

Annual Survey of Kentucky Deer Hunters: 2024-25 Season

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Executive Summary

Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KDFWR) conducted a survey of deer hunters following the 2024-2025 deer season. The primary goal of this survey was to identify 1) hunter demographics, participation and effort, 2) hunter satisfaction on both public and private lands, 3) preferences among potential future deer management strategies, and 4) hunter perceptions and attitudes regarding Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD).

Nearly 4,000 respondents completed the survey and provided constructive responses to help guide decisions about deer management moving forward. There was a high level of satisfaction with the overall deer management strategy across the state, especially on private lands, where a large majority of respondents hunted during the 2024-25 season. Hunters also indicated a high level of satisfaction with their 2024-25 deer hunting experience, with most sharing their personal deer harvest strategies, allowing KDFWR to better understand the amount of effort and participation in the deer hunting season statewide.

Although CWD awareness has increased in recent years since Kentucky's first detection of the disease in 2023 in a wild deer in Ballard County, many hunters are still unaware of the status of CWD in Kentucky and KDFWR's response. Voluntary sampling options and incentive programs are largely unfamiliar to our hunters, as is the newest positive case of CWD in the state—a 2024 detection in a captive deer in Breckinridge County. Hunters generally expressed trust in KDFWR in its response to CWD.

Regarding management of the deer population, the two most popular hypothetical options for potentially reducing deer numbers were 1) earning a second buck through prior female deer harvest and 2) extending the modern gun season. Hunters generally disliked a shorter season in areas with low deer numbers and instead preferred reducing the bag limit on antlerless deer to grow the population.

Respondents were generally satisfied with the deer management KDFWR provides statewide. Overall, hunters were also satisfied with the job KDFWR is doing at achieving its mission of conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife resources in Kentucky and providing related recreational opportunities.

Methods

KDFWR fielded the online survey from June 2 to June 23, 2025. The sampling frame was comprised of all licensed Kentucky hunters who held a deer permit during the 2024-25 deer hunting season (N=308,209). We first e-mailed invitations to complete the online survey questionnaire (using SurveyMonkey® software with

ResearchNet® branding) to 20,000 randomly sampled customers with email addresses on file (19,781 were deliverable). We followed up with nonrespondents via two email reminders (June 9-10 and 16-17). Respondents answered questions about their hunting behavior, satisfaction, land use, preferred management strategies, and more.

Results

We received a total of 3,921 responses, yielding an overall response rate of 19.8%, though rates of responses to particular questions varied considerably. The margin of error across results was 4%.

Hunter Demographics, Participation, and Effort

Most respondents indicated that they were white, male, above the age of 46, and resided in rural areas of Kentucky. Eighty-three percent (83%) of individuals said that they went deer hunting at least once during Kentucky's 2024-25 deer season. The majority (64.5%) of respondents were Kentucky residents, whereas most non-resident hunters were from Tennessee (12.2%), Ohio (8.6%), Florida (8.6%), Indiana (8.1%), Georgia (7.7%), and Alabama (6.2%). We asked resident hunters which county they primarily deer hunted in during the 2024-25 season; each county was represented with between 4 and 67 hunters claiming each as their primary hunting county.

The most popular Kentucky hunting license used by respondents for the 2024-25 license year was the resident Sportsman's License bundle or resident Combination Hunting/Fishing license (46%), followed by Annual Hunting License and Deer Permit (32%) used in tandem. Over half (50.4%) of respondents indicated that deer were the only game species they hunted during the 2024-25 fall and winter hunting seasons, while 24% also hunted squirrel and 22% also pursued coyote. Of those that indicated they did not hunt last season, 46.1% said that they had no time to get afield, 37.5% indicated that they had no desire to do so, 13% lost access to their hunting land, 7% said that illness kept them from hunting, 6.5% blamed deer disease or population concerns, and 2.4% indicated that they did not have a target buck to pursue.

Land Use

A large majority of hunters surveyed indicated that they either solely (79.8%) or mostly (7.1%) hunted private land. In comparison, only 5.3% of respondents only hunted public land, 2.6% mostly hunted public land, and 5.2% hunted public and private land equally throughout the 2024-25 season.

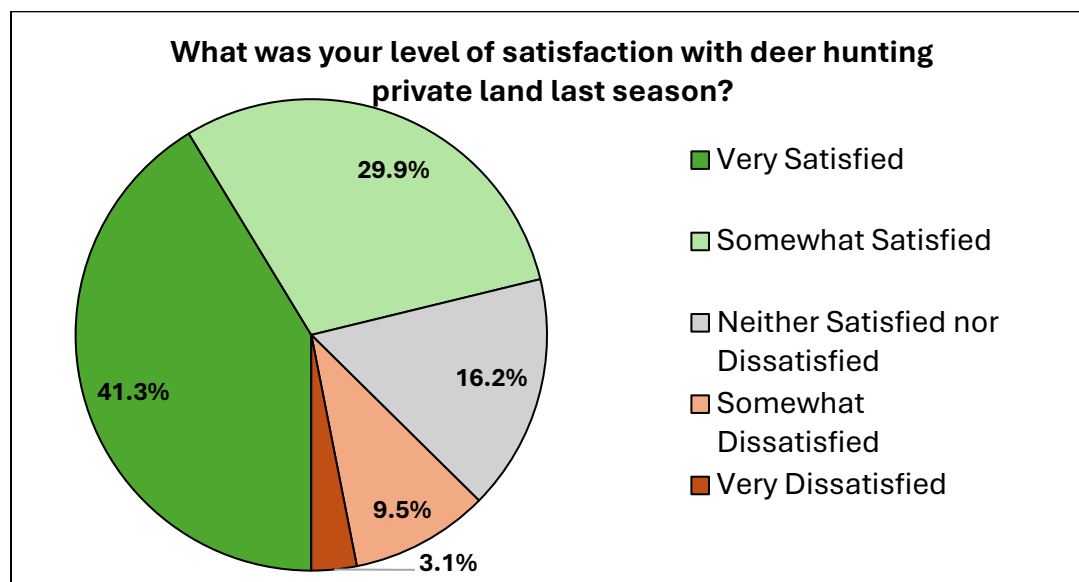
We asked the hunters what kind of access they had to private land during the 2024-25 deer season. Nearly two-thirds (63.7%) of private land hunters hunted land that was owned or co-owned by themselves or a family member. Nearly forty percent (39.9%) hunted land that they had free permission to hunt, while 17.6% of hunters

indicated they hunted land that was leased for a fee (14.4%) or for goods/services (3.2%). Only 5.5% of respondents said that they did not have *any* private land access.

What kind of access did you have to hunt private land last season, whether or not you hunted there? (Select all that apply)*	Number of Responses*	Percent of Responses
Free access with permission to hunt	1155	39.9%
Family owned the land	1141	39.4%
I owned or co-owned the land	705	24.3%
Leased for a fee	417	14.4%
No access to private land	158	5.5%
Leased in exchange for goods or services	93	3.2%
Other	81	2.8%

*Sorted by most frequent response

Of the hunters that hunted private land last season, only 12.5% were somewhat (9.5%) or very (3.1%) dissatisfied, while 71.2% of respondents indicated that they were somewhat (29.9%) or very (41.3%) satisfied. Sixteen percent (16.2%) of respondents were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with their deer hunting experience on private land.



We asked respondents who indicated they hunted public land at least once during the 2024-25 season what reasons they chose to do so. Although it seems that most hunters have some access to private land, 38.2% of respondents indicated limited or no access being a reason why they hunted public land last season. Seeking a wider variety of hunting locations or experiences was also a popular reason (41.0%), followed by the desire to hunt with friends and family (29.3%), seeking an area that would provide more hunting opportunity than their typical hunting property (25.6%), other reasons (11.0%), and wishing to hunt quality deer herds on public land (10.8%).

Of the 564 respondents who hunted public land, 42.2% indicated that they were either very (14.7%) or somewhat (27.5%) satisfied with their experience. Twenty-eight percent (28.2%) were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, whereas 19.5% were somewhat dissatisfied and 10.1% were very dissatisfied.

Hunter Experiences

Hunters were asked what equipment they used to hunt deer and which of the season segments they hunted during the 2024-25 season. Hunting the 16-day Modern Gun season in mid-November was clearly the most popular season segment, with 87% of respondents hunting it and 86% using a modern firearm to hunt deer at least once during the 2024-25 season. Muzzle-loaders, crossbows, and archery equipment use during the season were comparable, with 35%, 32%, and 39% of hunters utilizing these equipment types, respectively. Seventy-one percent of respondents used a crossbow or archery equipment during crossbow and archery season segments. Interestingly, the percentage of hunters that take advantage of the 2-day Early Muzzle-loader Weekend and the 9-day Late Muzzle-loader Season were comparable, with 29% and 28% of hunters hunting during these segments.

Kentucky deer hunters spent an average of 13 days afield out of the 140-day season. A majority spent 5 to 20 days hunting deer in the commonwealth.

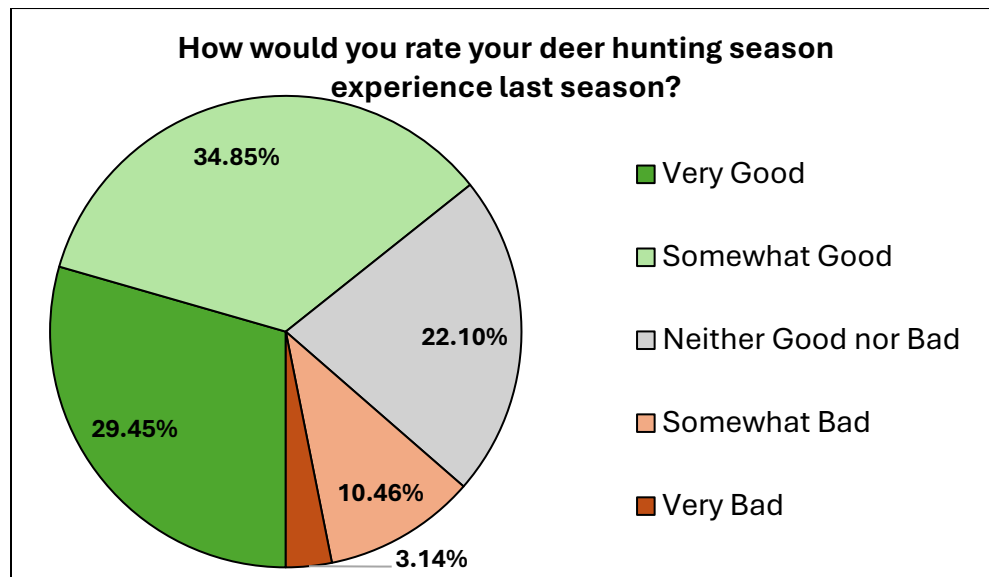
We asked hunters about their harvest strategies regarding the timing and sex of their desired take during the 2024-25 deer hunting season. Half of respondents indicated that they either hunted mainly for a buck and harvested antlerless deer as needed (32%) or hunted only for a buck (18%). More than 20% of hunters surveyed indicated that they either hunted exclusively for antlerless deer unless a desirable buck came along (12%) or hunted for the first legal deer that offered them a shot (9%). Less popular strategies included: harvesting a buck early followed by taking antlerless deer (8.8%); harvesting antlerless deer early followed by a buck (8.5%); mainly mentoring new or youth hunters (3.6%); hunting for a quality buck early but taking any antlered deer later (2.6%); and harvesting exclusively antlerless deer (<1%).

Which of the following best describes your deer hunting strategy last season?*	Number of Responses*	Percent of Responses
Hunt mainly for a buck, and antlerless deer as needed	955	32.20%
Hunt only for a buck (no antlerless deer)	529	17.84%
Harvest only antlerless deer, unless a desirable buck came along	353	11.90%
Harvest the first legal deer that offered a shot	296	9.98%
Hunt for a buck early, then take any legal deer later in the season	261	8.80%

Harvest one or more antlerless deer early, then hunt for a buck the rest of the season	253	8.53%
Other	111	3.74%
Mainly mentoring one or more youth or other new/beginner hunters	108	3.64%
Hunt for a buck early, then take any antlered buck later in the season if necessary	78	2.63%
Harvest only antlerless deer	22	0.74%

*Sorted by most frequent response

A majority of hunters (64.4%) indicated that they were somewhat or very satisfied when asked to rate their overall deer hunting experience during the 2024-25 season, while only 10.5% rated their season as “somewhat bad” and 3.1% “very bad.”



Management Preferences

We asked hunters how they would rate the population status of the deer herd in the county that they hunt the most compared to the last 5 years. Only 2.6% rated the deer population “Very Bad,” while over half rated it either “Somewhat Good” (32%) or “Very Good” (25%).

Biologists with KDFWR use statistical models, physical surveys, deer collisions, crop damage, and hunter surveys to estimate the deer population and project trends statewide and by county. In areas of the state where the deer population has the capacity to grow, hunters were asked which conservation strategy they would prefer to see implemented to limit antlerless harvest so deer populations can grow faster. There was overwhelming rejection of the idea of only shortening the deer season in these areas of potential deer population growth (5.8% support). However, this action coupled with reducing the antlerless bag limit received 42.2% support from deer hunters. The

most popular management action presented was reducing the bag limit on antlerless deer, which was supported by 52% of deer hunters surveyed.

In areas where deer populations are high and reduction in numbers is desirable, hunters were asked which management strategies they would prefer to produce more antlerless deer harvest. Two strategies—offering a bonus buck in return for antlerless harvest and extending the modern gun season—stood out as the most popular options among deer hunters, garnering support by 36.7% and 36.1%, respectively.

In areas of the state where there are too many deer, which of the following is likely to get you to harvest more antlerless deer? (Select all that apply)*	Number of Responses*	Percent of Responses
Make modern gun season longer	1090	36.7%
Offer a bonus buck permit for harvesting a certain number of antlerless deer	1072	36.1%
Increase the bag limit for antlerless deer	639	21.5%
Increase access to hunter harvest donation opportunities	572	19.3%
Allow the use of modern guns in Zone 1 counties during what is now the 9-day Late Muzzle-loader season in December	533	18.0%
Extend archery season later (to the end of January)	484	16.3%
None of the above - I am not likely to harvest more antlerless deer	346	11.7%
Make youth-only gun seasons longer	344	11.6%
Other	283	9.5%

*Sorted by most frequent response

We asked respondents whether they supported changing firearms deer hunting opportunities on Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) that currently have quota hunts to statewide regulations, where possible; this would allow for more hunting opportunity during modern gun season. Nearly half (46.2%) did not have a preference, whereas 23.8% either somewhat (11.1%) or strongly (12.7%) opposed, and 30% either somewhat (18.5%) or strongly (11.5%) supported the idea.

Hunters were asked which habitat management techniques they would like to see more of on WMAs in Kentucky. The most popular techniques included planting perennial (51.7%) and annual (50.3%) food plots for wildlife, followed by forest management techniques (39.4%), native grassland management (34.2%), and other habitat management practices (5%).

After the Hunt

Hunters were asked if they took any deer to a commercial processor during the 2024-25 season. A majority took none of their harvested deer to be processed (61.3%), while 9.8% took some and 28.9% took all of their harvested deer to a processor for skinning, butchering, and/or packaging.

For those who indicated they used a processor for at least some of their deer harvest last season, we asked about how far they typically drove for this service. Of those 1,576 respondents, the average respondent traveled about 25 miles to get their deer processed. The maximum distance driven to a processor was 200 miles.

Kentucky Hunters for the Hungry (KHFH) is a charitable volunteer organization whose mission is alleviating hunger and malnutrition in Kentucky by providing shelters and food banks with professionally processed and packaged venison meat free of charge. KHFH encourages hunters to donate legally-harvested deer by bringing them to participating processors each season, and pays processors a pre-negotiated price for handling and freezing the processed venison. KHFH also enables hunters to harvest more deer than they personally desire to use, which further aids in the management of the statewide deer population. We asked respondents if they were aware of this venison donation outlet before the 2024-25 season. Over two-thirds (67.4%) were aware that they could donate deer to KHFH through local meat processors at no charge to participating hunters.

Despite the high level of awareness about the program, 71.3% of hunters said that they only harvest enough venison for their own or their family's needs. Ninety-one percent (91.1%) of respondents did not donate venison through KHFH in the last 5 years. Of those who had donated deer to KHFH in the last five years, 90.2% had donated 5 or less deer during that time. The maximum donation by any respondent was 50 deer over 5 years. We asked what prevented hunters from donating more venison to KHFH. A large majority (71.3%) of respondents cited their desire to only harvest enough venison each year to sustain themselves and their families, whereas 22.3% indicated a lack of awareness of the program.

Chronic Wasting Disease

Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) is an always fatal neurological disease that affects deer, elk, and other members of the deer family. It is caused by a prion, is highly contagious, and has spread extensively among deer and elk populations across North America over the last two decades. KDFWR has been conducting statewide surveillance for CWD since 2002 and has tested more than 60,000 deer and elk. KDFWR detected its first case of CWD within the state in 2023 through a hunter-harvested adult buck taken in Ballard County. In October 2024, a case was detected in a deer farm in Breckinridge County. During the 2024-25 season, the KDFWR response to these CWD detections with regulations aimed at slowing the spread and learning more about how much of the disease is on the landscape. Carcass transportation restrictions, baiting bans, and mandatory check stations to facilitate systematic sampling were some of the measures taken in response.

We asked hunters across the state if they were aware of the 2 CWD cases in Kentucky. A majority of respondents were aware of the CWD detection in a wild deer in Ballard County (64.6%), but most (57.8%) were unaware of the Breckinridge County captive deer that tested positive. When asked if CWD concerns affected their hunting, respondents were overwhelmingly not concerned statewide with 90.8% saying CWD did not affect their hunting in Kentucky, despite the addition of 6 counties to the CWD Surveillance Zone over the last year.

Hunters were asked what potential impacts concerned them about CWD in Kentucky. A majority were concerned with CWD spreading throughout the state (53.7%). Other common concerns included deer population decrease, safety of eating venison, additional regulations, and buck quality diminishing. Twenty-one percent (21.0%) of respondents had no serious concerns about CWD.

What concerns do you have about the impacts of CWD on Kentucky in the next 5 years? (Select all that apply)*	Number of Responses*	Percent of Respondents
CWD spreading throughout Kentucky	1753	53.7%
Deer numbers dropping dramatically	1419	43.5%
Safety of eating deer meat	1371	42.0%
Additional regulations affecting my ability to hunt	1021	31.3%
Not having enough mature bucks to hunt	809	24.8%
Potential negative impacts on hunting participation	725	22.2%
No serious concerns about CWD	686	21.0%
Potential negative impacts on other KDFWR programs due to additional funding needed for CWD management	515	15.8%
Local processors stop processing deer	458	14.0%
Lack of disposal options of unwanted deer parts	399	12.2%
Potential negative impacts on local economy	277	8.5%

*Sorted by most frequent response

There are several avenues by which KDFWR obtains samples to test for CWD. We asked hunters which of the three main avenues—mandatory check stations, freezer drop-off sites, and self-serve mail-in kits—they were aware of to get their deer tested. Respondents were overwhelmingly aware (72.5%) of in-person mandatory check stations within CWD Surveillance Zone counties, but less than one-third of respondents knew about freezer drop-off sites (29.0%) or self-serve mail-in sampling kits (28.2%) that are distributed in counties statewide.

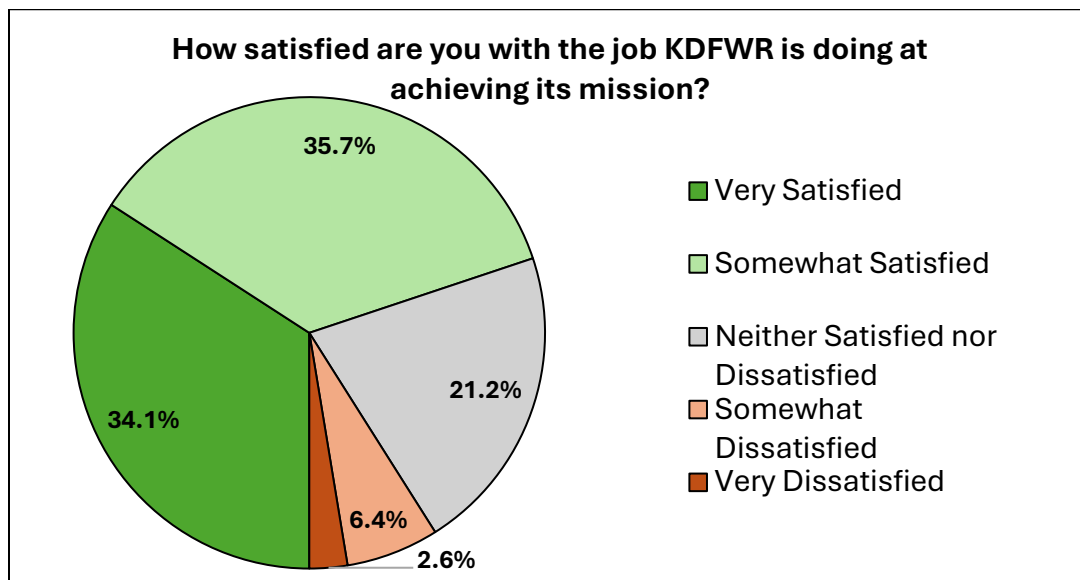
The 2024-25 season served as the inaugural year of KDFWR’s “Shoot for Samples” program, which offers hunters statewide the opportunity to be drawn for prizes if they submit deer heads for CWD testing. The program did not officially begin until well into the deer season, and survey results indicated that nearly all hunters (89.9%) were unaware of its existence. Beginning with the 2025-26 season, this

program will be advertised more extensively, with the goal of raising awareness of the opportunity.

Virtually all deer hunters indicated some level of trust in KDFWR with its response to CWD statewide; forty-three percent (43.6%) indicated that they trusted the agency's response "very much" and 48.9% trusted its response "somewhat." Only 7.6% of respondents indicated that they did not trust KDFWR's response "at all."

Hunter Satisfaction

Respondents were asked how satisfied they were with the job KDFWR is doing at achieving its mission – conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife resources, and providing related recreational opportunities, in Kentucky. Nearly three-quarters of respondents were either somewhat (35.7%) or very (34.1%) satisfied, while less than 10 percent were either somewhat (6.4%) or very (2.6%) dissatisfied.



More specific to deer management in the state of Kentucky, most hunters surveyed indicated that they were either somewhat (38.7%) or very (26.2%) satisfied with Kentucky's statewide deer management program. Less than 10% were either somewhat (7.4%) or very (2.2%) dissatisfied, while 25.5% indicated they were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied in Kentucky's statewide deer management.