

8. DEER WINTERING AREA MANAGEMENT

Shrubland habitat and young forest differ in vegetation types and food and cover they provide, as well as where and how they are maintained on the landscape.

White-tailed deer in Vermont live near the northern limit of their range in eastern North America. To survive, deer must use very specific winter habitat when severe climatic conditions become a threat.

Areas that are used year after year by deer seeking winter shelter are called *wintering areas* or *deer yards*. These areas consist of two basic habitat components. The *core range* is often characterized by concentrations of softwoods with high crown closure. This provides numerous thermal and microclimatic advantages to the deer such as reduced snow depths, less wind, increased daily mean temperatures, and increased relative humidity. South-facing slopes are often preferred yarding areas because they receive more direct solar radiation. The second component consists of mixed hardwood and softwoods adjacent to or within the core range, which provide accessible browse.

Stand maturity, canopy closure, crown shape and height, tree species, slope, and aspect are all important factors that determine whether or not deer will overwinter in a particular area. For example, snow cover is often melted or blown off steep, south-facing slopes in southern Vermont, and deer may be found on these slopes even when very little softwood cover is available.



Figure 8.1
Sample of a map of deer wintering areas

IDENTIFYING WINTERING AREAS

Physical evidence of use by deer is the best way to determine whether an area can be considered a wintering area. The most obvious indications of very recent deer use include tracks, trails, and droppings. Other less obvious, though more reliable, indicators of deer wintering area are the more permanent signs of deer use on vegetation, such as browsing and bark scarring.

Browsing on young, small diameter twigs and branches should be evident, even though the intensity of deer browsing may vary from site to site. Seedlings and saplings in heavily used areas have a deformed or “broomy” appearance. Bark scars from deer feeding can be visible to the trained eye for 20 years. Well-worn deer paths may also be evident.

Maps of currently known deer wintering areas are available from town clerks, regional planning commissions, and at each Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department district office. They are also available from the ANR Natural Resources Atlas at the link in [Resources](#).

In addition, upon request, a wildlife biologist can be available to meet with resource managers and interested private landowners for on-the-ground reconnaissance of suspect areas.

WINTERING AREA MANAGEMENT

The management goal for all deer wintering areas, regardless of species composition, is to prolong the useful life of the habitat by:

- Perpetuating softwood shelter through appropriate timber harvests using single tree and small group selection harvests, focused on releasing advanced softwood regeneration;
- Maintaining deer mobility and access throughout all non-regenerating segments of the wintering area; and
- Providing preferred, accessible browse, where appropriate and without compromising the softwood cover.

In the short term, any cutting of the softwood component reduces the winter shelter value and carrying capacity of the area. Any management plan for a deer wintering area must be designed to provide a minimum of at least one-half (50 percent) of the entire wintering area to be in “functional shelter” at all times. Throughout this book, “functional shelter” is defined as softwood cover at least 35 feet tall, with at least 70 percent crown closure. It is important to recognize, however, that within a wintering area, there will be variability and not all of the habitat may meet these thresholds, yet they are still an important, functional part of the overall winter habitat. For additional information on managing deer wintering areas refer to the *Management Guide for Deer Wintering Areas in Vermont* available from the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department offices or from the department website. See **Resources** for links.



RESOURCES

ANR Natural Resources Atlas. <http://anrmaps.vermont.gov/websites/anra/>

Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department. “Management Guide for Deer Wintering Areas in Vermont.” http://www.vtfishandwildlife.com/library/Reports_and_Documents/Fish_and_Wildlife/Management%20Guide%20for%20Deer%20Wintering%20Areas%20in%20Vermont.pdf

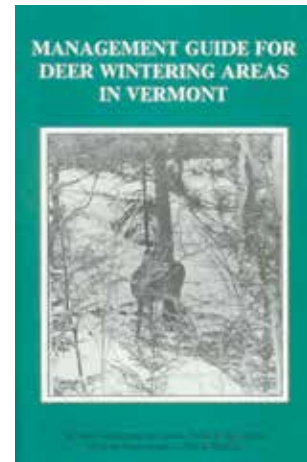


Figure 8.2
Management Guide for Deer Wintering Areas in Vermont