

[From Winter 1994-95]

Hunting on the Refuge

The 1994 hunting season has begun. However, again this year, no chance exists of "bagging" a white-tailed deer on Chincoteague refuge. Since 1987, there has been a moratorium on white-tailed deer hunting within lands administered by the refuge. Why has this moratorium been imposed?

Wildlife competition for resources is now exceptionally keen in many areas of the country. Habitat depletion, which magnifies such competition, has stemmed from various factors such as human development. Due to limited resources, it often becomes necessary to manage animal numbers in order to ensure the vitality, viability and quality of life of a population or ecosystem. Deer, in particular, have historically been susceptible to overpopulation. This has resulted in population crashes. Therefore, the Chincoteague Refuge policy has been to allow deer hunting whenever it becomes necessary to reduce an overabundant population.

In recent years, the white-tailed deer has "fortified its ranks" on the refuge. Yet they still show no signs of surrendering to the forces of overpopulation. One of the primary reasons for this is that competition from another small but worthy contender for the spoils of Chincoteague Refuge exists. The challenger has come from the far lands of the orient and has succeeded in infiltrating all of the territories of Assateague Island. This conquest began when it landed within the island's northern stronghold during the 1900's.

Yes, the infamous sika (which is actually a species of elk) is a formidable competitor for the white-tailed deer. It has one main advantage - numbers. In order to control its numbers for the benefit of wildlife, such as the native whitetail, and because it is an exotic species, a managed sika hunt is allowed on the refuge. The hunt begins on December 5 and runs three consecutive weeks, closing on December 23. On January 2, the hunt resumes and continues for one more week. Each hunt week has been split into a Monday-Tuesday hunt and a Thursday-Friday hunt.

For safety reasons, visitors are cautioned to obey all posted closures during the hunting season. On Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday, visitors will be restricted to Beach Road, Chincoteague Refuge Visitor Center, Lighthouse Trail, Toms Cove Visitor Center and the beach. All other areas, except the Woodland Trail, will be closed until noon. The Woodland Trail will be closed for the entire day for the first two weeks of the hunt. The refuge will be open as usual on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday.

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