous following among the public and many parks provide information on the status of deer through their interpretive programs. However, this information is generally anecdotal in nature. White-tailed deer can present a safety hazard to motorist and park visitors when populations are high. High deer numbers increase the number of vehicle-deer collisions and the resulting property damage and personal injuries. In some cases, vehicle-deer collisions can result in the loss of human life. Deer also disperse ticks which may carry Lyme disease (Connelly et al. 1987). Lyme disease is a debilitating immune system disease transmitted to humans by the bite of ticks. Ticks carrying other human transmittable diseases such as Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever and Ehrlichiosis may be spread by deer as well. Information on the status and trends in deer population size helps park managers determine if control measures are necessary in order to protect other park resources and improve visitor safety.

It is against a backdrop of urban sprawl, altered ecosystems and concerns over visitor safety on Park Service lands that we proposed monitoring white-tailed deer populations to assess their status and trends. Long-term trends in deer abundance provide one measure for assessing their potential as a problem for a park. Documenting long-term patterns in deer numbers allows one to evaluate correlations with changes in vegetation (e.g., through restoration of the cultural landscape). With this information resource managers can more effectively identify and potentially mitigate damage caused to vegetation communities and endangered plant populations by deer. Monitoring data also helps managers assess safety risk from collisions and disease transmission. Long-term monitoring of deer numbers is critical in evaluating any population control measures a park may implement.

Objectives

The primary objectives for monitoring white-tailed deer populations at Wilson's Creek National Battlefield, Missouri are:

- Determine annual changes in white-tailed deer numbers.
  Justification. *Significant annual changes in deer numbers may signal the presence of illegal deer harvest, disease or other acute factors of concern for park management.*
- Determine long-term trends in white-tailed deer numbers.
  Justification. *Understanding decadal trends in deer number will help park management determine if measures need to be taken to maintain herd health, minimize vegetation damage within a park or damage to surrounding private properties.*

This report summarizes survey results for the forth year of monitoring.

Methods

Study Area

Deer surveys were limited to an area visible at night with spotlights along the main tour road that makes a 7.90 km loop through the battlefield. This permanent sampling route was selected from all existing roads and trails within the battlefield, including service roads, because it is easily traversed and passes through all major habitats found on the battlefield. It is important for long-term monitoring that the survey route is an all-weather route so that it will be passable shortly following inclement weather. Counting deer along this road corridor will yield an index of relative deer abundance, which is correlated with the absolute abundance of deer on the battlefield. Our index of relative deer abundance will allow detection of general increases or decreases in the actual population over time.

White-tailed Deer Survey Methods

Sampling was limited to winter months, before spring vegetation emerged (January through mid March). Therefore, the target population included all deer within the boundaries of the battlefield at the time surveys were conducted (although the sample frame was limited to the road corridor). These are the deer that most impact herd size and battlefield resources throughout the year.

Surveys were conducted from a survey vehicle moving no more then 16 km / hr using two 1,000,000 candlepower spotlights. All deer seen along the survey route were counted and their location recorded using GPS. Deer counts were made by two observers, one seated on the left and the other on the right side of the vehicle. Distances from the stopped survey vehicle to all deer were determined by a rangefinder or, for deer < 10 m from the vehicle, by visual estimates. Deer were usually observed in groups, in which case distance was taken or estimated to the center most deer in the group. In order to map locations of deer, the direction and angle of all deer or deer groups from the survey vehicle were recorded as well.

Survey nights were January 3rd, 10th, 17th, 24th and February 7th. Following methods outlined in Peitz et al. (2007), three survey replicates were completed each night. Replicates started one hour after official sunset and occurred each hour thereafter.

Visibility Estimates

Every 10th mile along the survey route we recorded perpendicular distances from the survey vehicle to a point beyond which deer would not be visible. The perpendicular measures were marked using GPS. Following methods outlined in Peitz et al. (2007), visibility estimates were taken once following deer surveys on January 10. In a GIS, perpendicular distances were plotted on a map, along with any outlying deer locations (deer observed outside the estimated distance), to create a map of the survey area.

Data Analysis

Using nightly maximum count data and the survey area determined from visibility estimates (Figure 1), indexes of relative deer densities were calculated. Nightly deer densities were used to estimate the average ($\pm$ SD) annual deer population density. The percent change in annual deer densities were calculated and reported.

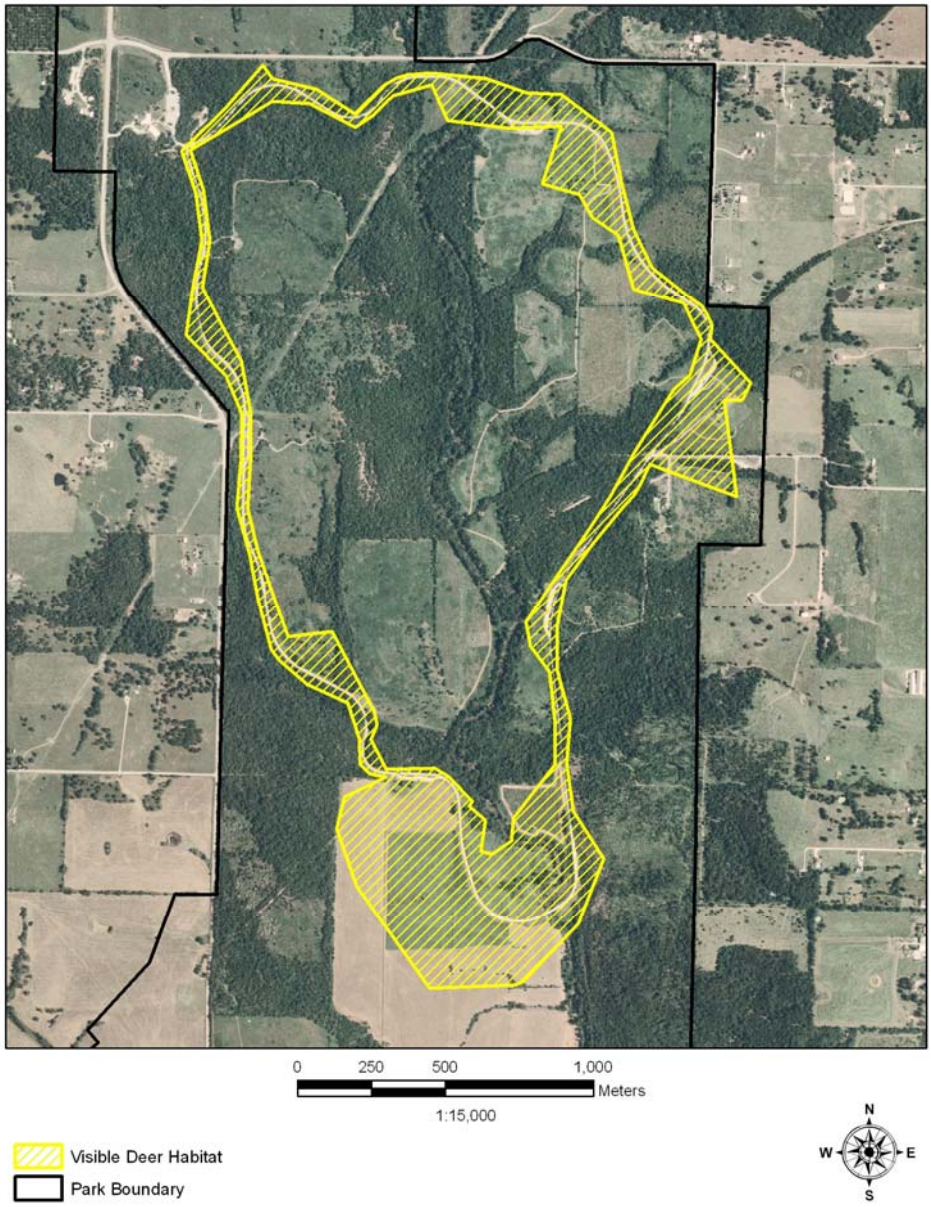

Figure 1. Route showing the area visible during white-tailed deer surveys on Wilson's Creek National Battlefield, Missouri during 2008 survey.

Results

The index of relative white-tailed deer density averaged 21.26 (std. dev. $\pm$ 4.11) individuals / km^2 for the survey area of Wilson's Creek National Battlefield in 2008 (Figure 2). Values ranged from 16.35 to 27.60 individuals / km^2. This represents an increase in the mean index value of 33.38% from the previous year. Vegetation structure on the battlefield changed slightly

from previous years, resulting in improved visibility. The area visible from the survey route increased 3.94 % to 97.83 hectares since the 2007 surveys (Figure 3).

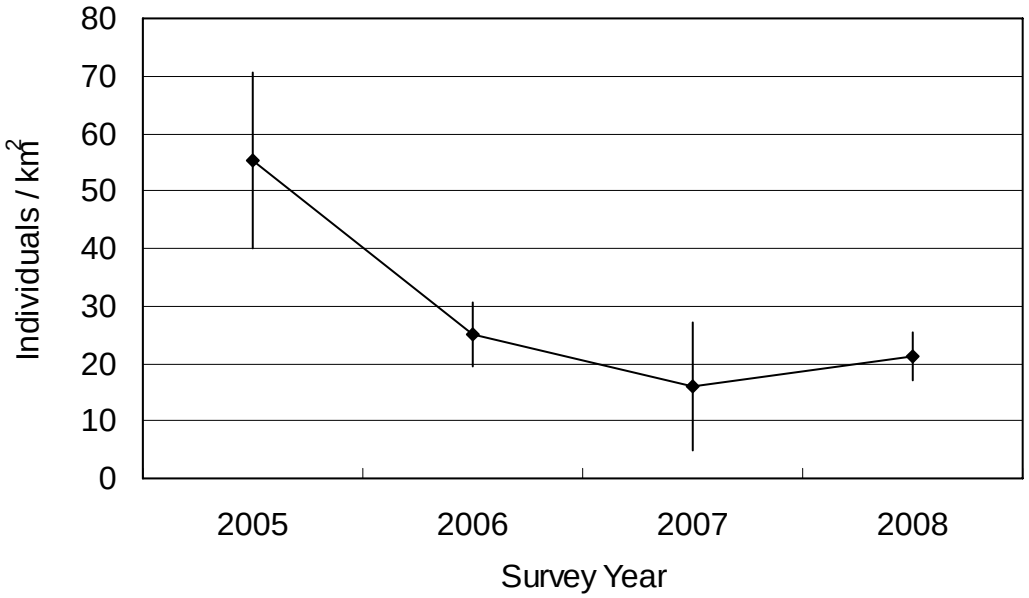

Figure 2. Average relative density index (± std. dev.) of white-tailed deer in the survey area of Wilson's Creek National Battlefield, Missouri, 2005 - 2008.

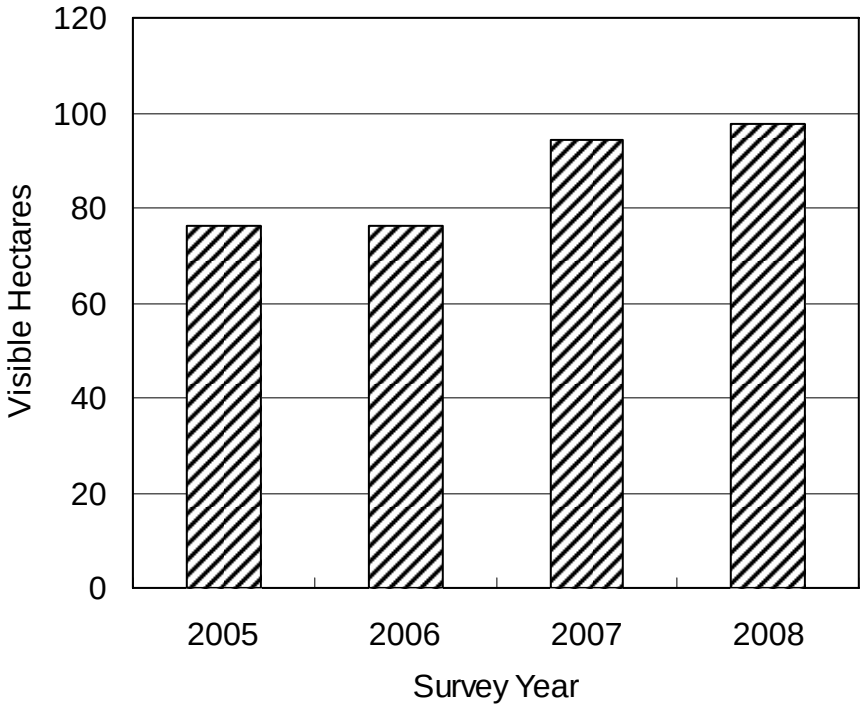

Figure 3. Area visible during white-tailed deer spotlight surveys (survey area) on Wilson's Creek National Battlefield, Missouri, 2005 - 2008.

Discussion

Comparing overlapping error measures (standard deviations) on means it appears that the white-tailed deer population has not changed significantly since 2006. Over this time period, the monitoring procedures have evolved in response to peer review and in-the-field experience. The methodology followed in 2008 reflects the final protocol, and yielded a lower ratio of variability to mean value then previous years. If the variance around the mean value remains low in the future as a result of procedural changes, we will be better able to detect a significant change in the index value. The estimated deer density index, however, increased 33.38% over 2007, representing an increase of 5.3 individuals / km^2. This increase in deer numbers ended a declining trend seen since 2006. Hemorrhagic disease, believed to be the causative agent in previous declining deer numbers, was not reported on or around the battlefield in 2007 (Hansen, 2008).

Food was not a limiting resource for deer on the battlefield in 2007, the year influencing our 2008 deer herd. Late spring frosts likely affected hard mast production. However, other foraging opportunities for deer increased. Corn planted in the historic Ray and Sharp's cornfield added a significant food source to the battlefield, and thanks to favorable summer and fall rains, food sources such as forbs and soft mass were good. Total precipitation for 2007 was 0.28 cm above the 30-year average. (http://ag3.agebb.missouri.edu/npsdata/, 2007), with much of this rain coming in the growing season.

Deer may become vulnerable to over population, disease and starvation in the absence of natural predators or hunting. The estimated deer density at WICR is 21.26 deer / km^2, considerably higher than the surrounding counties.

White-tailed deer are extremely adaptable to human disturbance, which has aided the species in recovering from near extirpation in Missouri. Missouri had as few as 400 deer in the state in the 1930's (http//www.mdc.mo.gov/, 2006). Today the statewide deer herd is estimated near 1,000,000 individuals (http://www.mdc.mo.gov/areas/stlouis/wildlife/deer.htm, 2002). In the two counties in which the battlefield is located (Greene and Christian), 2937 individuals were harvested in the 2007-2008 hunting season alone. Deer densities averaged between 6 and 12 individuals / km^2 in the southwestern part of the state prior to the 2005 hemorrhagic disease outbreak (http://www.uga.edu/scwds/, 2006). The estimated density of deer around the battlefield is 5-6 deer / km^2 (Hansen, 2008). Deer densities in urban areas are often much higher because populations grow without the pressures of predators and hunting. Urban sprawl benefits deer by fragmenting continuous blocks of forested lands into small sections with increased edge habitat favored by deer. In 2008, the deer densities observed in the protected, fragmented habitat of WICR were similar to other suburban locations, 15 to 30 individuals / km^2 (http://www.mdc.mo.gov/documents/areas/stlouis/deer_car.pdf, 2005).

One problem with high deer numbers is that they over-browse vegetation causing a shift in species assemblages, reduced plant diversity on a local level and changes in the functioning of plant communities (Alverson et al. 1988, Mladenoff and Stearns 1993). Rare and sensitive plant species may be influenced by foraging or other deer activities as well (Healy 1997). It is unknown if deer have an impact on *Lesquerella filiformis*, a federally threatened plant on the park. Efforts to restore the cultural landscape of the battlefield to an oak savanna could be hampered during years of high deer numbers. Studies have shown that deer can have a negative effect on developing forestland and they may be a key impediment to forest restoration projects (Crouch and Paulson 1968).

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The NPS has organized its parks with significant natural resources into 32 networks linked by geography and shared natural resource characteristics. HTLN is composed of 15 National Park Service (NPS) units in eight Midwestern states. These parks contain a wide variety of natural and cultural resources including sites focused on commemorating civil war battlefields, Native American heritage, westward expansion, and our U.S. Presidents. The Network is charged with creating inventories of its species and natural features as well as monitoring trends and issues in order to make sound management decisions. Critical inventories help park managers understand the natural resources in their care while monitoring programs help them understand meaningful change in natural systems and to respond accordingly. The Heartland Network helps to link natural and cultural resources by protecting the habitat of our history.

The I&M program bridges the gap between science and management with a third of its efforts aimed at making information accessible. Each network of parks, such as Heartland, has its own multi-disciplinary team of scientists, support personnel, and seasonal field technicians whose system of online databases and reports make information and research results available to all. Greater efficiency is achieved through shared staff and funding as these core groups of professionals augment work done by individual park staff. Through this type of integration and partnership, network parks are able to accomplish more than a single park could on its own.

The mission of the Heartland Network is to collaboratively develop and conduct scientifically credible inventories and long-term monitoring of park "vital signs" and to distribute this information for use by park staff, partners, and the public, thus enhancing understanding which leads to sound decision making in the preservation of natural resources and cultural history held in trust by the National Park Service.

www.nature.nps.gov/im/units/htln/

Heartland Network

Natural Resource Monitoring

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