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Feeding Fawns or Not?

By Kris VanBogelen

Supplemental feeding is an increasingly prominent management activity for white-tailed deer in South Texas. Pelleted feed helps deer maintain a higher quality diet through unpredictable periods of drought, promoting more consistent productivity and survival. As Stuart Stedman emphasized in the February issue of Deer Associates e-news, the benefits of supplemental feeding are not realized until deer acclimate to the presence of feeders and consume the feed for several years. The full effect is expressed in deer that eat supplemental feed as fawns and continue to do so through maturity. This is the goal of many managers today.

However, what happens if fawns are not able to use feeders due to social pressure or inaccessibility? At a 6,200 acre study site east of Laredo, TX we fitted 30 fawns with radio-transmitters and cattle ear tags in October 2008. We used trail cameras to monitor feeders in close proximity to one or more of the marked fawns from January 1-March 31, 2009. Cameras were left at feeders four days at a time and were set out on eight different occasions. Review of over 3,500 photos from all occasions revealed few photos of fawns and only three marked fawns eating the supplemental feed. Of the three fawns photographed, only two were identifiable by their ear tag number and they were the two largest of the 30 fawns that were tagged, according to their weight at capture.

Feeders at our study site were surrounded by a hog-panel fence to keep feral pigs and javelina from consuming the feed. Anecdotally, we found five untagged fawns caught in feeder fences throughout the entire ranch (17,000 acres), which ultimately led to mortality. This represents less than 1% of estimated fawns on the ranch, but suggests that fence height may inhibit fawns' access to the supplemental feed. The two identified fawns using feed were only photographed on a couple of occasions, suggesting that social pressure may also limit fawn use of feed.

What do these findings mean?

- To obtain the maximum benefit from a supplemental feed program, managers may need to determine if fawns are able to access feeders and change the feed system if fawns appear to be excluded.

- Low use of supplemental feed could explain poor fawn survival overwinter, a problem suggested by Charles DeYoung in an article in South Texas Wildlife.

- Research is needed to determine fence designs which allow fawns access to feed sites, reduce the likelihood of fawns becoming entangled, yet still restrict access by non-target species.

Related Information

What You Don't Know about Fawn Mortality, by Charlie DeYoung, Ph.D.

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