

Oregon's Big Game Inventory Under Way; Counting Will Continue Through Winter

By MILT GUYMON

This is the time of year when game agents throughout the state travel far and wide conducting inventories on Oregon's big game resources. It's an annual task that begins shortly after the hunting seasons and continues through the winter into March and April.

First phase of the big game inventories is herd composition studies to determine the ratio of bucks, does, and fawns on each range. Biologists begin gathering herd composition information immediately after the hunting seasons are over when they make a systematic survey of all big game ranges. All animals observed are classified as to sex and age and expressed in a ratio of the number of buck or bulls, fawns or calves per 100 adult females.

Herd composition must be completed before buck deer or bull elk lose their antlers. By mid-January herd composition on deer is no longer feasible as bucks rapidly shed their beams, and by early February there is little resemblance to the proud animals nimrods observed during the hunting seasons. Elk often retain their antlers as late as mid-March before the massive beams are dropped and new growth begins.

Surveys are made by automobile, on foot, horseback, and on some ranges by airplane. Almost without exception surveys on antelope are made from the air, preferably when snow is on the ground. At this time the animals are bunched on the winter ranges and the short sage country in which the animals live makes aerial observation quick, easy and accurate. Some elk herds are also censused by airplane, especially in rough mountain country which prohibits other means of travel. Deer ranges are traveled primarily by horseback, although on some ranges, depending on snow, sample routes are run by automobile as well as foot travel by snowshoe.

Rain, snow, wind, and cold are not deterrent, for game agents must travel in all kinds of weather if the status of Oregon's big game herds is to be accurately determined. Nature's hand is at work around the calendar affecting the big game herds through the seasons. Contrary to the fall hunting seasons enjoyed by Oregon sportsmen, the winter months might aptly be called the hunting season for game agents where in the cold and snow they hunt out the big game animals, watch them as they go through the winter, study their food supplies, keep a critical eye on herd condition,



THIS TROPHY BUCK will soon lose its antlers as the herds concentrate on the bleak, snowbound ranges in the dead of winter. Forked-horn in upper left has already shed an antler. New growth will begin in spring and de-

velop through the summer into the beautiful racks prized by hunters. Game agents must work fast during early winter to classify bucks, does, and fawns in each herd before antlers are shed.

record mortality, sex, and age and the number of animals observed on each range.

Herd composition doesn't complete the winter surveys and about the first of February game agents start all over again, this time to census animal numbers on each big game winter range. Observation continues until the herds disband with the spring breakup.

Although herd composition may be conducted throughout the ranges and at all elevations, the annual census is more or less confined to the winter ranges at lower altitudes.

During late winter snows are deep in the mountain ranges, forcing big game animals ever downward to the breaks and scablands near the valley floors. Animals from an entire watershed covering

thousands of square miles may be forced by the winter snows and cold into a narrow belt a few miles long by a mile or so wide. Heaviest concentration of animals will be found in the food producing areas within the belt.

This is the critical time of year and the time which game agents dread the most. For if the winter is long and severe they will witness first hand many animals dying of cold and hunger.

There is little to worry about during mild winters, broken by periods of thawing and sunshine. During such winters, animals remain scattered at all elevations of the winter range and manage to find enough food to keep them healthy and alert.

But hunger alone is the driving force when snow piles deep or temperatures drop to sub-zero lev-

els. The winter range produces limited food supplies to begin with and when much of it is buried beneath deep snow, competition is keen for the meager supplies that remain. Danger is forgotten, senses dulled, except the gnawing urge for food, and even this may become dulled in time.

Under such conditions many animals may starve before spring, with fawns the first to go followed by old animals and yearlings. Extreme cold may also take a heavy toll, mainly of weakened animals unable from the meager food supplies to generate body heat to withstand the frigid temperatures.

Permanent sample routes are established on all big game winter ranges. Small winter ranges may have only two or three sample routes, while large ranges may have a dozen or more traversing at intervals from low to high elevations.

These routes are traveled systematically. All animals observed are recorded and expressed in the ratio of animals observed per mile of travel. Mortality is also recorded and expressed in the same manner.

Records on all ranges are kept from year to year and comparisons made to determine if the herds are increasing, decreasing, or remaining constant. Some 7,000 miles of sample route are traveled each year by game agents to determine the status of the big game herds.

No attempt is made to count all big game animals. This has long been recognized as impossible. If the trend in numbers can be accurately determined game managers are satisfied.

The winter surveys give an accurate picture of the population trends, numbers of buck deer or bull elk in each herd, fawn or calf production, mortalities, range condition, and food supplies. This and other information gathered around the calendar serve as a basis for next year's hunting seasons.



KARL MORTON, district game agent at Baker, looks over fawn deer that was unable to make it through the winter. Too many mouths had reached the food supplies before this little fellow resulting in death from malnutrition. Diseases, parasites, predation and extreme cold make heavy inroads on deer populations during the winter months.

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