

The McAlester Army



the Unique Buck

When it comes to deer hunting in the Sooner state, few places are revered and esteemed so highly by Oklahomans — and by sportsmen all over the nation, for that matter — as the McAlester Army Ammunition Plant in southeast Oklahoma. Not only does it offer civilians a rare glimpse of one of the military's most important installations (especially for wartime explosives production), but it's also a deer hunter's paradise.

Through the Wildlife Department's Controlled Hunts Program, sportsmen from across the country have had the chance to visit the "Ammunition Depot" for a primitive archery or shotgun hunt, and they can attest to that sensation — that "mystique," as one previous Outdoor Oklahoma article puts it — that a sportsman only feels when he knows he's hunting somewhere special. And one thing that makes the area so special is its extraordinary deer population. That and the fact that such a hunt is still thriving

even with so many post 9/11 security issues across the nation. It is only thanks to Army commanders who value the opportunity to maximize public access to this federal facility that it even exists as an opportunity today. And it's crucial that sportsmen continue to be good stewards of that opportunity if they wish to see the hunt remain a part of the Oklahoma Controlled Hunts program.

It's the quality of deer found on the grounds of the McAlester Army Ammunition Plant that gets a hunter's heart pounding, and the anticipation of knowing theirs could be one of some 1,400-1,800 names drawn for six weekend deer hunts held throughout the year.

The ammunition plant got its start in wildlife management in the mid 1940s, when a small number of deer trapped in the Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge were released on the area. Then known as the U.S. Naval Ammunition Depot, the area is still fondly referred to by its nickname, the "Depot," at hunting camps and in sportsmen's circles across the state. It was a reserve in which hunting was

Bill Starry addresses a crowd of anxious hunters at one of six controlled hunts held throughout the year at the McAlester Army Ammunition Plant.

Ammunition Plant:

NELS RODEFELD



Hunt of a Lifetime

By Nels Rodefeld

not initially permitted because of the area's military status, but it was the hope of the Oklahoma Game and Fish Commission (now the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation) that the stocking would help replenish surrounding areas for restoration and hunting purposes. Plans at the time included removing "surplus" game from the area once capacities were exceeded, and relocating it to other wildlife-depleted areas in the state.

But by the early 1960s, deer reproduction on the area was so successful that trap and transplant efforts were no longer enough to maintain healthy, sustainable numbers of deer.

Enter what would eventually become one of the most desired hunts in Oklahoma. In the early '60s, the first draw hunt was conducted on the base, and 124 deer were harvested. Today, the area is home to bucks that most hunters only dream about, and while the mission of the McAlester Army Ammunition Plant is still to produce ordinance to supply the United States military, they have found a way manage

deer by allowing as many civilians as possible to hunt the area without jeopardizing that ever-important military objective.

McAlester and Its Management Evolution

Bill Starry came on board as a volunteer helper on deer hunts for the "Depot" grounds in 1977 and was hired as a paid employee about four years later.

"I was a died-in-the-wool deer hunter," said Starry regarding the year he started as the paid manager, but far fewer days are spent hunting now, and many more are consumed with managing this legendary herd. He emphasizes his belief in the importance of having hunted deer in order to manage them, but he never hunts on the base and is more content these days with watching his grandkids hunt than going himself.

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NELS ROOFELD

Bill Starry examines antler sheds collected from the McAlester Army Ammunition Plant in southeast Oklahoma. Starry has been managing the deer herd on the base since 1977, when he began as a volunteer. He came on as a paid manager in 1981.

The road to legendary status took time to navigate, however. By 1984, base personnel had noticed a decline in antler development and, according to Starry, who says he'd much rather see visitors on the grounds harvest deer than to harvest them himself, they just stopped seeing as many "good bucks" as they did in previous years.

Hunter success on the area was unstable. For example, in 1977, before compound bows, the success rate was at around seven percent, but by 1984 (around the time that tree stands and compound bows became popular and hunting equipment began improving in technology), there was a 24 percent success rate. As hunters became more successful, they also became more selective in what they harvested. And as all this took place, the age class of deer in the area decreased

ed several key practices that he says are instrumental in the success of management on the base grounds. Along with holding antlerless hunts and issuing a "quality pass," which allows deer hunters who harvest a doe to return the next year without going through the drawing, compound bows were prohibited. The idea in a nutshell is that, by limiting hunters to primitive archery equipment, more hunters can see and hunt the area, but success rates will be more stable than before. Primitive equipment is less advanced than compound bows and can greatly decrease effective shooting ranges; so naturally, fewer deer are harvested with primitive bows and hopefully fewer are injured from misjudged, long-distance bow attempts.

According to Starry, this important policy not only affords young bucks more time to grow to maturity (and thus trophy status), but in doing so it also improves the age structures and gender ratios in the herd.

"It's just a management strategy," Starry said. "It wouldn't work everywhere, but it does here."

And oh, how it does. Starry reports that today, there is a "natural herd balance" with good age structures and good buck to doe ratios. The proof might be found in the more than 100 rocks planted in the headquarters lawn, one for each buck taken on the Ammunition Plant grounds that has qualified

Keeping It Real

During any hunting season, it's important that sportsmen stay well-informed of the rules and regulations that pertain to their hunt. And it's no different at McAlester. Rules may seem more strict or limiting on the McAlester controlled hunt, but the fact that the base is such a crucial military installation with a primary goal of providing ordinance to the U.S. military is enough to imply that sportsmen are fortunate to have the hunt at all, so certain important rules must be followed in addition to state wildlife regulations. While Army officials are to thank for allowing public access to the base for such a useful purpose, it's up to hunters to be good stewards of that generosity and make sure all rules for this unique controlled hunt opportunity are followed. Doing so not only shows gratitude, but it helps ensure a future of public hunting access and opportunity on the McAlester Army Ammunition Plant as well as other areas where special access is granted.

McAlester Hunt Means Big Business for Local Merchants

Local merchants and deer hunters both look forward to the annual deer season with high levels of expectation. When local merchants of nearby community Savanna were asked if they noticed an increase in business during the deer hunts being conducted by the McAlester Army Ammunition Plant, all merchants agreed on one answer.

Most definitely.

“Cindy Holt, long time employee for the Savanna Superette, said the hunters start pouring in on the day of the briefing for the army plant hunt and buy beverages, chips and candy.

Lodging facilities notice a surge as well.

“Many hunters book their rooms a year in advance, with high hopes that they will be drawn for the base

hunts and then others book later in July or as soon as they are notified they were drawn for the hunt,” said Melisa Redmon, manager of the Americas Best Value Inn in Savanna.

Some lodging managers prepare rooms especially for hunters who are lucky enough to draw out for the hunt.

“I absolutely see an increase in business,” said Beverly Gillis, general manager of the Candlelight Inn and Suites. “We even clean our rooms a special way just for deer hunters, using only alcohol and water so they won’t be smelling like a motel room when they go to the woods. I let the hunters set up their targets for shooting their bows out back. We take care of our hunters.”

—Steve Burge

for Pope and Young trophy status. Or maybe the proof is evidenced by the “10 most wanted list,” a collection of “Depot” bucks noted by unique characteristics — such as antlers, scars or other interesting qualities — that make them highly sought-after by hunters. Either way, it’s no secret that drawing out for the McAlester Army Ammunition Plant hunt is a near euphoric dream for hunters everywhere, and not without reason.

As in most everything else, though, “to get a little you have give a little,” meaning that, while the herd age structure is evenly distributed, boasts healthy buck-to-doe ratios and includes plenty of bucks in their peak age of 7-8 years, and while a large number of hunters get a chance to hunt them, there are always trade-offs with any management system. And McAlester — as good as it is — is no exception. According to Starry, such “trade-offs” include a lot of fighting between bucks in the area, which can lead to death, injury or, at best, loss of trophy antlers. Additionally, Starry said many bucks simply leave the base in search of does outside the base grounds. But it’s all part of the process of achieving management goals without compromising military objectives. Still, Starry said these issues are something he and Ryan Toby, Wildlife Department biologist on the base, would like to address since one of their primary management goals is to grow animals that hunters can pursue and harvest. This management team is constantly considering

new ideas and potential changes to fine tune the deer management on the “Depot.” As good as it is, they want it better.

Deer management on the base is a year-round job. Population surveys start in January and include brood stock counts. In March, browse surveys are performed, with special attention given to green briar, winged elm and sumac plants. Deer that are counted are classified into buck, doe and fawn categories in August, which is when buck-to-doe and doe-to-fawn ratios are determined. Base personnel also rely on observations outside of these yearly efforts.

“We’re out there every day, January through



RYAN TOBY

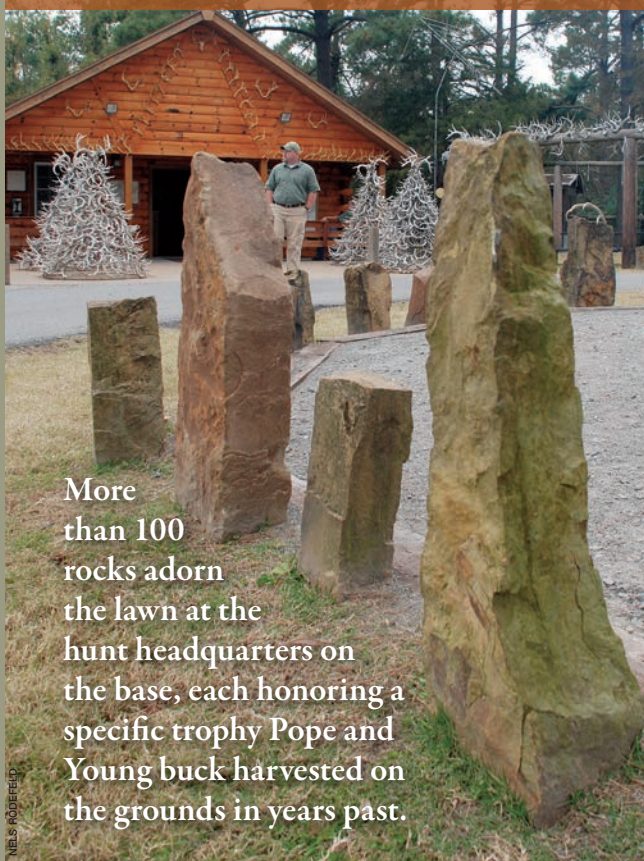
Jerry Stafford doesn’t need anyone to tell him there are nice deer in the area. He’s seen it with his own eyes and, in 1997, harvested this outstanding buck (scoring 163 1/8).

A few sportsmen sit about a campfire, undoubtedly discussing the wonder and awe of the bucks found on the base. We're sure they're not the only hunters to have ever sat about a campfire with such matters on their minds.



NELS ROSEFIELD

Rock Bucks



More than 100 rocks adorn the lawn at the hunt headquarters on the base, each honoring a specific trophy Pope and Young buck harvested on the grounds in years past.

August, so we make adjustments based on what we're seeing versus solely relying on numbers," Starry said.

Among other practices, management on the base includes burning about 3,000 acres annually by prescribed fire, which Starry said has improved habitat conditions more than any other effort.

When it comes to hunt-

stand when they don't quickly see deer. This, Starry said, is the biggest mistake hunters make on the base. The belief that deer appear out of every nook and cranny is not true, said Starry. Additionally, the deer on base endure a lot of hunting pressure. As in any hunting situation, patience is an important key.

According to Starry, it doesn't matter whether you hunt early, mid or late season — the hunting is good and the experience is rewarding.

And if having the opportunity to hunt trophy deer on the base isn't enough to excite a sportsman, there comes with each hunt the opportunity to see other types of wildlife, including eastern turkeys, bobcats and even river otters. And, since good food can be as important a staple as ammo for some hunters, it should be noted there is no shortage good eating in the area for when the hunt is over. Few Oklahoma towns know fine Italian dining like the nearby towns of McAlester and Krebs. There's also great steak, barbecue and Chinese and Mexican food available as well as all other important amenities.

The unmatched appeal associated with the buck population at the McAlester Army Ammunition Plant points to the success of the Oklahoma Controlled Hunts Program and the benefits of sound management, not to mention the joint cooperation between the United States military and the Wildlife Department. Ultimately, the result is one of the most wildly popular controlled hunts offered by the Wildlife Department along with many satisfied civilians who get the opportunity to hunt the buck of a lifetime in pristine deer habitat that some individuals can only hope to one day see. 🌿

ing on the base, sportsmen enjoy a 13 percent success rate, good odds considering the statewide archery success rate of 21.3 percent during the 2006-07 season. Last season, sportsmen from 16 states hunted on the base. Starry said many hunters arrive with a misconception that there's a deer behind every tree, as they have heard the celebrated stories of outstanding hunting in the area. Because of this, they tend to find an area with good deer sign, set up, and then move their

McAlester's 10 Most Wanted

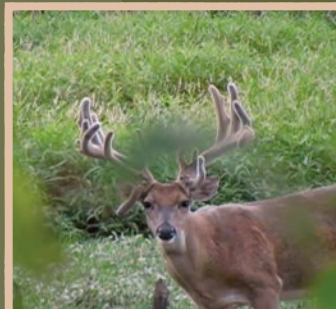
There are 10 of them — a collection of bucks known to call the McAlester Army Ammunition Depot home — that for one reason or another are highly sought after. Not necessarily because they are the biggest deer on the base, but you can bet there is something about each of them that makes them special. Scars, antlers or other distinct characteristics may put them on the list, but one thing is for sure, they are trophies to the hunters and managers who are lucky enough to see or even harvest them.



Name: Beamer
Hunt Area: Hominy
MO: Long Main Beams



Name: Ace of Spades
Hunt Area: Hominy
MO: Son of Spade?



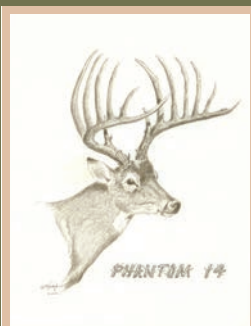
Name: Colonel
Area: Deer Creek
MO: The Neighborhood Guard



Name: Scar
Area: Deer Creek
MO: Battle Tested
*Found in Dec. 07—Scored 197 0/8 P&Y



Name: Mr. Clean
Hunt Area: Boggy
MO: Clean, Symmetric, Palmated Twelve



Name: Phantom 14
Area: Deer Creek
MO: Camera Shy



Name: Tongue
Area: Boggy
MO: Tongue hangs out, Palmated



Name: Skipper
Area: Deer Creek
MO: Perfect ten point



Name: Sasquatch
Area: Boggy
MO: Long Drop Tine



Name: Precious
Area: Boggy
MO: Multiple Kickers