

# THE DEER WARS, PART III

# SILENT

# ARMY

Meet the best little deer-management squad in America **BY FRANK MINITER**



Eric Huppert (center) is president of Suburban Whitetail Management of Northern Virginia, the urban group of bowmen that is fanned out behind him.

**T**he scene was wildly out of place. An army of bowhunters stood before dawn on a construction site, bulldozers and model homes silhouetted behind them. Hunters gather every fall in small towns across rural America, but this was *suburbia*.

Yet there they were, bathed in the headlights of a dozen pickups not 30 minutes from where George W. was probably still fast asleep, chatting in terse whispers over the background noise of barking dogs and bustling autos. One hunter, pulling a camo jumpsuit over

a polo shirt, gushed, “Did you see all the deer by the road on the way in? The area’s still loaded.”

Another, busy swapping street shoes for hunting boots, answered, “Yeah, we have a lot of work to do.”

Work? Yep. Maybe the finest bit of volunteer work there is—or so Eric Huppert, the leader of these troops,

would tell you. He says it like he needs to pinch himself occasionally to make sure he’s not dreaming. But assembled here were a dozen members of Suburban Whitetail Management of Northern Virginia, Inc. (SWMNV), a squad whose sole mission is to reduce urban populations of whitetail deer. They come at the behest of sub-

urbanites with expensive shrubbery and \$40,000 SUVs—homeowners who have gone to the trouble of obtaining special “kill permits” (issued in northern Virginia with no questions asked) that allow the harvest of as many deer as they, or in this case, obliging bowhunters, can possibly kill.

Oh, they’re rough and tough urban



warriors, sure enough. There's Steve, an accountant who last year climbed into a tree stand on more than 150 days; John, a retired U.S. Army colonel who spends his off time 20 feet up a tree and 28 feet from a back porch; Daryl, an electrician who is watched out a back window by two children like he is some new form of reality hunting show; and Bogos, a rental car company employee who is so lethal, "He could bag a deer in the Union Station parking garage," says Huppert.

Huppert's dream team has a secondary agenda to thinning deer, and he makes no secret of it. By linking responsible hunters with suburban homeowners, he's putting hunters in a positive role, thereby battling the

Bambi-killing, sport-hunting-for-the-thrill-of-killing image that anti-hunting groups would like the public to believe is accurate. Which explains why this group of SWMNV members is more animated than a Cub Scout patrol. Not only are they doing what they love; they're doing it for a good cause.

"Imagine people thanking you for doing what they see as a selfless service every time you play a round of golf or fish a local lake," says Huppert, "and you'll know what it's like to be one of us."

Outfitted with handheld radios

attached to headsets—like telemarketers gone commando—the hunters began to disperse into a forest that would rumble awake in a few hours as the heavy machinery lying idly about continued to clear 1,200 acres of land for 1,300 homes, a golf course, two schools and a hospital. The developer sought help because he's afraid that by knocking down the forest he'll chase the area's one thousand deer onto nearby highways. And he has no time

to spare. The houses, which start at around \$600,000, are scheduled to be





With one deer down, Bogos Kaypaghian attempts to call in another with a bleat call.

left the state, and Huppert decided one late, sleepless night that he'd create the group himself—county board be damned. He marveled at the idea: a group of bowhunters that would perform a free service and help landowners in three counties in northern Virginia (Prince William, Loudoun and Fairfax). Hunters would be in demand.

Huppert quickly decided on five main points: 1) the hunters in the group must be insured, so there would be no liability to landowners; 2) the hunters must be proficient marksmen; 3) the hunters must be ethical and accountable; 4) the group must be open to all who qualify; and 5) the meat harvested should go to the poor.

"Inconceivable" is the only word to describe what Huppert did next: He put an ad in a newspaper that urged, "Bowhunters, Volunteer Now!" Soon he began to hear the phone ringing in his sleep and learned to hate the "you've got mail" guy on his computer.

Now, just a few years later, an IRS agent would be impressed by the number of rules the 40 card-carrying SWMNV members have to follow. Each hunter must leave a decal on his vehicle's dash when he's hunting. All arrows must be marked with the member's ID number. Members must take off their camo and stow their bows when they leave the woods and must cover

the \$50.5 million Loudoun Project. "When one of these bulldozers drops a tree, a dozen deer start feeding on it right in front of the bulldozer, which makes it hard to continue work."

Marable planted thousands of dollars of ornamental flowers a few weeks ago, but the deer have already eaten them. "They're starving. Look at that browse line," he said, pointing to the forest, which looked like an over-dedicated gardener with a souped-up hedge trimmer had clipped off all of the growth below six feet.

"Sharpshooters wanted \$400 per head. Multiply that by a thousand and you'll see why we didn't pay up," said Marable. "But these boys are doing it for free. Last year they took about a hundred and fifty deer off this property. This year I hope they'll..."

A red SUV skidding to a stop broke the conversation and threw a cloud of dust over the hunters. An agitated realtor was at the wheel screaming in an angry voice into her cell phone. "There are hunters here! There's a bunch of guys in camo right on the site!" But then she eyed Marable, who was waving her off like an angry cop at a busy intersection. She dropped the phone and made a speedy retreat. A few of the hunters were left rubbing dust out of their eyes and shrugging their shoulders.

## COMING OUT

All of the bowhunters build relationships with the property owners they

completed within five years, and there are already more applicants than there are homes available.

## GOING MAINSTREAM

Four years ago, Eric Huppert watched as David Flagler, chief of animal control in Virginia's Fairfax County, was asked to present a solution to the surging deer population.

A teacher had been killed when a deer, which had collided with another vehicle, was thrown over a highway divider and crashed through her windshield. The tragedy prompted a public outcry and forced politicians to stop pretending a problem didn't exist. After reviewing his options, Flagler stood in front of the county board and suggested that a crack team of bowhunters be used to cut down the deer population. "Are you serious?" the county's leadership asked. Hunting was not an option.

When Huppert spoke to Flagler, he listened as Flagler described the group of responsible bowhunters he wanted to call to arms. Then Flagler, disgusted,



deer that are being transported.... The group's bylaws are extensive in order to keep the group's profile low—not because they're doing anything wrong, but because they believe in showing respect for those who don't want to see what must be done.

## A QUIET ARMY

"I don't know what I would do without them," said Tom Marable, property superintendent in charge of

"Imagine people thanking you for doing what they see as a selfless service every time you fish a local lake and you'll know what it feels like to be one of us."

help. As a result, hunters are suddenly both amenable and accountable. If a homeowner has a problem, he or she can call one of the group's leaders. This has caused reports of the hunters' valuable service to be related over fences in subdivisions everywhere they've gone. Sam Rotolo, one of the people who uses the group, joked, "That's my house, that's where my garden was before the deer ate it and that's my Daryl," as he pointed to Daryl Whitt,

## Free Gear for a Good Cause

Hunters for the Hungry programs are now active in 29 states and a national office has been created under the name Farmers and Hunters Feeding the Hungry (FHH); it has brought most of the groups that donate venison to the hungry together and is bringing the idea to many other states. Rick Wilson, director of the FHH says, "The supply of venison will never exceed demand. The only trouble we have is raising enough money to pay for the meat processing."

Donations are needed. However, there's more reward here for donors than just the good feeling that comes from giving to a worthy cause. There's free gear. Farmers and Hunters Feeding the Hungry has more than 20 corporate sponsors that send gear to people who make a donation. For example, \$300 gets you an API Grand Slam Supreme Treestand, a dozen Easton XX75 arrows and a hat and T-shirt (combined retail value of \$430). To contribute, log on to [www.FHH.org](http://www.FHH.org) or call 866-Get-FHH.

*(Virginia Hunters for the Hungry, 800-352-4868; Farmers and Hunters Feeding the Hungry national office, 301-739-3000)*

the SWMNV member who's thinning out the deer on his property.

Last summer, Huppert took his group to a whole new level by boldly setting up a booth at a county fair. He then spent the day with several SWMNV members talking to hundreds of suburbanites. People came and went, and Huppert's pride was growing from the generally warm reception...until he found himself confronted by a woman who sneered, "You're murderers."

Huppert kept his indignation in check and said, "Let me explain. Deer are starving to death and people are being killed on the highways when they hit deer that are looking for food." The woman crossed her arms, but she was listening. "Deer contraception is not yet feasible." She still looked like she didn't give a damn, so he dropped the bomb, "And all of the deer we shoot go to feed the hungry."

That's when her arms unclenched and she said, "Really?"

"For most, though," says Huppert, "the problem has to hit them where it hurts, in the cabbage patch. For example, one of the landowners we help has a dozen bunny-hugger bumper stickers pasted on his car. When we first went to his residence to scout it out we saw the stickers and thought we had run smack into an activist. But he surprised us; he pranced out and said, 'I used to hate you guys. I'm a vegetarian. But the deer have eaten

enough of my vegetables. I want you to kill them all.'"

### JUST THE BEGINNING

Bogos is a native of Somalia. When asked how he learned to clean deer so well, he said, "In my homeland, you can't go to the supermarket. When you want to eat, you grab a goat." He lived up to his lethal reputation. In the early light, when the forest was still a blur of grays and browns, two deer came up from behind his stand, found some limbs Bogos had pruned off while climbing the tree and stood there eating every precious leaf. Bogos waited, blinking his eyes until the sun gave sharper contrast to the red-brown deer against the brown-brown forest floor. Then, when one of the does stepped just far enough out, he put an arrow through her heart.

The doe's ribs could be counted in a glance and her stomach was flatter than a greyhound's—there wasn't much meat for the hungry.

Huppert looked at the deer and said, "This is why we're doing this." He made it sound like his group was on a lonely quest, but many similar organizations are forming across the country. In fact, two have already followed Huppert's lead: Suburban Whitetail Management of Northern Georgia and Suburban Whitetail Management of Maryland. And bowhunters are now being utilized in dozens of other urban areas, though these examples are still the exceptions to the rule.

Driving down one of the capital's four-lane highways, Huppert had something to say but seemed to be searching for the words. In the brief silence, I noticed that everywhere I looked another field that had once been a forest was now freshly leveled earth or a new subdivision with all the homes stacked like eggs in a carton. And every few miles there was another deer lying by the roadside.

One of the road-killed deer prompted Huppert to summarize what was on his mind: "Picture the day when people can call 1-800-Hunters, and a stout-looking fellow—a plumber in camo—will come by to control their populations of deer, or bears, or geese.... You see, interest is not our problem. Even the counties are starting to trust us enough to send troubled landowners our way. Within two years I think we'll be one hundred strong" he says, sweeping his hand across the front of us. "There's a quiet army out there, restless and eager to mobilize to solve this whitetail-overpopulation problem."

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Eight months of deer hunting per year is what these bowhunters call volunteer work.