**When is the rut in your neck of the woods?**

Each year we receive phone calls or e-mails from hunters wanting to know when the rut begins, ends and/or peaks in their neck of the woods. It is not an easy question to accurately answer, especially in Florida, which is notorious for having a wide range of dates marking the magical peak breeding dates of deer.

The phenomenon known as the rut is highly anticipated by hunters each year because bucks lose their famous sense of self-preservation and begin covering a lot of territory seeking out does in estrus – the 48-hour period of time during which females are receptive to breeding.

The peak of the rut is those wonderful few days when the majority of does in a given area come into estrus. Does may breed over a period of a month, but there is usually one week during that time when bucks suddenly forget how to act and seem to be in constant search of that perfect girlfriend.

A brief lapse in judgement gives hunters a chance to harvest their buck of a lifetime when he seems to need only water and a hot female – not necessarily in that order.

Many believe the peak of the rut lasts around two weeks, but pinpointing exactly when that period begins and ends is much like hitting a spooked buck sprinting through an overgrown oak hammock.

A particular area’s buck-to-doe ratio, the deer herd’s age structure, climate and temperature conditions, genetics and hunting pressure can all play a role in the rut.

Biologists generally agree that the rut is tied to the length of daylight in a 24-hour period (light hours per day or photoperiod) and the local climate.

However, many argue over if the deer in different areas breed at different times of the year and that deer in those general areas breed at approximately the same time each year.

The breeding period (from when the first doe is bred to when the last doe is bred) can last as long as 60 days. Peak breeding may begin about 10 days before the peak breeding dates given and may last up to 10 days after that date, so it is not necessarily confined to one week.

One sure-fire way to find out when the rut occurs in the woods you plan to hunt is to contact a wildlife biologist in your area. He or she should have information and historical harvest data that indicates the general period of time when peak breeding and the rut historically occurs.

But, for this hunting season the best information can be found in the woods. Hunters may begin to hear the rattling horns of battling bucks, see more bucks in daylight hours, does will begin acting spooky and skittish (more than usual), moving at a faster clip like they are being chased.

This is the time when hunters should plan on being in their stands for longer periods of time and resist the urge to hunt only the first few hours after daylight and the last few hours before dusk.

Bucks mark their territory, sending “love notes” to does and warning signs to other bucks through scrapes and rubs before the rut arrives. Don’t rely on the buck sign you saw earlier in the year, because bucks are unlikely to be in the same area.

Instead check out food plots and bedding areas where the does are hanging out. A hot buck will soon be on her trail (tail).

In Florida’s Northwest Zone archery season begins Oct. 13, while bow season in the South Zone opened Sept. 8, and on Sept. 22 in the Central Zone when the summer heat and high humidity was still baking the woods.

The peak of the rut generally occurs in December and January in the Panhandle, well after bow season in the Northwest Zone (Oct. 13-Nov. 11).

In the Central Zone the peak of the rut historically occurs from mid-September to mid-October, but due to the large area of Florida included in the Central Zone, dates vary from late September to early November.

One of the main reasons for a drastically staggered archery season in Florida is to allow hunters to be in the woods during the rut.

Predicting the rut in the South

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**HUNTING THE RUT? –** Available breeding chronology data and historical harvest information compiled by the FWC helps predict the historical start of the “rut” in specific areas of Florida. The dates listed above (Northwest Zone), at right (Central Zone) and below right (South Zone) are estimated dates indicating the historical start of the rut.
Zone may be close to impossible with peak breeding dates ranging from late July to August and September and even October in one area.

Biologists say that the South Region has some deer in rut and some fawns being born almost any month of the year.

Basically, there may not be a defined “peak of the rut” in the South Zone, but the good news is that rutting activity will be occurring throughout the archery, general gun and muzzleloading season.

Regardless of exactly when the rut will hit your area, the only guaranteed way of knowing and taking advantage of it, is to be in the woods!

For more information from FWC biologists in your area, contact one of the following individuals:

Northwest Region – Cory Morea at 850-627-1773 or cory.morea@myfwc.com;

North Central Region – John Ault at 386-758-0525 or john.ault@myfwc.com;

Northeast Region – Jen Williams at 352-732-1229 or jen.williams@myfwc.com;

Southwest Region – Jason Burton at 352-540-6096 or jason.burton@myfwc.com;

South Region – Wes Seitz at 561-625-5122 or wes.seitz@myfwc.com.