

MONTGOMERY

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OUR DEER DILEMMA

How the county is finally winning
the battle of development vs. deer

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The Battle Over Our Deer Dilemma

Archers and marksmen are hunting deer in our neighborhoods and county parks to try to control the population, which in Montgomery County has reached a deer-to-human ratio that is problematic. It appears to be working, but not everyone is happy.

By Rosanne Skirble

Photography by Teddy Fisher, Montgomery Parks

It's early spring and Cheri Winter is exactly where she wants to be – in the woods up a tree.

She arrives at Goshen Recreational Park four hours before sunset and with the skill of a telephone repairman clips into a safety harness attached to a 25-pound Summit Climber that allows her to move confidently into the canopy. She's fond of mature oaks, cherry and maple trees, but on this day she climbs a poplar.

Her camouflage clothing is sprayed with a "calming scent," a bottled concoction of scents and smells that whitetail deer produce while in their bedding areas. Winter fixes the stand, then pulls up a rope with her backpack tied to it; then another rope with her single shot 20-gauge Thompson Center Encore Pro Hunter shotgun.



The 64-year-old retired Maryland National Capital Park Police officer lifts her binoculars and begins scanning a stretch of open land that she knows well, having patrolled the park by horseback and ATV with Park Police Special Operations. She sits, gun at the ready, and waits.

Winter is among a growing number of hunters in Montgomery Parks' Deer Population Management Program that is designed to combat a steadily rising deer population that county officials say is well past the number where humans

and deer can co-exist peacefully. Deer populations throughout the county have reached "levels that exceed the capacity for sustainability of the natural environment," according to Montgomery Parks.

What's more, the huge number of deer has a financial impact. Deer-vehicle collisions are one thing, but deer annually cost county farmers more than \$4 million in lost crops, a figure that doesn't include the financial cost to homeowners who frequently lose plantings to deer.

By the 1990s, the deer population was spiraling out of control in parks and in neighborhoods in concert with a surge in new residents and rapid development. With declining habitat, few natural predators and limited hunting, deer populations have continued to increase in the past 25 years. In addition to hunting within the state's regulated hunting seasons, Winter and other highly-skilled hunters in the county and across the state are "agents" on Deer Management Permits (DMPs) issued by the Maryland



A DEER HAS PICKED THE BRANCHES OF A NEIGHBORHOOD SHRUB CLEAN AND NOW REACHES FOR MORE.

Department of Natural Resources (MDNR) to farmers who need help protecting their crops from deer damage on their land. She and others who participate in the regulated hunting seasons, in managed hunts, and on DMPs hunt all year long on farms, state and county parks and in suburban neighborhoods.

Brian Eyler, deer project leader with the MDNR, says about 60 permits are issued in Montgomery County. Winter participates as an agent on several of them, including one issued to Butler's

Orchard.

She largely works with farmers and on managed hunts. She doesn't roam, none of the hunters does. For safety reasons they shoot from identified trees either with shotgun or bow and arrow. State regulations say that in densely populated areas, only archery hunting is permitted. Under another aspect of the deer management program, Park Police sharpshooters hunt in county parks at night during January and February each year.

"I get out three or four times a

week," Winter says. Last year she harvested 84 deer, which she calls a "slow year," down 10 from 2015 and 2016, respectively. At Goshen she is positioned on parkland leased by Butler's Orchard in accordance with a park program that allows tenants to invite licensed hunters with shotguns to cull the population eating away at the company's bottom line.

Winter says her busiest time of year is during the growing season. She arrives at a farmer's field in the afternoon, four to five hours before sunset to scout a site and then stays put in a tree. "Positioned between two ravines, I got five," she says. At the end of the day she single-handedly drags the 75-to- 80-pound carcasses to her pickup truck. "No 18-wheeler was coming to help me," she laughs.

Deer Seek Refuge in Parks, Suburbs

The battle against deer is waged on many fronts. One is Rachel Carson Conservation Park near Olney, where on this day Ryan Butler, a wildlife ecologist with Montgomery Parks, is surveying deer hotspots. On the trail he's likely to see forest and nesting birds like pileated woodpeckers and scarlet tanagers, but also fox, coyote, river otter, and other small mammals.

Twenty-five years ago, deer were a rare site. But he explains, waves of new residents began to change that picture. Between 1990 and 2016, Montgomery County grew by 40 percent, according to U.S. Census data. Butler says "that led to new roads, water and gas lines, and shrinking (and fragmenting) animal habitat, pushing deer into smaller spaces in county parks and residential neighborhoods." Add to that, deer have no natural predators left in the area like wolves or mountain lions. "Essentially



DEER-VEHICLE ACCIDENTS HAVE GONE DOWN IN SUBURBAN AREAS WHERE THE POPULATION IS BEING CONTROLLED IN COUNTY PARKS.

we set the table for a deer population explosion,” he says.

And, explode it did. By the mid-1990s Rachel Carson Conservation Park averaged 120 deer per square mile – five to six times the number that would allow for a mostly healthy, regenerating forest. Angry citizens began to voice concerns over property damage, tick-related Lyme disease and a surge in deer-related auto and bike collisions.

Faced with these issues, the Montgomery County Council supported establishing a Deer Management Work Group, a multi-agency task force that would monitor and recommend action. Based on their reports the county began

to implement non-lethal interventions like fencing and repellents. Sterilization and contraception were considered too costly and impractical, at least for now.

There is no definitive number for the money the county spends through various departments on deer population control, but Butler says, “Between our botanical gardens, nursery facility, reforestation plantings and so on, spending is considerable and maintenance is required throughout (county property).”

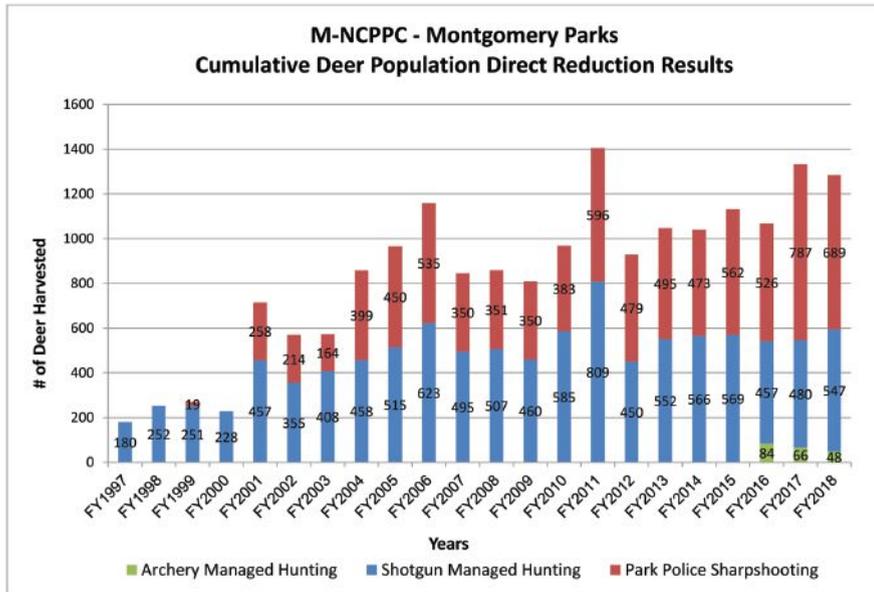
“All along the way, we’ve tried to implement and improve on our strategies, to follow the research and collaborate with other entities in our region,” Butler says. “Hunting, we

reasoned, could fill the role of predator in the ecosystem.”

And what the county spends doesn’t represent the total economic cost of deer damage.

National statistics show that the number of deer-vehicle collisions has gone down for three consecutive years, thanks at least in part to deer management programs. But the average cost per collision continues to go up. Between July 1, 2016 and June 30, 2017, the average cost to a driver involved in a deer-related accident was \$4,179, up from \$3,995 the previous year, according to State Farm.

State Farm also ranks states in which a driver is most likely to hit a deer.



Get Educated

If you've never hunted and want to learn more and are a skilled hunter and want to join a group, or if you want more information about working with hunting groups in your neighborhood, start your search with these sources:

Animal Connections Deer Management

The Animal Connections Deer Management Team (www.acdmt.org) of highly qualified archers specializes working in suburban neighborhoods looking for solutions to help restore ecological balance through good stewardship of natural resources.

Bowhunting Firefighters

According to their stated mission, this small, tight knit group of bowhunters "strives to bring balance to communities through ethical removal of deer, while providing those in need of food." (www.bhffmd.com)

Izaak Walton League of America

The Izaak Walton League (www.iwla.org) is a national conservation organization with five chapters in Montgomery County. The group advocates for clean air and water, healthy fish and wildlife habitat and collaborates with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources to offer hunter safety courses. It also organizes managed deer bowhunting and have gun and practice archery shooting ranges.

Maryland Bowhunters Society

Maryland Bowhunters (www.maryland-bowhunterssociety.org) promotes and preserves bowhunting through education, wildlife management and conservation.

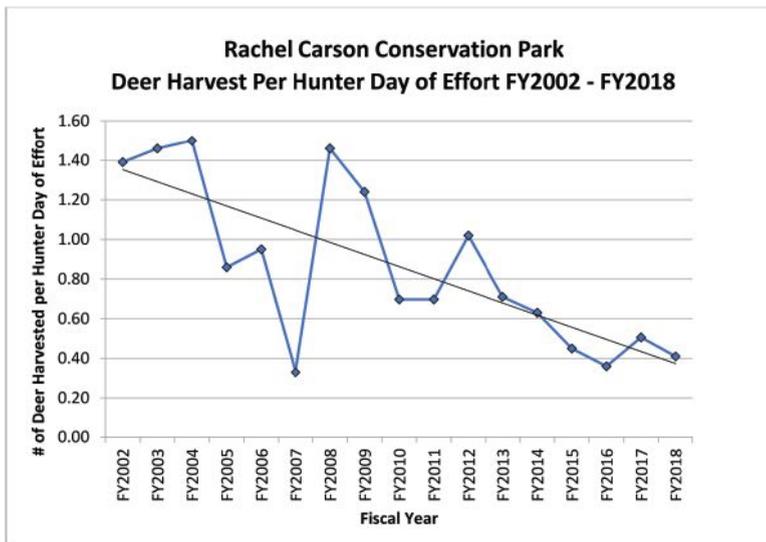
Quality Deer Management Association

The Deer Quality Management Association (www.qdma.com) is a national group, with chapters in Maryland, promoting sustainable, high quality deer populations, wildlife habitats and ethical hunting experiences through research, education, advocacy, and hunter recruitment.

Join the Hunt

All hunters must have a state license unless they are exempt from the requirement as are private property owners hunting their own land. Managed deer hunts on public lands in Montgomery County are sponsored by multiple agencies including the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission and the National Capital Park and Planning Commission Montgomery Parks programs.

The Montgomery Parks' lottery-based managed deer hunting accommodates about 300 participants a year. Pre-screening application packets (www.parksdeermanagement.org) must be submitted before the first Friday in August for the 2018-19 season. Participants under 18 can sign-up, but must be accompanied by a parent or guardian. Volunteers wanting to assist wildlife staff should inquire at MCP-Deermanagement@montgomeryparks.org.



THE HARVEST NUMBERS FOR LOTTERY-BASED MANAGED DEER HUNTING AT RACHEL CARSON CONSERVATION PARK SINCE THE FALL OF 2001 REPRESENT A DECLINING/STABILIZING TREND. GRAPHIC BY MONTGOMERY PARKS DEER MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

West Virginia is No. 1 with 1 in 43 drivers being involved in a collision with a deer. Leaving Hawaii out, drivers are least likely to hit a deer in California (1 in 1,117 drivers). Maryland ranks in the top 20 in these annual surveys at 1 in 127 last year.

Reduce Deer in Their Tracks

The first managed hunts began in Little Bennett Regional Park and the Agricultural History Farm Park in 1996. While shotgun hunting has since expanded to 42 parks, only the lottery-based managed deer hunts are open to the public, with some 350 to 400 applicants each year. Two-thirds end up joining the hunts in five parks.

After a three-year pilot program, archery has been added to the suite of programs. All candidates for both the shotgun and archery hunts are pre-screened, take an online training course and undergo a criminal background check. Certified Park Police sharpshooters under stringent guidelines operate on an internal, pre-determined schedule in 28 parks. Other Montgomery Parks' programs engage pre-selected, highly-qualified hunter groups and match pre-qualified hunters with tenant farmers.

"Safety is our number one priority," Butler says. "In 22 years of deer population management, we have not had one occurrence of personal injury of the public as a result of the department's deer management operations."

According to the Maryland Department of Natural Resources in the 2017-18 hunting season, Maryland hunters yielded 86,542 deer. Montgomery County accounted for 4,783, a number exceeded only by Frederick, Carroll, Baltimore, and

Garrett counties. Between that and the take from the managed deer population program, county officials are seeing an impact.

"We are seeing seedlings survive, where in previous decades nearly nothing was growing on the forest floor," Butler says of places like Rachel Carson Conservation Park. A recent survey also reports 56 percent fewer deer-auto collisions within a half-mile of parks under deer population management compared to parks not under such management.

Suburbs up in Arms

Colesville is a Silver Spring neighborhood between the Northwest and Paint Branch tributaries of the Anacostia River. Five hundred homes on acre-size lots sit on the sloping hills with shared woods stretching like fingers among the properties.

"When we moved in 16 years ago, little did I imagine deer would be mowing down the garden," says one resident, who doesn't want her name used because she has been harassed online and in person. "I watched the herd grow. The deer feast on my flowerbeds and chomp on my rhododendron, euonymus, azalea, and even forsythias," she says, pointing to a browse line in her backyard.

Another neighbor is worried about the natural landscape. "Deer have eaten the understory and habitat for small mammals and nesting birds," she says, pointing out a toppled tree. "With little new growth in the steep ravines, there is little to stop the erosion."

More than a year ago, the two women joined forces to weigh their options. They got advice from landscapers who recommended growing deer resistant plants, deploying

Neighborly Advice from the Front Lines

Ryan Butler with Montgomery Parks says 70 percent of residents surveyed say they support hunting as a deer management tool, but he adds, "Wildlife management is really about people management," which rang true in the Colesville neighborhood that invited archers for the first time during the 2017-18 hunting season and has plans to bring them back in September for another push. Here is some advice from the women who spearheaded the effort, which they admit, wasn't easy and elicited "some hostility from a vocal minority."

- Go door-to-door to meet your neighbors. Misery loves company. Commiserating with deer war stories helps build a sense of community and a shared mission.
- Do your research. Explain your case and listen.
- Follow through, leaving neighbors with paperwork detailing how the hunt would work and answering questions and concerns.
- Map your neighborhood. Know where the deer are and establish circles of neighbors who can work together. You won't get a consensus, but you can make progress.
- Be flexible. Not every yard needs a hunter, but approvals must be collected from abutting property owners.
- Approvals may include only an allowance to track and retrieve a harvested deer. These approvals are important, since no one wants a dead deer to remain on his property.
- Hunters can alter their activities to meet your needs, such as providing notice of hunting activities ahead of time or removing deer from a yard. Animal Connections, for example, puts a tag on a homeowner's front door to let him know when its members are on the property. Deer culled in managed hunts and by Park Police sharpshooters have steadily increased since 1997 due to increased management resources, and program expansion.



BY ROSANNE SKIRBLE

LEFT, A HUNTER WATCHES FOR DEER WITH A MONTGOMERY PARKS OFFICIAL ON THE GROUND BELOW IN RACHEL CARSON CONSERVATION PARK. RIGHT, FORMER MARYLAND NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK POLICE OFFICER CHERI WINTER PACKS HER HUNTING EQUIPMENT INTO RACHEL CARSON CONSERVATION PARK WHERE SHE HAS PARTICIPATED IN MANAGED HUNTS.

hot pepper spray (it smells like rotten eggs) and wrapping young trees with plastic fencing higher than the deer can reach. That was some help, but they realized that population control – hunting not contraception – made the most sense. But they needed their neighbors to agree.

“People tell me that it’s cruel to shoot a deer and that we’ve moved in on their property. Yet they fail to notice that in the 1960s when these homes were built, there were no deer here,” says one of the women.

“There is a very vocal minority who feel we’re imposing on the deer, rather than creating ideal habitat for them, and that we should just leave them alone,” adds the other.

That’s the plan 68-year-old Eilene Cohn of Bethesda would like to see followed. She says she has

“comfortably co-existed with deer” for decades in a home that backs up to Stauton Park. The retired Montgomery County teacher, who “taught compassion for all animals” to students at Strathmore Elementary School, was “livid” when Montgomery Parks began the archery hunting pilot program, which she calls “barbaric and primitive.”

Her outrage led to a 2015 lawsuit in counsel with People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) against the Montgomery County Park and Planning Commission, contending that the program violated the state’s cruelty

code. PETA petitions (which garnered 1,007 signatures) against the practice of bow hunting as a management tool called it “a slaughter, not a hunt, not a harvest.”

While Cohn and PETA lost the case in August 2016 when a summary judgment by Montgomery County Circuit Judge Steven G. Salent ruled against the animal rights organization, the judge wrote that the crossbow program was not “the most humane method reasonably available” to harvest the animals.

At the time PETA’s attorney Jeffrey Kerr released this statement: “Although the judge agreed that slaughtering deer with high-powered crossbows is not ‘the most humane method reasonably available’ to kill deer, he has allowed the county’s cruel program to continue, leaving more Montgomery County deer

to endure slow, agonizing deaths from steel arrows that tear through their flesh and rarely kill them outright.”

On appeal the Maryland Special Court of Appeals upheld the lower court ruling. Despite the setbacks, Cohnn hasn’t given up, and says she intends to hold county officials accountable.

“I’m in for the long haul,” she says, “And there will be an opening, and I’m going to jump on it.”

PETA counsel Jenni James encourages the activist and urges Montgomery County residents to “learn

neighbors who either agreed to host a hunter or would allow the operation to move ahead. They circulated flyers and made promises.

Then they called Mark Eakin, a dedicated hunter who heads the Animal Connections Deer Management Team. ACDMT is a free service for homeowners. Its members are licensed archers and skilled, reliable and experienced bow hunters. Initially, the group uses mapping tools, and then walks the neighborhood to identify the best sites. Automatic game cameras are installed and bait is set out to attract the

“This year we provided just over three tons of high protein meat to Manna Food Center in Gaithersburg. That translates into 27,000 meals,” he says.

Montgomery Parks gifted 26,286 pounds from their hunts to the Capital Area Food Bank. Spokeswoman Hilary Salmon says, “As an organization (Capital Area Food Bank) focused on providing foods that contribute to wellness, we’re pleased to be able to provide this locally-sourced option for lean protein to families in need.”

Winter, the retired Park Police officer, says the deer she takes are given to people of low to modest incomes in the rural area near where she lives in Manchester, Maryland. “Some have lost their jobs and have families to feed,” she says.

Eakin is concerned that the Maryland Department of Natural Resources might issue new rules that could limit the numbers that could be taken during hunting season, which he says could seriously hamper the progress of the deer management programs to balance the ecosystem in parks and suburban areas that deer have embraced.

However, with renewed confidence, the Colesville neighbors have invited hunters to return next season. The two Colesville women say people are beginning to understand that responsible hunting makes ecological sense.

“I’d like to see a restored ecosystem with a healthy deer population that doesn’t overwhelm the landscape,” says one.

Butler with Montgomery Parks agrees: “I am hopeful we can manage the resource to a level that we can live with, where we can co-exist with deer and enjoy seeing them.” 

Living with Deer

Humane Society of the United States

www.humanesociety.org/animals/deer

www.humanesociety.org/animals/deer/tips/deer-in-garden.html?credit=web_id83195613

Montgomery Parks Living with White Tailed Brochure

www.montgomeryparks.org/uploads/docs/deer-in-mc-v2011.pdf

to live alongside deer and to demand that their parks department stop wasting tax dollars on finding new, cruel and ineffective ways to kill them as the population rebounds year after year.”

County officials say the public is increasingly recognizing the issues presented by deer over-abundance.

“This is opening new doors of legislation and cooperation in support of population management,” says Butler. “While sometimes there may seem to be a disconnect, it seems to me that progress is being made and residents, biologists and hunters are coming together to make a difference.”

That’s the page the two Colesville women are on – the deer population and the human population have to be in proportionate numbers for both species to co-exist.

The women started a chat line, went door-to-door and mapped out circles of

deer. On hunt days, hunters climb a tree and remain fixed, staying alert for passing deer. “We wait for a good shot, usually before sunrise or sunset when deer are most active,” Eakin says.

During the 2017-18 season, the Colesville neighborhood put ACDMT and a second group, Bow Hunting Firefighters, in four locations. “Forty-three nuisance deer were hauled away, including 14 behind my house,” one of the women says.

Feeding the Hungry

None of the deer meat from these suburban hunts goes to waste. ACDMT partners with Farmers and Hunters Feeding the Hungry (FHFH), a national nonprofit that donates venison to food banks, soup kitchens and rural families. Lynn Sheldon, a retired U.S. foreign service officer, coordinates the D.C. and Montgomery County FHFH chapter.