



The Deer Herd in Northern Virginia

By Mark Fike

It is no secret that the deer herd within the circulation area of the Chronicle Newspapers is very dense. In some areas, the herd has exceeded biological carrying capacity (there are more deer than the habitat can support in a healthy manner) and/or the deer herd has exceeded cultural carrying capacity (when there are more deer than most humans care to have around). Normally when cultural carrying capacity is exceeded, residents complain about their flowers being eaten up, the garden getting raided, bushes browsed or deer causing numerous accidents on the roadways.



Photo courtesy Duke University Whitetail deer are a common sight along the roads and in communities throughout the county and the Northern Virginia region.

Let's face it, Much of the problem lies in the fact that the area is high-density development. At this point, there is no undoing that fact. Humans have encroached on the habitat that the deer—and many other animals—use. The number of roads we build makes for a death trap for many animals because their habitat is fragmented. With no real predators, save humans and the occasional coyote that slips through the housing developments, what are residents to do about the deer?

Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) has instituted an urban archery season that began in mid-September and ends in March. It is a fact that hunting is the most efficient and least wasteful manner in which to control the deer herd. Snipers, darting deer with reproductive meds and all of the other tried methods have either cost way too much or have fallen flat on producing reliable results that last.

Non-hunters who are reading this are probably thinking that hunting deer in suburban areas is just too dangerous. There are definitely some safety concerns that need to be addressed. By using a bow and arrow, and especially a crossbow from an elevated tree stand, hunters can safely harvest deer without danger to nearby homes or businesses. There is no noise to worry about, and in the hands of an experienced hunter, the bow or crossbow is fast and clean.

VDGIF wants to encourage hunters to help out with culling the deer herd by harvesting does as often as legally possible. During the urban archery season, only antlerless deer may be taken. During other hunting seasons in counties such as Loudoun, Frederick, Prince William, Fairfax and Fauquier, the doe season is open the entire season.



Fairfax County is where the group *Suburban Whitetail Management of Northern Virginia* has taken a very active role in helping residents and VDGIF reduce deer numbers where most drastically needed. In Fairfax County, 15 to 20 percent of the total harvest was the result of the urban archery seasons, with much of the harvest there coming from the well-renowned group.

VDGIF has also recently instituted a late antlerless only firearms deer season in Loudoun, Fairfax and Prince William counties. This season had its first run last year. The three counties had a combined harvest of 1,286 deer during this season alone. Fairfax County had 21 percent of its total female harvest for the year come during the late antlerless only firearms season. Loudoun County had 24 percent of its total doe harvest taken during the late antlerless firearms season and Prince William County tallied a figure of 16 percent. Obviously, the season was a success and biologists hope this is just the start to a new method of cutting the deer herd back to within the Deer Management Plan's goal.

(To review the plan, go to www.dgif.virginia.gov/wildlife/deer/, then click on Virginia Deer Management Plan, 2006n2016.)

If you are interested in seeing less deer damage on your property, consider permitting a hunter on the property during the special seasons. Ask that they only take does, even if taking a buck is legal. There are plenty of hunters looking for a place to hunt.

Be sure to ask about the hunter's experience with the bow or crossbow, whether they have had to track any animals (this will tell you if they are a good shot or not), whether they have a hunter education card and don't be afraid to ask for references from other landowners where the hunter has hunted. Become comfortable with the person before allowing him to come onto your property.

Before the season starts, set up guidelines such as include calling before hunting, alerting you when they leave your property, keeping a log of deer harvested and times when you do not want them hunting.

Most reputable hunters will be more than willing to abide by your wishes. If you have never tried venison, ask for some of the meat. It is very lean and much healthier for you than beef.