

## **Your Wildlife Management Area Visitor Data is IMPORTANT!!!!**

**By Brad Holder, Northwest WMA Regional Biologist**

Author of Sherlock Holmes, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, said, “It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data”. Data’s importance to assessment, understanding, decision-making, and ultimately to achieving objectives cannot be overstated.

The Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks (MDWFP) relies heavily on different types of data to guide adaptive wildlife and visitor-use management on our statewide system of 55 wildlife management areas (WMAs). As a WMA visitor, you play a crucial part in that management by submitting required data during each WMA visit. You may have heard the adage: “Garbage in, garbage out” as it pertains to data and results. It is important that the type(s) of data collected provide the MDWFP a reasonable chance of adequate evaluation and understanding, and data must also be of sufficient quality and quantity. If any of these aspects are lacking, one risks a less reliable approximation of actuality, poor decisions, and undesired outcomes. The fact data submission is required of every single visitor, from the youngest to the oldest, for each WMA visit should impress upon you its importance. So let us get into more of the what, why, when, and how regarding WMA visitor data.

For first-time WMA visitors, the different types of data required and the process by which you submit data may seem a little daunting. However it’s really not that complicated, and it won’t take you long to get into the swing of things. So what types of data are you tasked with submitting when visiting a WMA? Personal information is always required (i.e. name, physical address, phone number, email address, demographic information, vehicle tag number, etc.) as well as your intended activity (i.e. hunting, bird watching, fishing, hiking, etc.). If hunting, it is necessary to report the game species pursued (turkey, waterfowl, squirrel, rabbit, deer, etc.) and number of animals harvested (zero to daily bag limit). Turkey hunters are also required to submit observation data regardless of harvest success. For each deer harvested, the MDWFP requires hunters to submit additional data (i.e. name, date of harvest, WMA, sex, age, weight, antler measurements, etc.) at deer data collection stations located on each WMA. All instructions, supplies, and tools needed to collect this information are available on-site. Turkey and waterfowl hunters are encouraged to answer a few hunt-related survey questions following each hunt.

You may be wondering why the WMA visitor data you submit is so important. As public, multi-use areas, WMAs receive many different uses from lots of people. The data you submit helps the MDWFP determine who is using our WMAs, how often, and for which purposes. The visitor contact information we receive can be used to send out WMA use and satisfaction surveys. Generally, the primary use of WMAs is hunting. Submission of required hunting data helps the MDWFP estimate local population trends of game species, determine population health, track hunting pressure, evaluate habitat management, monitor diseases, and adjust opportunity within the limits of WMA size and wildlife resources. Visitor data plays a critical role in the crafting and effective evaluation of regulations. It’s not uncommon for proposed statewide hunting regulations to first be piloted on WMAs. Buck antler regulations, mandatory turkey harvest reporting, and truncated turkey seasons are some recent

examples. The data you submit during your WMA visit also helps ensure safety and compliance by allowing MDWFP personnel to know who is currently on a WMA and for what purpose.

So how do I submit required WMA data? In addition to having the appropriate hunting licenses, each WMA visitor must submit the required data previously discussed through the WMA check-in and out process. You have two options for completing this process:

**MDWFP WMA Check-in/out App.** Yep, there's an app for that. It's free and can be downloaded from Apple App or Google Play Store. A helpful instructional video for the WMA Check-in/out app is available on our website at: <http://www.mdwfp.com/license/wma-check-in-app/>. After downloading to your mobile device, create your user account while in an area with good internet service. Multiple accounts can be set up on one device, allowing multiple people to check in through that device. This feature is very useful when accompanied by a partner or youth. Everyone must check in to the WMA through the app prior to their WMA use and check out when leaving the WMA. To check out and complete the process, simply return to the app, fill in a few blanks, and tap the "submit" button.

OR

**WMA Daily Visitor Permit Card.** These physical versions of the WMA Check-in/Out App are provided at a designated permit station on each WMA. There is an A and B part to each card. Complete the front and back of part A, and place it in the box at the permit station before you engage in your activity. Also prior to your activity, complete the front of part B and place it on the dash of your vehicle so that the information is easily viewed. At the end of your visit, complete the back of part B and place it in the same box you deposited part A.

AND

**Biological Deer Data.** As previously discussed, biological deer data is required from each harvested deer in addition to recording the harvest via the app or permit card. This data must be collected and submitted before the deer is removed from the WMA. Deer data collection stations along with instructions and supplies are provided on WMAs.

Remember to thoroughly and accurately complete the WMA check-in and out process. Your data's value to WMA management and visitor safety can't be overstated. It's also the law. Remember to familiarize yourself with the regulations for the WMA you wish to visit, preferably before your visit. WMA-specific regulations and maps can be found at information stations on the WMA, at <http://www.mdwfp.com/wildlife-hunting/wma/>, or through the primary MDWFP app (<http://www.mdwfp.com/license/mdwfp-app/>) also available at Apple App or Google Play store.