

Evolution

of a Small Property

FROM TRADITIONAL HUNTING CAMP TO QDM SHOWCASE,
THE EVOLUTION OF THE JENZANO FARM IN PENNSYLVANIA IS
PROOF THAT SUCCESS IS WITHIN REACH ON SMALL ACREAGE.

By Jim Jenzano

Our Pennsylvania hunting camp began in 1967 when my father, Joseph Jenzano, purchased 13 acres of land. Over the years he continued to add more land that adjoined our original property, and today we own 190 acres of mixed farmland and woods in north-central Pennsylvania. For years this rural area was home to the big hunting camps that made the woods echo with riflefire on opening day. Today, many of these camps have broken up or dissolved, taking the intense hunting pressure with them. Hunting pressure is still high around our property, but the days of large organized drives are a thing of the past.

In the beginning, our camp's hunting goals were much like the rest of the state's hunters: kill a buck. Any buck. Throughout the 1970s, 80s and early 90s we strived to answer the question "Did you get your buck this year?" with a resounding "Yes!" It didn't matter if it was a spike or a 4-point. It didn't matter if the

deer dressed under 100 pounds. The goal for our group of eight to 10 hunters was to try and kill eight to 10 bucks a year. Most years we came close to this goal. If you didn't kill a buck, you shot a doe. This practice, which went on for decades, obviously led to a disproportionate number of bucks being shot in relation to does. During this period, a 100-inch deer was a really good buck but was a rare animal. In 1976 my father shot a 125-inch buck

Above: this field is an example how the Jenzano farm has been converted to quality deer habitat. Large fields, once wide open and clean, have been softened through conversion of edges to early successional cover. The strip in the middle of this field is maintained in perennials like alfalfa, clover and chicory. Edges like these have increased cover, forage and wildlife diversity. Even use of the food plots by deer has increased after edges were installed.

that was the talk of the area, a real monster for that time. There wasn't a buck killed by our camp that came close to the size of my father's deer for the next 23 years.

We did some things to our property in the early 1980s that I wish I could say was for the purpose of growing quality deer. While that wasn't our intention at the time, it has been the result. In 1983 my father planted approximately 30 acres of our farm in Douglas fir for commercial Christmas tree production. As these trees grew, we noticed deer began to bed in the cover they provided. When the trees were 6- to 8-feet tall and ready for harvest, my father decided against cutting them. These patches of trees provided so much cover for the deer, bear and small game that he just couldn't cut them down. Unknowingly, we had provided our deer with 30 acres of some of the thickest sanctuary you have ever seen. These overgrown Christmas trees have become vital to the success of our farm. They provide excellent thermal cover in the winter and great fawning cover in the spring.

About the same time the trees were planted, my father started to have more time away from work, which allowed him to plant food plots for the deer and turkeys.



Above: the author with a buck he killed in January 2006. The buck dressed 180 pounds and grossed 130 inches. He was aged at 3½ years.



Jim Melvin killed this 3½-year-old buck last season on the Jenzano farm. The buck weighed 198 pounds and gross-scored 121 inches. Though eight Cuddeback cameras are maintained on the property, this buck had never been photographed – evidence that the plan to offer heavy cover and ample food to attract pressured bucks during gun season may be working.



This plot and others were cleared in heavy cover in the center of the Jenzano property. Planted in cool-season annuals (brassicas are shown here), the plots are not hunted and are designed to attract and hold deer in the core of the property. Because of their proximity to cover and zero hunting pressure, these plots are productive sites for trail-camera surveys.

Those early plots consisted of corn and buckwheat and were primarily used for the purpose of just “seeing” deer. While we were not thinking about cool-season and warm-season nutrition, it was a start.

As several of my friends and family began to bowhunt in the late 1980s, our deer hunting addiction reached the next level. It was now amazing to see a number of bucks in October and occasionally some decent bucks as well. These were animals that eluded us during those first two days of the Pennsylvania rifle season. There actually were some decent 90- to 100-inch deer on the property, and they were not as few and far between as we once thought. As our growing interest led us to read more publications, we learned of other foods besides corn to plant for deer. Our first experiment was with clover. We planted several plots in red and white clover purchased from the local farm supply, and it worked. The summer deer sightings on these plots were phenomenal and, more importantly, over the next several years the 90- to 100-inch bucks became much more common. While the bucks seemed to be getting bigger, the meat

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Strips of woodlands adjacent to property boundaries were clearcut and are being allowed to grow up into early successional habitat that will be maintained in dense cover and will not be hunted. The idea is that deer crossing onto the Jenzano farm will immediately feel safer and might stay and move into the interior. Meanwhile, the author has reached out to neighbors to nearly double the acreage under voluntary QDM.

pole on the opening few days of rifle season was full of spikes, 4-points and the occasional 8-point. This practice went on for years.

It wasn't until 1997 that things started to change. Several of us who bowhunted began to pass up smaller bucks in the hopes of tagging one of those 100-inch "monsters." We tried unsuccessfully to connect with them, but we knew they were out there. Just because they eluded us didn't mean they weren't there. Several years later, I finally convinced my father and the other members of the "old guard" to follow self-imposed antler restrictions. While the bowhunters stuck to an 8-point or better philosophy, the gun hunters agreed to a 6-point restriction. It was a start.

This practice went on for several years on what we referred to as a trial basis. We killed some better deer than in years past, but the largest was still around that 100-inch mark. I remember praying that someone would shoot a really big buck so they could see that the restrictions would work; and then it happened. In 1999, my brother shot a 130-inch 10-point and a member of the "old guard" shot a 118-inch 9-point. Both deer were 3½ years old and, more importantly, both hunters passed up smaller legal bucks the morning before shooting their bigger deer. Success was at our doorstep, all we needed to do was plant some clover, pass up small bucks, and we could shoot 130-inch deer every year. Right?

No exactly. It soon became apparent that 1999 was just a lucky year. Sure, we still saw better bucks than the decade before, but we had hit the ceiling of our management program and needed a little help.

The Next Level

It was clear to us that we had raised the level of quality of the deer herd on the property with the use of food plots. However, at that time we were only planting a few small plots of clover, and the rest was corn and buckwheat. We really didn't have an understanding of year-round nutrition. It was also clear that we needed to hold more deer on the property. We had the 30 acres of overgrown Douglas fir, but we needed the rest of the property to hold deer as well.

The habitat on our farm in those days was much like many of the farms and woods of north-central Pennsylvania. We had some thick spots, but we also had a lot of big hemlock stands with very little understory. In 1999, my father harvested several sections of timber, and over the next few years we watched as the habitat transformed into a deer bedding haven. We were not looking at what the new growth consisted of or attempting to harvest the timber in ways to enhance deer movement. We only knew that three years after the woods were cut, they were thick with briars, and thicker is always better.

We cut all of our timber stands over the next five years. Some stands were nothing more than "pipestems" as we called them – 3- to 6-inch diameter trees about 20 years old with little to no timber

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value. The areas were void of underbrush because of the closed canopy overhead, and our deer would simply move through these sections on their way to our neighbors' properties. These sections of pipestems were adjacent to our fields and food plots, and if you didn't catch a deer moving off the field and through these sections first thing in the morning, you could forget about seeing a deer in them the rest of the day. Some sections we cut ourselves. Others were cut for pulp by loggers. The result in three years was that we had created about 25 acres of briars and saplings that were impenetrable. By 2002 our farm consisted of thick, early successional forest, clover and corn plots, and overgrown Christmas trees. Most importantly, several of our neighbors began to join the program. While they were not passing up all the deer I would have liked, they were harvesting or thinning their mature timber and planting food plots for the purpose of deer management. To our property, we added another 400 acres under Quality Deer Management through four different property owners. Forming a QDM Cooperative with these neighbors was vital to our success.



Wildlife biologist Jason Snavelly (left) tours the Jenzano farm with the author (center) and Jim Melvin Jr. of Rhode Island, who owns 60 acres adjoining the Jenzano farm. Throughout the area, neighbors are following the Jenzanos' lead by harvesting or thinning stands of mature timber and creating new early successional habitat.

With the travel patterns of local deer and the lay of the land, we were all essentially hunting and managing the same deer. While we knew we still couldn't completely protect all young bucks even with the additional acreage, the Cooperative was a kick start to

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push us to the next level.

Several years ago I contacted a local wildlife biologist, Jason Snavelly of Droptine Wildlife Consulting. Even though I read every publication I could get my hands on and believed I was on the right track, I felt I needed an outside source to visit the property and see if there were more techniques for improvement.

One of the first questions Jason asked me and a couple other members of our hunting group was “Where is the hole in your whiskey barrel?” I guess we looked a little puzzled at first, but we understood that he was asking us to identify the weakest link in our QDM program. The answer? Our own hunters.

Shooting the wrong deer is a problem for a lot of camps and continues to be a problem for ours. Our own antler restrictions got us to the point where we had many more 2½-year-old deer on the property. Many of these deer were killed by our guys because they carried 6 or 8 points. Some were 100-inch 2½-year-olds that we referred to as “the golden geese” because they had so much potential as 3½-year-olds. There were several of us that spoke of the deer on our property in terms of age, not antler points. But to reach the next level, as Jason pointed out, all of our hunters needed to look for age, not points.

Over the next several years, I continued to lobby the other hunters to pass on the 8-points that were still 1½ years old. By this time Pennsylvania’s mandatory antler restrictions were saving the small bucks, but we had a lot of immature deer on the property that were carrying decent 6-, 7- and 8-point racks. These healthy yearlings were the result of our habitat enhancement and food plot programs. No longer were we just planting corn, buckwheat and a little clover. We had begun to think in terms of year-round nutrition. The Cooperative allowed us to plant approximately 20 percent of our total area in food plots. With Jason’s help, we expanded our varieties of plantings that were suitable to the northern area we hunt. Plots of clover varieties suited to our northern winters covered the property. Chicory plots were introduced to ensure we provided good nutrition during the dry, hot summer months. Warm-season annuals like lablab and cowpeas were coupled with cool-season annuals like winter wheat, oats, brassica and Austrian winter peas. We swamped our deer in food!



Recently, the author has added herd monitoring and data collection to his efforts, which has allowed him to get a handle on fawn recruitment, sex ratios, and overall population health. Management decisions are no longer based on the “best guess.”

Success is Not Measured in Antler Inches

By Jason Snavelly

The Jenzano property in north-central Pennsylvania is truly a model property for a small-acreage QDM program. They have a focused habitat management plan, a herd-monitoring and management plan, and, perhaps most importantly, a group of like-minded hunters who have a knack for building relationships with neighboring landowners. If you have these things, you don’t need thousands of acres to produce a successful QDM program and satisfied hunters. Jim continues to strive to learn from mistakes, build on success, and make improvements each year. The cooperating landowners who make up what I now call the “Jenzano Management Area” control more than 400 acres. Jim’s ability to put together a growing QDM Cooperative with surrounding property owners has allowed him to meet his objectives in fast-forward fashion.

I didn’t encourage Jim to share this article with his fellow QDMA members because he is consistently harvesting large-antlered bucks. I did it because I feel he represents a significant portion of hunters and QDMA members. From the first telephone call I received from Jim, I could tell I was dealing with a sharp deer manager. The fortunate truth is, because of organizations like QDMA, sportsmen and women are much more educated today than ever before. It’s the whitetail resource that ultimately benefits from this.

I recently received an e-mail from Jim. I could feel his excitement as he described the bucks that the property’s hunters had harvested after the first three days of the two-week Pennsylvania rifle season. You could tell Jim was proud of the bucks that were harvested by his guys – they were proof the QDM program was working. After detailing the story of how each buck was killed, who shot it, its age, weight and B&C score, what it was doing when it was killed, and whether or not it had been captured on one of the trail cameras, Jim ended his e-mail with “Oh yeah, I also attached a photo of my Saskatchewan buck.” While he was proud of his successful hunt for a gorgeous, dark-antlered, high-scoring Canadian buck, he mentioned it only briefly as an afterthought. Most of his e-mail dealt with his Pennsylvania farm. Clearly, success for deer managers like Jim is not measured in inches of antler but in the satisfaction and reward that comes from actively managing deer and their habitat.

I believe the hardest tradition to break among hunters is the belief that if you don’t have a thousand acres or more, you can’t manage and improve the deer herd. While we have made many improvements in my home state of Pennsylvania, “I better shoot them or someone else will” is still a widespread belief in many camps. This article is a brief history of how one camp overcame these barriers.

We already felt we had some of the best cover around and now we knew we had the best food around as well. We had succeeded in making our Cooperative lands more attractive than the neighboring properties. While our deer would still spend time outside of the Cooperative, we felt the law of averages would be on our side. The more time they were within our borders, the more chances we would have to harvest or protect them.

If you can’t control what your neighbors are going to shoot, try to make your property so attractive that deer do not want to leave. On our Cooperative, we created bucks that were fat and lazy. They bedded in the thick cover close to our food sources and didn’t need to travel long distances.

Our Christmas tree sanctuaries and other thick bedding areas are located adjacent to many of our food plots. Our deer can be

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in some of the thickest cover on the farm and within 50 yards of a food plot at the same time. Another important recommendation that Jason gave us was to make the entire perimeter of our property a “wall” of dense cover. We wanted deer to “feel” the difference when they entered our property, immediately sensing safety and protective cover.

The Results

Over the past few seasons, we have taken four 3½-year old bucks; three of the bucks were over the 120-inch mark, with the largest being a 130-inch 9-point. The most interesting thing about these harvests was they were killed between the last day of gun season and the second week of January. These older bucks were making it through bow season and the intense gun season. Amazingly, all four of the 3½-year-olds tipped the scales at over 225 pounds, with the largest pushing 240! We attribute this to year-round nutrition.

Not too many years ago only one in 100 deer in Pennsylvania lived to the age of 3½. At the time of this writing, we are now following at least five bucks of that age on our small property and one that is estimated to be 4½. This was unheard of 10 years ago.

We continue to manage the habitat, and we now use small, protected, woodland food plots in the core of the property to continue attracting fat and lazy bucks. We do not hunt these plots – we simply want deer to bed close to these plots in the hope they will spend the majority of their time within our borders.

We are also beginning to keep meticulous records, another area that Jason pointed out as a deficiency. With the use of trail-camera surveys, hunter observation reports and strict harvest

records, we are getting a handle on our buck-to-doe ratio, fawn recruitment and the overall health of our herd. We can now use this data to make educated decisions for doe harvests rather than merely hoping we are shooting enough does, or worrying that we are shooting too many.

What started out as a traditional Pennsylvania deer camp has turned into something quite different. We still don’t have the bucks of Iowa, Illinois or the Canadian prairie, but our farm is a gem for north-central Pennsylvania. We now have a realistic chance of killing Pope & Young-class deer. It didn’t happen overnight, and sometimes it was by luck, but we kept striving to reach the next level. If you own or lease a small tract like we do, learn from our experience. Make your property more attractive by creating thick bedding cover both on the interior and the perimeter of your property. Create interior food plots that are not hunted. Offer a diversity of foods that varies from surrounding lands so deer seek food sources on your property. On small properties, you are playing the odds hoping that the buck you’re looking for is spending the majority of his time on your small piece of real estate rather than your neighbors. You can put the odds in your favor by implementing some of the management practices we have incorporated into our management program.



About the Authors: Jim Jenzano is a QDMA member and business owner from Gap, Pennsylvania, whose passion for managing quality deer is as strong as his passion for hunting them. Jim dedicates this article in memory of his dad, Joseph Jenzano.

Jason Snavelly is a wildlife biologist, QDMA member, and owner of Droptine Wildlife Consulting in Pennsylvania.

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