



# Deer: Conservation's Longtime 'Problem Child' for Wisconsin

Kevin Pitts, a friendly reader who appreciates Wisconsin's deer hunting history, was doing some housecleaning in May when he came across a tattered paperback titled "A History of Wisconsin Deer."

The book was printed in 1946 and written by Ernest Swift, assistant director of the Wisconsin Conservation Department, the forerunner to our Department of Natural Resources.

Pitts is at a point in life where he realizes he can't take everything with him, no matter how precious the possession. He asked if I owned a copy of Swift's book. When I said no, he sent me his copy for safekeeping, along with a note:

"You will enjoy this book. Hopefully you'll pass it on to others who care about Wisconsin deer hunting. You can use the third paragraph on Page 95 whenever describing some of the dumb-\*ss politicians we have in this state."

I was intrigued, of course. Ernie Swift was a frank, well-spoken communicator, which he displays throughout his 96-page deer book, beginning with its introduction titled, "Conservation's Problem Child." The paragraph Pitts endorsed discusses the wildlife agency's duty to manage the public's deer, forests and other natural resources. Swift wrote:

"Trained biologists and field men of long experience have been working to determine facts and present workable remedies. It is their desire to make them simple, acceptable, and effective. On the other hand, there are individuals and many small groups who insist that their special brand of snake oil will cure everything. Too many of these cure-alls are based on special and sometimes selfish interests in the subject, or lack of appreciation of the broad ramifications which surround it."

That still sounds about right 74 years later, so remember that paragraph when lawmakers or members of our Natural Resources Board tell the DNR to solve the state's deer disputes within the next five years. When Swift (1897-1968) wrote his book, he had already witnessed several decades of public deer angst.

In case you haven't heard of Swift, know that he was inducted into the Wisconsin Conservation Hall of Fame in 1986. He was considered a fearless Northwoods game warden from 1926 to 1935, before becoming the department's deputy director. He then served as its director from 1947 to 1954 before heading to Washington, D.C., to serve as assistant director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. He finished his career as director of the National Wildlife Federation.

Travel with me now to 1946, and read Swift's thoughts from "A History of Wisconsin Deer." Let's start with a bold, innovative law the state forced upon deer hunters in 1915. As Swift recounts, the Legislature imposed

buck-only hunts in 1915 and 1916 to help rebuild the state's deer herd after its near collapse in the early 1900s.

Swift shared this account from the Wisconsin State Journal:

"The bill provides that it shall be illegal to kill a doe deer. The discussion resulted in several speeches on whether a hunter can tell a deer is a doe or a buck when he sees it coming. It was brought out that most hunters cannot even tell a man from a deer."

The Legislature repealed this divisive law in 1917 so hunters could again shoot any deer, but modified it in 1918 to protect fawns. Lawmakers revived the buck-only law in 1920, but specified bucks must have antlers at least 3 inches high.

Swift also reported widespread disbelief in deer-population estimates. To address that skepticism, the U.S. Forest Service called on the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1936 to determine the deer kill in the state's national forests, and to census the forests' deer populations. The census included 12 deer drives by CCC members, who stomped through a combined 8,290 acres of northwestern Wisconsin forests to count 446 deer, or 34 per square mile before the 1936 hunt.

Did the CCC workers' efforts impress hunters? Pfft! Those guys didn't need Facebook and Twitter to spread conspiracy theories. Swift wrote:

"Census counts had hardly commenced when rumors became current that they were a camouflage, and that the diabolical idea was to drive deer into refuges before the season so the hunters could not get them. A flood of extremely frank 'cease and desist' letters were forthcoming, and columnists gave voice to the general dissent. The entire affair was solemnly investigated with lengthy statements required from all (CCC) camp superintendents as to their activities."

One reason hunters didn't trust herd estimates or the CCC's deer count was their belief that the forests held too few "breeding bucks," which caused an abundance of "dry does."

Therefore, from 1939 through 1942 the Conservation Department dispatched pathologists from Hayward, Trout Lake and Black River Falls to examine does illegally shot during the hunting season. Swift reported:

"In 1939, only 12 does were examined; all were milking. In 1940, six out of 66 showed no milk in the udder. This did not mean, necessarily, that the animals did not conceive, as the fawns might have died or been killed. In 1942, 129 does were examined, of which six proved dry. ... The general conclusion was that the dry doe problem was of little consequence. A doe running without a fawn is not sufficient evidence to substantiate the dry doe theory."

Swift conceded that the Conservation Department could improve its public relations, which he considered a "vital necessity." Even so, he didn't favor caving to mob rule. He wrote:

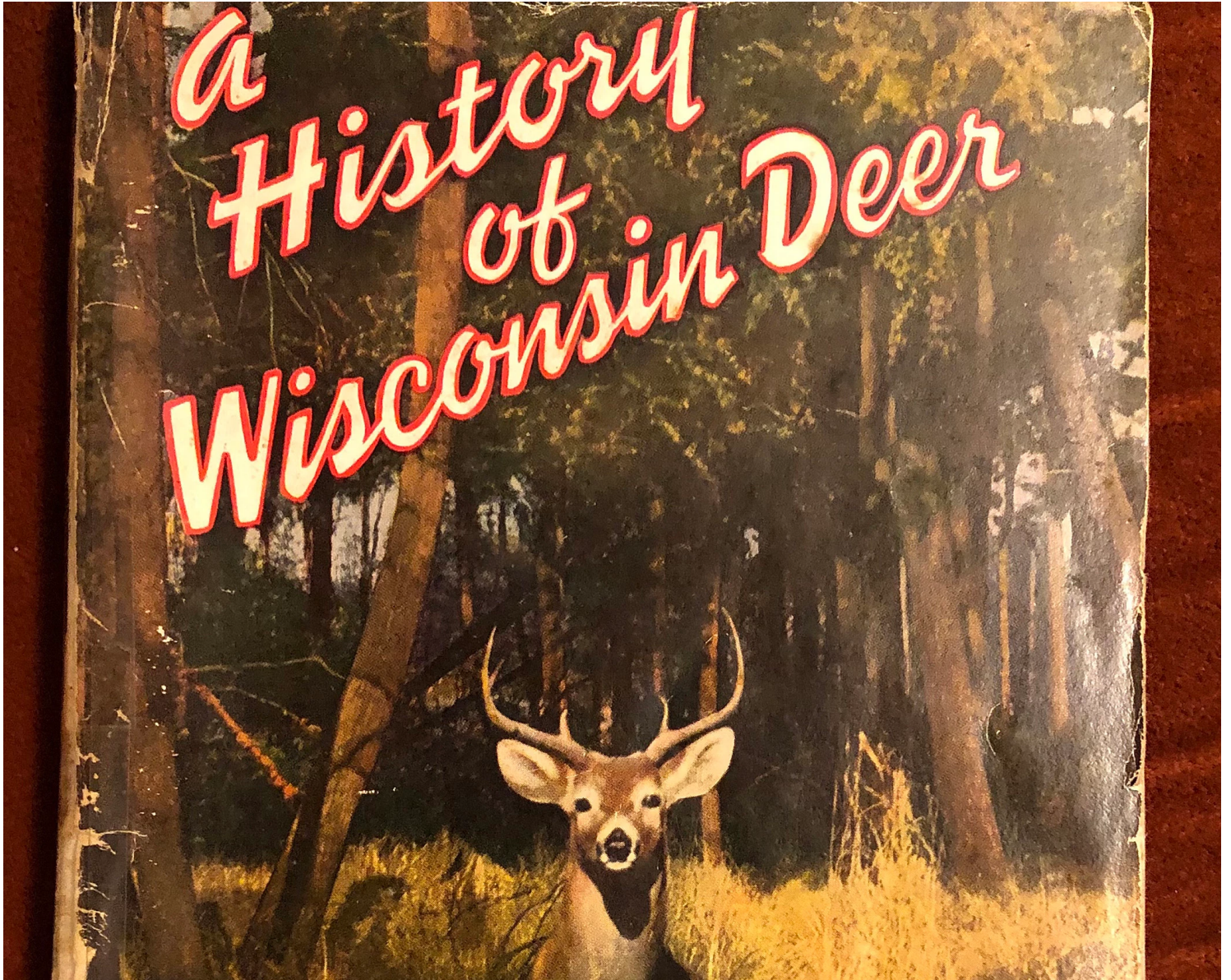


"If a conservation program is to mark time or retreat when an ill wind blows through a newspaper, it will stagnate and die. Situations arise where action cannot wait, and it is better to take vigorous action than to be consistently seeking (approval)."

Sigh.

Something tells me Swift would laugh if he could return today and consider a contract to reprint his book.

"Easiest money I'll ever make," he would say. "I'll hardly need to change a thing except a few names and the copyright date. Deer make people stupid. Their beliefs petrified to stone a century ago."



***Ernest Swift's "A History of Wisconsin Deer" reviews the first 30 years of Wisconsin's efforts to manage and regulate deer and deer hunting. — Patrick Durkin photo***