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Illinois Deer Hunters' Attitudes Toward Use of Handguns During Firearm Deer Season



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Executive Summary

Illinois deer hunters were surveyed during May 2003 for their attitudes toward a proposal that would allow the use of handguns during firearm deer season in Illinois. A total of 2,683 (79%) of hunters responded. The survey results have a +/- margin of error of 3%. Key findings of this survey are:

- On a statewide basis, hunters are essentially evenly split on the use of handguns during firearm season: 52% support, 48% opposed.
- Support varied across the 5 IDNR regions: 55% of hunters in Regions 1, 2, and 3 supported use of handguns; 48% of hunters in Region 4 supported the move; 49% in Region 5 were in favor of the regulatory change. The level of support in Regions 2 and 3 may be related to the need for increased hunting opportunities in these regions.
- Support for the change in regulations varied across type of deer hunter. Hunters favoring the change, by type: handgun 64%, muzzleloader 47%, archery 36%, and firearm 34%.
- Reasons for opposition include an apparent misunderstanding of handgun ballistics: 57% of hunters opposed to the proposed regulation felt handguns were unsafe; 6% believed handguns would result in too many wounded deer; 1% perceived handguns to have same range as rifles. Other reasons for opposing handguns involved a perception that the regulations would increase the number of hunters afield during deer season: 22% felt there would be too many hunters if handguns were allowed; 6% perceived handgun use as disruptive to their deer hunting.

Awareness of current handgun seasons may not be widespread among Illinois deer hunters. Researchers conducting this study were unable to find a list of counties that had a handgun season in either the 2002 Illinois Digest of Hunting and Trapping Regulations, or on the IDNR website and were forced to call the IDNR office in Springfield to find the counties that offered a handgun deer season. If hunters are unaware that there is an existing handgun season in their county, they may have perceptions of handguns (for example wounding rates, ballistics, or numbers of hunters) that may not prevail with better knowledge of current handgun use. A strong educational effort regarding handgun effectiveness, ballistics, and safety, combined with greater awareness of current handgun hunting opportunities may reduce opposition to handgun use during firearm season.

Methods

Data were obtained through a mail-back survey conducted March through May 2003 of a randomly selected sample of deer hunters in Illinois. Hunters were stratified by permit type: 2,000 firearm, 1,000 archery, and 500 muzzleloader deer hunters were selected. Firearm and muzzleloader deer hunters were stratified and sampled by county for which they held a permit; archery deer hunters were selected by the county in which they resided. Each participant was mailed a 15-page questionnaire, cover letter, and stamped return envelope. Nonrespondents were mailed a postcard reminder 10 days following the questionnaire. A total of 3 mailings of the questionnaire were conducted. We received a total of 2,683 (79%) responses.

Results

Hunter Participation

Most hunters (89%) reported they participated in the 2002 Illinois firearm deer season, whereas 61% hunted during the archery, 20% during muzzleloader, and 11% during handgun seasons. A small minority (0.2%) of these hunters ($n = 4$) used handguns exclusively for deer hunting. Handgun hunters responding to the survey reported they harvested 0.3% of the buck harvest reported among all deer hunters in the survey, compared to 67% harvested by firearm hunters, 28% by archery hunters, and 5% harvested by muzzleloader hunters. Of the 2,560 respondents, only four reported they took a buck by handgun. Handguns were used to take 5% of the doe harvest reported by survey respondents, accounting for 68 animals. Most handgun hunters (32%) have hunted deer in Illinois for 10-20 years (Figure 1).

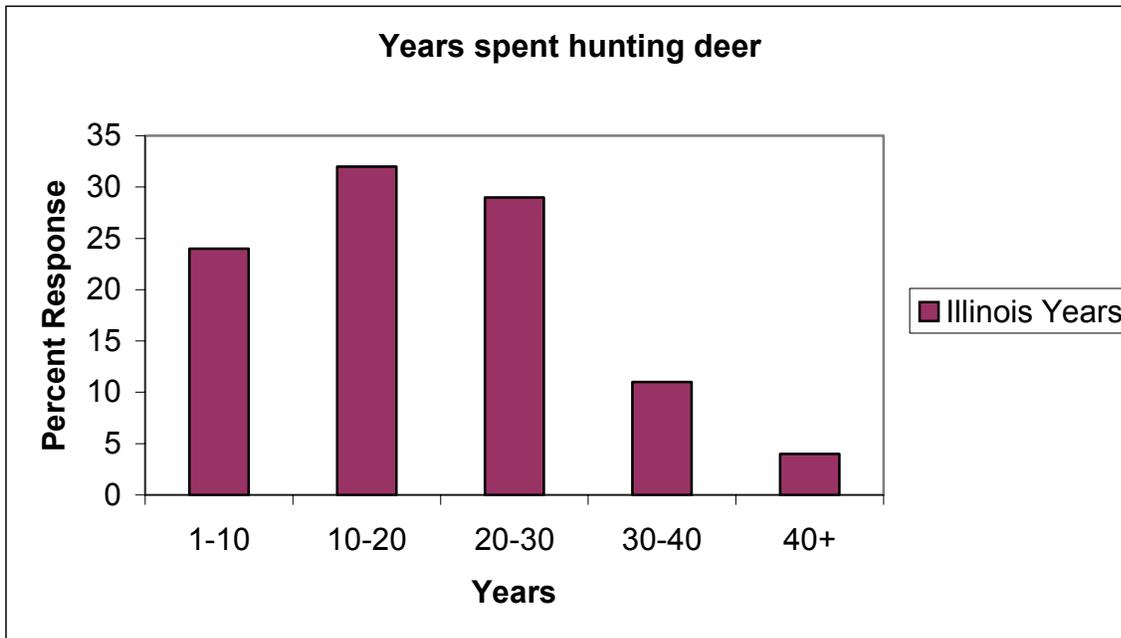


Figure 1. Reported years spent hunting deer with a handgun in Illinois.

Handgun Regulation Change

On a statewide basis, deer hunters were evenly divided (52% Yes, 48% No) in their support of regulations permitting handguns to be used during the Illinois firearm deer season (Table 1). Position on the issue differed by the type of hunting in which the hunter participated. Firearm deer hunters remained divided, but support for the regulation increased to 54% among archery hunters, 60% among muzzleloader hunters, and 71% among handgun hunters. An unsafe hunting environment (57%) was the most frequent response given by hunters in opposition to using handguns during firearm deer season, followed by too many hunters (20%) (Table 2). Other reasons frequently listed for not supporting regulations permitting handguns were “needs a separate season and license” (n = 74) and “too many wounded deer” (n = 73) (Table 2a).

Table 1. Hunter support for use of handguns during firearm deer season, by hunter type.

“Would you support handguns to be used during firearm deer season.”	Yes	No
Handgun	71%	29%
Muzzleloader	60	40
Archery	54	46
Firearm	51	49
Combined total	52	48

Table 2. Reasons given by hunters opposing handgun use during firearm season, by hunter type. (N = 1,288)

“Reasons you would not support regulations permitting handguns.”	Archery	Firearm	Muzzleloader	Handgun	Total
Unsafe hunting environment	54%	58%	49%	48%	57%
Too many hunters	22	20	26	23	20
Disrupt my hunt	6	6	4	4	3
Increase number of handguns	3	3	<1	2	6
Other (see Table 2a)	15	13	21	23	14

Table 2a. Write-in reasons for opposing handgun use during firearm season.
(N = 376)

“Other reasons for not supporting regulations permitting handguns.”	n
Needs separate season and license	74
Too many wounded deer	73
Only for people qualified as a “good shot”	16
Same range, efficiency, etc... as rifles	11
Too many hunting seasons	9
Do not believe in hunting deer with handguns	8
Lower deer population too much	7
Increased poaching	4
Only in certain situations	3
Gives deer hunting a bad name	2
Not enough information	1
Too easily concealed	1
All of the above	6
Total	215

Deer hunters in three IDNR administrative regions of the state (1, 2, & 3) were most supportive of regulation changes permitting handguns during firearm deer season, with 55% of all deer hunters in favor of the proposed regulatory change (Table 3). Regions 4 and 5 had the lowest support for the proposed regulation among all deer hunters, with a total of 48% and 49% respectively. In Region 1, 59% of archery hunters supported the use of handguns during the firearm deer season, whereas 65% of muzzleloader hunters in region 2 supported this change. Deer hunters in Region 3 were most supportive among handgun hunters (83%).

Table 3. Hunter support for use of handguns during firearm deer season, by hunter type.

“Would you support handguns to be used during firearm deer season?”	Archery	Firearm	Muzzleloader	Handgun	Total
Region 1	59%	54%	64%	74%	55%
Region 2	55	55	65	79	55
Region 3	57	55	57	83	55
Region 4	50	48	59	67	48
Region 5	52	49	55	66	49

Hunters were asked if they would hunt with a handgun for deer if the regulations permitted handguns to be used during the firearm deer season. Firearm hunters were least likely to take up handguns for deer hunting; approximately one-third (34%) of the firearm respondents indicated they would hunt with a handgun (Table 4). Those hunters who already used a handgun to hunt were most likely to take advantage of these regulation changes: 64% responded they would use handguns during firearm season, followed by 47% among muzzleloader hunters, and 36% among archery hunters. It is important to note that 54% of the handgun hunters who reported they would hunt with handguns in the firearm season hunted in counties that already have a separate handgun season. Hunters from counties that had established handgun seasons in 2002 were slightly less likely (49%) to support regular season handgun use than hunters in counties without handgun season (53%).

Table 4. Hunters interest in using handguns during Illinois firearm deer season.

“Would you hunt deer with handguns if they were permitted.”	Yes	N
Firearm	34%	796
Archery	36	578
Muzzleloader	47	244
Handgun	64	173
Combined total	34	907

Regions 2 and 3 were most likely to use handguns to hunt if they were permitted. These regions make up the greater Chicago metropolitan region and central Illinois' most intensely farmed lands. In these regions, 38% (Region 3) and 39% (Region 2) would begin to hunt deer with handguns (Table 5). Archery and firearm hunters were least likely to use handguns for hunting in all regions.

Table 5. Hunters interest in using handguns during Illinois firearm deer season, by IDNR region.

“Would you hunt deer with handguns if they were permitted?”	Archery	Firearm	Muzzleloader	Handgun	Total
Region 1	38%	33%	46%	62%	34%
Region 2	41	39	58	64	39
Region 3	35	40	40	73	38
Region 4	33	34	50	62	34
Region 5	36	31	41	64	31

Conclusions

Handgun hunters constitute the lowest proportion of deer hunters in Illinois: far below firearm and archery hunters. Results of this survey showed that only 0.2% hunt exclusively with handguns, therefore any increase in handgun hunting will likely be attributed to recruitment from archery and firearm hunters. Furthermore, allowing handguns during firearm deer season will not cause a significant increase in deer harvest, since a minority of firearm and archery deer hunters (the most numerous types of deer hunters in Illinois) indicated they would be interested in using handguns during firearm season.

According to the findings of this study, firearm hunters were least likely to support the regulation change. Factors that contributed to this lack of support included concerns over safety and perceptions of handgun ballistics. The greatest concern expressed by firearm hunters (58%) was that this change will create an unsafe hunting environment. This attitude is likely linked to

many of the other responses given. Hunters seem to perceive that handguns have a much greater shot capacity and range than shotguns. Hunters also see the use of handguns resulting in more wounded deer. Relatively few hunters (6%) cited “disrupt my hunt” as their primary concern. Twenty percent of firearm hunters were concerned that these regulations would result in too many hunters during the firearm season. As approximately 85% of Illinois deer hunters hunt on private property, creating crowded conditions by allowing handguns during firearm deer season will not likely be an issue. Moreover, the use of handguns will not increase the number of deer permits available for a given county, therefore the argument that there would be more hunters afield if handguns were permitted may not be valid. Thus, deer hunters using handguns will likely be tolerated as long as these misconceptions can be clarified.

Archery, muzzleloader, and handgun hunters are more likely to hunt deer with a handgun than are firearm deer hunters (36%, 47%, 64%, and 34% respectively). These findings show how the degree of specialization in hunters is likely to affect their participation in hunting. Specialization has been shown to affect the behavioral choices of hunters and their perceptions of satisfaction (Kuentzel & Heberlein, 1992; Miller and Graefe 2000). Extending opportunities for specialized hunters may increase hunter satisfaction with Illinois deer hunting and provide more opportunities for hunters interested in challenges provided by hunting with handguns.

Regional differences that were shown in this survey are similar to past research done by the Human Dimensions Research Program at the Illinois Natural History Survey (C. Miller, unpublished data) . Regions 2 and 3 were very similar in their support of these regulation changes and intention to use handguns if permitted. These two regions had the greatest support of the regulation change (55%) (along with Region 1), whereas 39% of hunters in Region 2 and 38% in Region 3 indicated they would use handguns during firearm season. These behavioral changes may be attributed to the lack of recreational opportunities in these regions. The urban sprawl and private lands in Region 2 and the lack of land access in Region 3 have made hunting participation increasingly difficult. Region 4 and 5 hunters were least likely to support any changes to the current regulations. This is likely due to existing levels of hunting pressure (e.g. for trophy bucks) and public land holdings in these two regions.

Misconceptions about handgun effectiveness, safety, and general awareness of handgun use in deer hunting exist among Illinois deer hunters. Researchers conducting this study were unable to find a list of counties that had a handgun season in either the 2002 Illinois Digest of

Hunting and Trapping Regulations, or on the IDNR website and were forced to call the IDNR office in Springfield to find the counties that offered a handgun deer season. If hunters are unaware that there is an existing handgun season in their county, they may have perceptions of handguns (for example wounding rates, ballistics, or numbers of hunters) that may not prevail with better knowledge of current handgun use. A strong educational effort regarding handgun effectiveness, ballistics, and safety, combined with greater awareness of current handgun hunting opportunities may reduce opposition to handgun use during firearm season.

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