In 1973, I took a flight from West Virginia to Texas, where I had just been hired as an assistant professor of forest wildlife management at Stephen F. Austin State University. My flight path extended southwest, taking me right down the Mississippi River for a large portion of the trip. Ironically, that was perhaps the last time the river flooded to the epic proportions we saw in 2011. The Mississippi looked more like one of the Great Lakes than a river.

"What on earth happened to the deer?" I pondered, peering down at the water. Thirty-eight years later, I now know the answer to that question.

In nearly 40 years of researching whitetails, I have learned they are perhaps the most adaptable big game animal in the world, with a range that extends from the tropical forests far to the south of our border to the very edge of the tundra in Canada's northern territories. Ask most biologists about whitetails and you commonly will hear that the species can get along just about anywhere.

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DEALING WITH COLD
Whitetails are remarkably adapted to cold. Low temperatures seldom are the culprit in winter mortality; snow deserves the blame for most winter deaths. Whitetails “try” to reach late fall with as much stored fat as possible. They actively seek foods high in carbohydrates (and some fat) to accomplish the task, their systems converting the energy stored in carbohydrates to fat via rumen organisms.

Acorns and other fruits, plus nutritious weeds are critical to this task. Fall weeds germinate in the fall, grow while conditions are still suitable, then become dormant until spring. These plants are most nutritious in the fall. Obviously, it is the fall plants and fruits that supply the resources to store winter fat. Without these critical plants and fruits, deer are hard pressed to make it through the winter.

Significant snow cover then becomes a serious concern. If native fall weeds are under too much snow, or if there is a fruit crop failure, deer are left with the woody stems of browse plants to survive on once their fat reserves are depleted.

At Turtle Lake Hunting Club near Hillman, Michigan, we use a two-pronged approach to managing for extremes. Snowfall there sometimes on the ground, which is highly attractive and beneficial to our deer. Later, the same timber stands produce nutritious weeds and browse the coming growing season.

We also do what we call “banking” of planted forages. We recommend protecting about half your forage with electric fencing, then opening these plots later in the year. If we receive adequate snow over the plots before opening the fences, there will be a significant buildup of green forage beneath the snow. Deer paw down to these foods. We even blade our roads so deer can move around from plot to plot and timber harvest to timber harvest even in deep snow.

In areas where feeding still is legal, there is nothing that beats a sound feeding program, as long as it is coupled with sound native forage and herd management. I recommend one free-choice feeder per 100 acres, providing a high-energy pelleted ration or even corn. As with banked forage plots, you should make it easy for your deer to move about the property.