

2017 Acorn Production Varies By Region

Over 200,000 hunters will take to the woods this fall in search of deer, turkey, and bear as well as a host of smaller game species. Their success will depend in part on their opportunities to scout areas they can hunt and find areas with preferred game foods. At the top of the list for deer, turkey, and bear are acorns, acorns from white oak trees in particular. Wildlife will concentrate in areas where acorns are available, making them hard to find and leaving some hunters to wonder if game populations are low. Under these conditions hunter success rates decline. Conversely, when acorn crops fail, wildlife search forests and fields for other food sources which makes them easier for hunters to find thereby increasing hunter odds of success.

Given the importance of acorns to wildlife and relevance to hunter success and satisfactions, the Department annually monitors acorn crops across the state. In addition to Department staff, personnel from the Department of Forestry, Department of Conservation and Recreation-State Parks, Smithsonian Conservation Center, Natural Resources Conservation Service, several military bases, and US Army Corps of Engineers participate in the surveys.

Results of the recent surveys show both red and white oak acorn crops were below their long-term averages at the state level. However, there was wide geographic variation in production across the state. In the western Mountain Regions, both white and red oak production was average or above average in the North Mountain Region, clearly the best in the state. District Biologist Fred Frenzel reported the highest estimates of both red and white oak in the Lee Ranger District of the George Washington National Forest. Moderate to good red oak acorn numbers were found in the Central Mountain Region but white oak acorns were scarce. In the South Mountain Region, both white and red oak crops were light.

Unlike the Mountain Regions, white oak production was fair-good in the Piedmont Regions from Maryland to North Carolina. High white oak acorn production was found in the Hardware River Wildlife Management Area (WMA), James River WMA, and Fairystone Farms WMA. Unfortunately, red oak acorns were hard to find in any (North, Central, South) of the Piedmont Ranges.

The pattern of higher production in the northern sections of the Mountain Ranges was also seen in the Tidewater Region. Both white and red oak acorns were available in the North Tidewater Region. Low acorn counts were reported in the South Tidewater Region.

Readers should know that mast abundance ratings are intended to reflect the region averages; however, mast crops are rarely uniform across a Region. Acorn abundance can vary among local areas that are only 10-15 miles apart. And, there is no such thing as a complete acorn failure; if you search hard enough you will find some trees with acorns in a year that is otherwise considered a bust. So scouting is helpful for hunters to find those areas with acorns. Readers should also be aware that white oak acorns are preferred over red oak because they have fewer tannins, a compound with a bitter, gritty taste. White oak acorns are also smaller than red oak acorns – an important consideration for wild turkeys. Both attributes, taste and size, result in preference for white oak acorns which translates to white oak acorns disappearing from the forest floor earlier than red oak. So it is not only important to know where acorns are abundant in September and October, but also what species of acorns are prevalent. Scouting will be particularly important as many game species are enjoying some species of acorns and their movements and home ranges are likely to be dictated by the abundance of these important foods.

Hopefully the information provided above will help hunters know what to expect in the Region (s) they hunt.