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A group of deer walked through a cornfield on the outskirts of Sappa Park, east of Oberlin.

— Photo by Kimberly Davis/The Oberlin Herald

Deer population has over the past six

By Kimberly Davis

*The Oberlin Herald
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Since 2003, the deer population in northwest Kansas has been growing, with the number of deer per square mile showing up in counts by state biologists not quite doubling in that time.

Lloyd Fox, big game program coordinator with the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks, said in 2003 in deer management Unit 1, west of U.S. 283 through Norton and north of I-70, there were about two deer per square mile, in 2007 an estimated 2.7 deer per square mile and in 2008, 3.5 per square mile.

The numbers overall have been increasing steadily since 2003, he said, despite efforts by the state to control the herd. One thing to remember, said Fox, that even though the numbers are given as an average per square mile, that doesn't mean that in every square mile there are that many deer. Some areas have more deer than others. There are some areas, he said, where only a few or no deer are seen and others where there are large herds.

Although the area has seen a steady increase from 2003 to 2008, said Fox, it isn't an exceptional rise when you look at the numbers and see what deer reproduction is capable of doing. Deer can increase substantially from year to year, he said, and their density could have tripled in that time.

Behind the increase, he said, have been good weather and good habitat for fawns. Land in the Conservation Reserve Program, which pays farmers to plant grass on erodible land, he said, has provided great cover for fawns.

In this area, he said, the deer generally don't have a heavy parasite load and are healthy. They are able to put on the weight.

The department, said Fox, tries to control the population with hunting. Some hunters have limited success because they can't get landowner permission to hunt where they want to take antlerless deer.

The department tries to encourage hunters and landowners to help control the deer population. If there are too many females, he said, it results in population growth and more conflicts with

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Matt Murray, owner



A doe and fawn hung out on the outskirts of a corn field near U.S. 36.
 — Photo by Cynthia Haynes/The Oberlin Herald

not quite doubled years in the region

people, more traffic accidents and more deer eating crops.

On the one hand, he said, game managers want the population to grow, and on the other hand, it's important to limit that population.

Years ago, said Fox, hunting wasn't as big a draw in Kansas, but that's changed. Kansas has a tremendous reputation for deer hunting because of the quality of deer people can get here. They are larger animals, he said, and Kansas provides a unique hunting opportunity. There are lots of hunters who would like that opportunity.

Northwest Kansas, he said, has a 50-50 mix of mule and white-tail deer, though the mule deer are more visible and whitetails are more evasive.

The near future looks good for the deer population, said Fox, but 50 to 70 years down the line, the numbers could start to show the effects of a neurological condition called Chronic Wasting Disease, first found in this part of the state in 2005.

The disease, which ultimately kills the deer, was first found in Wyoming and parts of Colorado back in the 1980s. Those states are now

seeing more animals with the disease.

In 2005, the first case was found in Cheyenne County, then in 2006 no cases were reported. In 2007, three confirmed cases turned up in Decatur County and then in 2008, Unit 1 had at least 10 cases. The department urges hunters to have deer they take tested for the disease, which is similar to "Mad Cow Disease" in bovines, but not thought to infect humans.

Chronic Wasting Disease is one of those diseases that doesn't go away, Fox said. It won't fade in and fade out. It is a disease that will be here for a long time.

Hunters need to be aware that deer in this area could have the disease, he said. Some will show symptoms, while others might have it and not show signs.

Fox said Wyoming and Colorado are seeing the impact of the disease after almost 30 years. That's the darkness in the future here, he said.

He said he encourages people to enjoy the deer hunting while it's good, adding that hopefully science will find an effective way to combat Chronic Wasting Disease and others that might crop up.

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