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Bambi in the crosshairs:[South Pinellas Edition]

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Four years ago, when Aileen Mitchell moved into the big house beside the woods, she loved seeing deer in her front yard. The animals were peaceful and gorgeous.

Then they started eating her holly. They devoured her red osier dogwoods, sunflowers, lilac bushes and azaleas. They munched on her pansies, apparently didn't like the taste, and left the chewed-up flowers on the ground.

Recently, she counted 29 deer in her yard at one time, many feasting on her plants. The animals have left her shrubs mangled and her backyard dotted with deer droppings.

"Deer! Get away from Mommy's flowers!" her children holler. But the deer keep coming back.

"I call them long-legged rats," Mitchell says. "They have no fear."

At this moment, three men in camouflage are perched in her trees with bows and arrows, ready to shoot the next deer that comes along.

Here in suburbia, relations between deer and humans have reached the breaking point.

A deer population explosion and suburban sprawl have created an unusual turf battle. Deer love the new subdivisions, which provide a bountiful food supply and sanctuary from predators. But homeowners are getting fed up with the animals. The deer not only eat shrubs and leave droppings, they dart onto highways and get struck by cars.

Mitchell says she saw five deer carcasses by the roadside in one recent trip to her kids' preschool. Nationally, there are more than 1.5-million collisions each year, killing more than 1-million deer and about 150 people.

In this Washington suburb, like countless others around the nation, homeowners try to make their yards less inviting to deer by spraying coyote urine on their plants and leaving human hair, dried blood or elaborate concoctions of eggs and hot peppers in their gardens.

None of it has worked.

Many communities - like Fairfax County, Va., where Mitchell lives - have strict rules against using firearms to kill deer. Suburbanites who grew up watching Bambi and have never hunted are often aghast at the idea of shooting the animals.

Some communities have tried to kill deer with "managed hunting," allowing firearms for a few days in a limited area such as a park, but the hunts can't keep up with the rapidly multiplying deer. The hunts are often controversial, which explains why local governments use euphemisms like "deer culling" and "deer reduction."

Bow hunting is allowed in many places where guns are banned, but the archers are so outnumbered by the deer that they have little impact. Critics say the bow hunters often wound the animals and cause inhumane deaths.

A handful of communities are trying deer contraceptives.

Scientists shoot females with darts that contain a contraceptive vaccine, which prevents them from having fawns for about a year.

Tom Haueter, a Great Falls, Va., resident, grew so frustrated with deer eating his plants that he installed a \$3,600 fence around his house. He says the animals need a predator.

"I'm all for introducing timber wolves," he jokes.

But others don't mind the animals.

Ashley Bliss, a Great Falls resident who often sees the animals in her yard, says they are a pleasant reminder of nature.

She says, "I think the people who complain should move to an apartment."

From his perch 15 feet up in a red oak tree, Bob Flanagan has a panoramic view of Mitchell's yard.

He's holding a Durango bow with a precision sight that allows him to target a spot on the animal the size of a dime. He usually aims directly behind the front shoulder, so he can shoot the lungs and heart.

The first snowflakes of a winter storm are beginning to fall, which means the deer will soon be active.

"They like drizzly, cloudy weather," he says. "It gives them more security."

Flanagan, 58, is a retired physical education teacher who volunteers for Suburban Whitetail Management of Northern Virginia, a group of hunters who provide free "deer harvesting" for suburbanites. It reduces the deer population and gives the archers a chance to hunt and keep some venison. (They donate much of the meat to Hunters for the Hungry.)

Flanagan has already positioned his colleagues Mike Manuel and Rolando Murillo in trees in the backyard, above a muddy path where they saw deer tracks. Bow hunters can only shoot about 20 yards, so Flanagan put Manuel and Murillo each 20 yards from the trail.

"Good shooting lanes here," Flanagan says.

He leaves them and goes to the front yard, where he climbs a metal ladder to a portable platform designed for deer hunters. He wears camouflage coveralls and often sprays fox urine around the tree to cloak his scent.

Flanagan says it typically takes him 30 to 50 hours of waiting before he gets a deer. He has killed 12 since March and is passionate about deer hunting. He loves the tranquility of the woods and the challenge of mastering a sport. His license plate is DEER BOB.

Opponents of bow hunting say it is inhumane because deer don't always die quickly when they have been shot.

Allen Rutberg, a professor at the Tufts University Center for Animals and Public Policy in North Grafton, Mass., said it takes 60 seconds to an hour for the animal to die.

"That doesn't qualify as a humane death," said Rutberg.

But the bow hunters say they comply with game laws and that a skillful archer can be as effective at killing as a hunter with a gun. They say hunters reduce the herd so deer can properly feed without destroying the ecosystem.

Says Flanagan, "These homeowners are just begging us to get the herd knocked down."

When he arrived at Mitchell's home, Flanagan got a glimpse of the root cause of the deer problem. A bulldozer was clearing land for houses on 5-acre lots.

A sign said, "MARQUIS CUSTOM HOMES - NOW SELLING."

Flanagan says the new homes are gradually eliminating the deers' natural habitat and forcing them into smaller wooded areas. It won't take long for the homes to become magnets for the animals, offering a smorgasbord of well-fertilized plants.

Fertilized plants are heartier, which makes for healthier deer. Those deer, in turn, are more likely to have larger litters, adding to the population explosion.

One hundred years ago, deer in the United States were nearly wiped out by hunters and predators. Game wardens were so alarmed that they launched an aggressive effort to boost the population by restricting hunting and relocating deer.

But that effort spiraled out of control.

The deer population boomed at the same time the suburbs grew. The animal's usual predators - bears, wolves and human hunters - moved away or weren't allowed in the 'burbs.

Mary Lou Relle, a Potomac, Md., homeowner, says she has replaced thousands of dollars of plants, including many that were labeled "deer-resistant."

"They have eaten every perennial down to the root, the forsythia, the hydrangea, the mums, the geraniums," she says. "They don't eat the weeds, which is a darn shame."

Car collisions peak from October through December, which is not only hunting season, but mating season.

"The hunting season is picking up, everybody has sex on their brain and they are being chased around by people," says Bill McShea, a research scientist at the National Zoo/Smithsonian Institution center in Front Royal, Va.

But sex might provide a solution to the overabundance of the animals.

With so much opposition to hunting - as Relle says, "I don't want to see them killed, but I want to see them controlled" - some areas are exploring contraception.

A handful of communities have tried contraceptive darts, which inject the female deer with a vaccine that prevents them from becoming pregnant for about a year.

Rutberg says the program has cut the deer population in half in Fire Island, N.Y., and has virtually eliminated homeowners' complaints about the animals. But it can cost as much as \$500 per deer and many governments resist the idea.

"The fish and wildlife agencies tend to be very hostile to it," Rutberg says, because their mission is to help hunters.

Just as Flanagan predicted, the deer are on the move.

Four of them wander into a neighbor's yard and are shoed away by the owner. The animals run toward Mitchell's backyard.

In the trees, Murillo and Manuel have their arrows in position and are ready to shoot.

The hunters whistle to get the animals' attention. But the deer keep running. They sprint along the edge of the yard and back into the woods. Neither hunter can take a shot.

Flanagan says later that he isn't discouraged.

He says, "We'll get 'em."

- Times researcher Caryn Baird contributed to this report.

About the intruders

White-tailed deer (*Odocoileus Virginianus*)

Height: 3-3 1/2 feet (at shoulder)

Weight: Females, 90-200 pounds; males, 150-300 pounds

Food: 6 1/2 pounds of vegetation a day

Social life: Females live in small groups with related does. Males live separately, except during mating season.

Found: Primarily in Eastern states (Western deer are primarily mule deer).

Total U.S. deer population: 35-million, up from 2-million in 1900.

SOURCES: FAIRFAX COUNTY, VA;

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