

**Division of Wildlife Conservation**  
Eddie Grasser, Director  
Region I — Southeast Alaska  
802 3<sup>rd</sup> Street  
Douglas, AK 99824



**Alaska Department of Fish and Game**  
Doug Vincent-Lang, Commissioner  
PO Box 115526  
Juneau, AK 99811-5526  
[www.adfg.alaska.gov](http://www.adfg.alaska.gov)

## **Advisory Announcement**

*For immediate release*

**CONTACT:**  
**Sitka Area Biologist Steve Bethune:**  
**907- 747-8449**

### **Spring surveys provide insight on deer winter mortalities**

SITKA — Recent body condition and mortality surveys throughout GMU 4 (Admiralty, Baranof, and Chichagof islands) indicate that despite the early onset of winter 2021-22, Sitka black-tailed deer seem to have weathered the winter with limited effect on the population. In a memorandum released May 3, Alaska Department of Fish and Game Sitka Area Biologist Steve Bethune said diligent hunters and wildlife enthusiasts should expect reasonable opportunity for success when it comes to hunting and viewing deer this upcoming season.

Deer body condition surveys are one way wildlife biologists monitor how deer fared over the winter, when heavy snows cover vegetation and make movement and finding food difficult. Deer spotted on the beach during boat surveys are assigned a body condition score of zero (dead) through five (excellent), based on an established protocol. This year 123 deer were scored. Overall body condition score for all ages and sexes was 3.28. This overall score was lower than the 2021 score of 3.63 and similar to the 2020 score of 3.3. Female deer averaged 3.52; bucks averaged 3.00; fawns averaged 3.25; and yearling deer averaged 2.73.

Deer mortality surveys are conducted by walking beaches and adjacent forest fringes on pre-established mile-long transects. ADF&G staff documented carcasses of deer that succumbed to malnutrition, which were identified by bone marrow composition. ADF&G staff surveyed 35 beach transects on Admiralty, Catherine, Kruzof, Chichagof and Baranof islands and found a total of 29 mortalities or 0.76 dead deer per mile of beach. That number was higher than 2021 results (0.1 mortalities per mile), but similar to 2020 surveys (0.65 deer per mile). However, when compared to the record winter of 2006-2007, these numbers are far lower. That spring, biologists counted an average of 3.8 mortalities per mile.

From 2013 to 2021, much of northern Southeast Alaska, which includes GMU 4, experienced average to mild winters, which bodes well for deer populations as they are able to retain valuable fat reserves until snow melts in spring and new, nutrient-rich vegetation begins to grow.

“This past winter appeared to be on track for a severe winter classification in December,” Bethune

said. "Fortunately, snowfalls throughout much of GMU 4 receded in January and did not end up being severely deep in most watersheds. The fall 2021 deer harvest was higher than recent years because the December snowfall made deer vulnerable to hunters at lower elevations and on beaches."

Bethune also said adult deer appear to have survived the winter relatively well, but fawns accounted for 83 percent of the tallied mortalities. Fawns enter the winter with lower fat reserves than adult deer, making them most vulnerable to winters with deep snow.

"However, I think deer densities remain high throughout Unit 4, except in localized watersheds," he said.

Overall, Bethune didn't identify any conservation issues or the need for any changes in seasons or bag limits to maintain sustainable hunting opportunities for all Unit 4 user groups.

The body condition and mortality surveys were conducted as a joint effort by ADF&G's Sitka and Juneau/Douglas-based staff and trained volunteers.

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