

Oakland County Parks Cull Deer

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After another unsuccessful morning hunt I stopped to grab a coffee and a snack and noticed the newspaper stand "thin the herd". I chuckled a little. Must be my luck for the latter part of the season, because evidently there are 24,000 deer in oakland county and growing exponentially. Two weeks left I need to find one of the 24,000 for the freezer! Some very good information in there. I thought you all would enjoy.

<http://spinalcolumnonline.com/deer-remain-in-crosshairs-at-area-parks/>

Deer remain in crosshairs at area parks

Oakland County may be Shangri-la for white-tailed deer. There is an abundance of food and water, adequate shelters of wood lots and undeveloped fields to frolic and roam, relatively mild winter conditions, private land sanctuaries safe from hunters, and nearly no natural predators — which is one of the contributing factors explaining why the local deer population has grown so profusely. As a result, special deer hunts used as a population management tool are being implemented again in some area county parks and Huron-Clinton metroparks.

“Historically, the predators that have kept the deer (population) in check are gone, such as the wolves. Today we have some coyotes that may take some sick or compromised deer, but they certainly don’t provide the overall predator pressure that historically may have been in place,” said Brittany Bird, a natural resource planner for Oakland County.

The Michigan State Police reports that there are more than 60,000 vehicle-deer crashes in Michigan every year. A couple years ago approximately 2,000 of those occurred in Oakland County — one of the highest amounts ever recorded.

According to Joe Robison, a wildlife biologist with the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the deer population in Oakland County is still increasing.

While Oakland County may resemble deer paradise, no environment can handle a species whose numbers are over its biological carrying capacity — the area’s capability to support a species’ sustainability by providing food, water, cover, and space.

And with their prolific reproductive potential, white-tailed deer have the ability to quickly overwhelm an area, reaching numbers that are completely unsustainable by the environment. Does have the ability to reproduce within their first year. Once they are older than 3-years-old, the does usually produce twins and triplets.

Typically, when controlling the deer population by lethal methods, does are the targeted deer because even though it takes two to reproduce, one buck can fertilize many does. Each doe is capable of producing multiple offspring; therefore, the fewer does, the less potential for more fawns.

According to the DNR, the ideal number of deer per square mile is 15, based on biological carrying capacity. After that number is exceeded, the vegetation in a given area and the deer themselves experience harm. As such, it is sometimes necessary for humans to manage the deer population.

Deer herd densities in excess of the DNR’s recommended limits can result in increased propensity of deer disease, poor individual deer health, starvation, and high incidence of roadside mortality.

Furthermore, there are ecological and agricultural threats to consider, as well.

“Overbrowsing becomes a problem. The deer eat more food than is available. There is also damage to shrubs and trees, especially in an urban setting,” Robison said.

According to Oakland County Parks Natural Resources Stewardship Program, overbrowsing can alter the structure and composition of plant communities. The damage to the natural community can be seen by how long it takes the native forage plants to regenerate. Many can require up to 10 years to recover, and that’s only after the deer population is controlled.

Deer have the potential to introduce and spread invasive species, as well, by eating the preferred native species, while serving as dispersal conduits of invasive species along the game trails.

There are an estimated 24,000 deer in Oakland County, according to the DNR, which is able to estimate the deer population using a couple different techniques, including aerial surveys, mortality and reproduction rates, as well as the state police records on the number of deer hit by road vehicles.

With the absence of predators, unmanaged deer herds frequently exceed the land’s carry capacity in urbanized areas.

Another reason for the large deer population, according to Robison, may be the lack of opportunity to hunt in certain human populated areas.

“Over population (of deer) could be a result of non-huntable areas in townships or hunting restrictions in city environments,” Robison said. “Hunting opportunities are the No. 1 management tool of the DNR. And in an urban setting, hunting is not allowed.”

In the absence of natural predators, hunting is the preferred method of deer management, which is why the county Parks and Recreation Department and the Huron-Clinton Metropolitan Authority (HCMA) have used managed hunts as a way to control the deer population in their respective parks.

The county utilizes both archery and controlled hunts in when trying to control the deer population inside county parks. Archery hunting is available to members of the public inside the Addison Oaks East Unit, Highland Oaks, the Independence Oaks North Unit, Rose Oaks, Lyon Oaks, and Orion Oaks during the DNR’s approved archery season, which lasts from Oct. 1 through Jan. 1.

Controlled hunts have taken place at Addison Oaks since 1990 and in Independence Oaks since 2003.

“It’s necessary to employ measures such as these to keep the deer population at a level that state biologists recommend,” Bird said.

According to Bird, the hunts have been successful.

“When we first started the hunts at Addison Oaks, the deer densities were in excess of 140 deer per square mile. There were very high levels of deer browse that were severely impacting the native communities that we were seeking to preserve at the parks. Since we implemented the deer management program, we have brought the deer densities closer to the state recommended levels with archery hunts and managed hunts.”

The managed hunts are volunteer-based with participation determined via a lottery application system. The hunts target only antlerless deer, and all deer taken are donated to the Salvation Army in support of the Michigan Sportsmen Against Hunger Program.

Last year, approximately 1,500 pounds of meat were donated.

The county parks are closed to the public on days of the hunts, and the county has a list of safety measures and requirements that must be followed.

Two hunts are conducted in each park in November and another two in December.

According to Bird, they typically remove about 20 deer per park depending on the density of the

deer herd found based on aerial surveys.

This past winter, Addison Oaks had a density of 35 deer per square mile, while Independence Oaks saw a density of 27 deer per square mile.

Bird said the county plans to continue the controlled hunts in an effort to manage the deer populations and restore the parks' ecosystems.

"We haven't gotten to the recommended levels and maintained them long enough to see restoration of native plants," she said. "We're looking to maintain the deer densities for another five to eight years before we see restoration to the point we can see landscape changes. We are approaching that point but we're still not there yet. Of course, there are other confounding factors such as invasive species. Deer management is just one piece of the puzzle, but it's an important piece to look at and address."

The HCMA has been using controlled hunts to manage the deer populations inside its metroparks for over 10 years, including inside Kensington Metropark in Milford Township and Indian Springs Metropark in White Lake Township.

Last year, 27 deer were removed from Kensington, while 22 were removed from Indian Springs via deer hunts.

This year the HCMA plans to remove 77 deer from Kensington and 31 from Indian Springs. According to aerial surveys performed in January and February of this year, the deer density was estimated to be 30 deer per square mile inside Kensington (5.1 square miles) and 24 deer per square mile inside Indian Springs (3.5 square miles).

According HCMA Chief of Natural Resources Paul Muelle, the HCMA has already conducted a hunt at Indian Springs with volunteers from the Safari Club International, who donated their time and expertise again this year.

"We removed 25 deer," he said. "We're going to evaluate and look to see if we need to have another hunt to reach our goal of 31, to see if it's worth it or not. Sometimes it's not worth going back in for just a couple deer."

All the deer meat was distributed by Sportsmen Against Hunger.

Meanwhile, January and February hunts are planned inside Kensington. However, due to local firearms restrictions in Milford Township, these hunts are conducted using sharpshooters from local police departments.

"Typically, when possible, we work with volunteer hunters during the regular deer season as specified by the DNR. But other than that we bring in our own sharpshooters out of the regulated hunting season to get to our management numbers," Muelle said.

He added that so far the HCMA has "absolutely seen success" with the deer management program.

"We are seeing vegetation out there that we haven't seen in a long time," he said. "We are going to continue to monitor that progress, but we are seeing that success, for sure."

It's not just the plants that are looking healthier, but the deer, as well.

"We have seen a huge difference with the deer herd health from when we started the program to now," he said. "Deer are looking healthier now that we are at maintenance levels. It's another reason to continue with the program," he said.

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