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Losing the Battle With Deer

By Alex Scofield/The Almanac

June 25, 2003

Deer Digits

- 300,000
Estimated number of whitetail deer in Maryland
- 4,229
Deer-vehicle collisions reported in Maryland in 2001
- 2,127
Deer-vehicle collisions reported in Montgomery County in 2001
- 13
Personal injury deer-vehicle collisions reported in Montgomery County in 2002
- \$1,000
Cost to treat one doe with experimental contraceptives
- 10
Years since citizen concern led to creation of county task force on deer management
- 8
Height in feet in permissible fencing, recently increased from 6.5
- 7
Years since managed hunts began in Montgomery County
- 1
Year since managed hunts began in Blockhouse Point Conservation Park
- 88
Deer harvested during last year's hunt at Blockhouse Point
- 140
Deer per square mile in "hotspot" regions in Potomac

GET INVOLVED

Homeowners may attend workshops on protecting property from deer damage, including the latest information on repellents, fencing and vegetation management, as well as educational information on deer impacts and solutions. For information on upcoming workshops call the Montgomery County Extension Service at 301-590-9638.





Photo by Pam Brooks/The Almanac
Why did the deer cross MacArthur Boulevard? To enter Great Falls National Park.

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Taller fences might deter some deer from a tasty garden, but Mary Lou Relle has seen the deer find other ways to invade her yard.

"They can climb under the lowest rail in a split-rail fence, 18 inches off the ground," said Relle, a Potomac resident and avid gardener. "They go on their elbows like they're training for military camp."

Relle is not the only one who feels like she's battling the deer.

"It's an ongoing thing. You're almost at war with this situation. You can't let your defenses down," said Ken Kasprzak, manager at Behnke Nursery.

In Potomac, homeowners, farmers and county officials try to stave off the assault of a booming regional deer population.

POTOMAC IS NOW a certified "hotspot" for deer. In Fiscal Year 2003, 38 vehicle collisions with deer were reported in Potomac. On average, 140 deer per square mile were recorded in several separate Potomac locations.

At some locations in town, the sight of deer at dusk is almost as reliable as the sunset. Steve DeLanoy, a member of the C&O Canal Volunteer Bike Patrol, is accustomed to seeing them on his route. "They're smart enough usually to get out of the way," said DeLanoy, who has never seen or been in a deer-bicycle collision. "The really tame ones, though, are too busy eating to notice you."

"As they get used to people, their fear decreases," said George Timco, an urban biologist with the state's Natural Resources department.

"Even when we have groups of noisy children, the deer will sometimes show up," said Marian Ewell, a naturalist at the Locust Grove Nature Center. "The deer walk across the meadow and don't pay much attention to us. ... I grew up in Northern Virginia, and a deer was a very exciting thing to see. You'd only see them way out in the country."

BEN ALLNUTT DOESN'T want to sound like a curmudgeon, but as owner of Homestead Farm in Poolesville, he is pessimistic about solving the damage deer do to his crops.

"They're absolutely devastating. They're like rats with antlers," Allnutt said. Nothing works. Allnutt can put up electric fencing, keep dogs, use repellent or shoot at the deer, but the deer keep coming back.

Allnutt is not alone.

"We have some farmers in the county that are just abandoning fields," said Rob Gibbs, chairman of the county's Deer Management Work Group.

People living in areas of high deer populations often have concerns about Lyme disease or deer droppings, said Gibbs.

"Deer are just fouling people's yards to the point that people feel they can't use their own yards," said Gibbs.

WHILE "LETHAL" deer management methods such as hunting draw the most attention, Gibbs said that the non-lethal responses are more important. "There aren't any sweeping, silver-bullet answers [but] the educational component, I think, is the most important thing," he said.

"This year, the focus is what we can all do in our own yards."

Until recently, county regulations required fences to be six-and-a-half feet or shorter. But now, plastic mesh fences up to eight feet high are allowed, to help discourage the deer. Farmers are permitted to use any type of fencing.

Allnutt has electric fencing on his farm, but said it is not enough of an obstacle for the deer. "They jump over it, hurdle through it, or they can take the pain for the gain," Allnutt said.

Various forms of repellent are available to farmers and gardeners. They range from bags of soap to coyote urine to human hair.

"By and large, the repellants work," said Doug Tragoning of the county's Agricultural Services department. But Tragoning added that repellants reduce deer browsing; they do not eliminate it. Allnutt isn't as sold on them. He has used repellent bags, which have had minimal effect, he said.

MANAGED HUNTS have helped, said Gibbs. "In those specific sites [where hunts were authorized], automobile accidents have been reduced," he said.

Among the parks where managed hunts began in 1996, deer-vehicle collisions on roads near Seneca Creek State Park have fallen from 119 in 1996 to 29 in 2002. Roads near Little Bennett Park were site of 43 deer-vehicle collisions in 1996; seven in 2001.

The Deer Management Work Group recently released its annual report and recommendations for FY '04. Among the conclusions were to continue the hunt at Blockhouse Point. During last year's hunt,

88 deer were harvested at Blockhouse Point.

More than 200 people used to attend the Deer Management Task Force's annual meetings, but fewer than 100 showed up in 2001 and this year's meeting drew fewer than 20 people.

"It's probably not as hot a topic as it was four years ago," said Gibbs. "When we started the program and initiated the first managed hunts, it was a lot more controversial."

"Since we have eliminated the predators ... we have an obligation to keep the population in check," said Ewell.

The county is experimenting with deer contraception in two areas. But the procedure remains prohibitively expensive, at \$1,000 per doe, said Timco.

"What I'm waiting for is for nature to take its course," said Allnutt, who is concerned that nothing short of a plague among the species will solve the problem.

"There's not enough political will for the county to do enough about it. ... The deer don't vote, and they don't give a damn about what the County Council does."

DEER HOTSPOT

Deer hotspots are areas in Montgomery County with the greatest concentration of deer-related impacts — deer-vehicle collisions, crop damage, damage to home landscaping and natural vegetation. Potomac was identified as one of 19 county hotspots by the Deer Management Work Group, due to high numbers of accidents involving deer and cars, crop and landscape damage and citizen complaints.

The working group recommends four methods for managing deer population in Potomac:

- * Educating the public on non-lethal methods of reducing deer damage to personal property.
- * Making improvements to road fencing, signage and design to reduce deer-vehicle collisions at specific locations.
- * Encouraging local community involvement in deer management issues.
- * Encouraging continuation and expansion of lethal deer management on large parcels of private property.

WHERE ARE THE PREDATORS?

Maryland has few natural predators of deer, and Montgomery County is home to even fewer.

- * Gray Wolves — Legitimate deer predators, but no longer native to Maryland
- * Mountain Lions — Also legitimate deer predators, but no longer native to Maryland.
- * Black Bears — Occasionally prey on fawns or sick deer, but are rarely seen in Montgomery County.
- * Coyotes — Occasional predators of deer, coyotes can now be found throughout Maryland, are not numerous enough in Montgomery County to significantly affect the deer population.

WHITETAIL WORDS

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— Rob Gibbs

"Nothing dissuades them. ... If you throw a rock at the deer, the deer eats it."
— Ben Allnutt

"As they get used to people, their fear decreases."
— George Timco

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