

OUTDOORS

Well-armed wildlife researchers converge on Enterprise South Nature Park

By Richard Simms

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Wildlife Officer Joe McSpadden tapped on the roof of the pickup truck, and driver Bill Swan hit the brakes.

"Ease forward just a little, past that one bush," McSpadden said to Swan. Once past the bush, we had a fairly clear view of the white-tailed doe about 50 yards away.

"It's a doe, right?" McSpadden asked.

We all confirmed, and a second later, McSpadden's .308-caliber rifle spat lead. The big doe dropped in her tracks.

It wasn't deer season, however. It was Wednesday night on the [Enterprise South Nature Park](#) and an adjoining section of the Enterprise South Industrial Park (formerly the Volunteer Army Ammunition Plant) still closed to the public.

Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency officers and biologists, accompanied by volunteers with the local [Safari Club chapter](#), were on a research mission. The goal was to take (AKA kill) 10 white-tailed deer for a regular project known as an "abomasum parasite count."

White-tailed deer have a four-chambered stomach. The last chamber is called the abomasum. A standard biological technique for determining the health of a white-tailed deer herd is to count the number of internal parasites in the abomasum.

"Measuring the internal parasite load of the deer provides a direct correlation to herd density and health," TWRA big game biologist Ben Layton said. "If the parasite load is above a certain level, your deer herd is above carrying capacity."

"Above carrying capacity" means there are too many deer for the existing habitat to support. In most places, abomasum studies are not usually conducted every year; however, Layton has been monitoring the deer herd at Enterprise South more closely than normal.

"On Enterprise South, we have been doing it for the last three years," he said. "The hunts here have been kind of controversial, and we want to make sure that we are looking at every herd health condition to ensure that we do need to take more deer out."

The only way to collect an abomasum, of course, is to kill the deer. Layton said it has to happen in the summer because that is when the most parasites are present and provides the most accurate data.

It is serious work with a scientific goal, but there is also friendly competition between the collection teams.

"Sure, there's some competition," Layton said. "It's like hunting."

TWRA Officer Ben Davis was on hand with his [K-9, Levee](#), in the event the crews needed extra tracking assistance.

The four collection teams spread out across ESNP beginning about 7 p.m., well after dark when the area had closed to the public. That called for the use of high-tech, thermal night vision cameras and scopes, the same type used by soldiers in the battle arena.

Shooters are instructed that they cannot take fawns or bucks. They can only take mature does, and they can only take shots when the deer is standing in front of a safe backdrop. It is also essential that their bullets don't damage the abomasum, the only reason the deer is being taken.

Finding a clear, safe shot at the right deer, while taking the time to confirm age and gender, often in the dark, means the deer have plenty of time to melt into the thick underbrush. On Wednesday (and Thursday morning), it took several collection teams from 7 p.m. until 2 a.m. to complete the work.

"That was actually pretty good," Layton said. "Some years, we've had to come back and work a second night."

It is Layton's job to examine each deer, weigh it, age it and collect the abomasum that will be sent to the [Southeastern Cooperative Wildlife Disease Study](#) in Athens, Georgia.

"We have to get in line with other similar research projects from all across the country," Layton said. "TWRA likely won't get the results back until early in 2016."

Those results will be available for decision-makers for the 2016–2017 hunting season.

"Last year, the parasite count went down some," Layton said. "So this year, if counts go down again—and since the deer are looking in good condition—hunting efforts may have gotten the [Enterprise South] deer herd back down to carrying capacity."

The deer killed Wednesday night do not go to waste. The Safari Club volunteers paid a local processor to butcher them.

"This fall, we'll use the meat to host a venison dinner during the **annual Hunt for Warriors**," Swan said.

Two limited deer hunts are scheduled for ESNP this fall. An archery-only hunt (80 hunter quote) will be held Oct. 6–7, and the Hunt for Warriors is scheduled for Oct. 20–21.