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SPORTS

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## Menacing Herd - AT ISSUE: DEER HUNTING IN THE SUBURBS

As deer spread in subdivisions, hitting cars and damaging yards, some call for suburban hunts.

*Kent Mitchell - Staff Sunday, June 25, 2000*

Bert Collins has hunted since childhood, but these were not sights and sounds he normally experiences. From his perch in a tree in the backyard of a half-million-dollar home, the 38-year-old Collins watched residents jog down a path about 40 yards away. He heard sounds from a neighboring yard of a rowdy pickup basketball game.

People were working out. Children were playing.

And deer were everywhere.

"Even in the daytime," Collins said. "Many houses had electric fences, which didn't work. Deer just went around the fences to driveways and jumped the gates."

Collins, with bow in hand, felt uncomfortable. He knew he had the ability to make an arrow travel where he aimed it, but he was new to suburban hunting, and the deer were running around almost like pets.

So he turned to Dan Sardella, a Port Armor resident who arranged the hunt in the neighborhood at Lake Oconee.

"Are you sure it's OK for me to hunt here?" Collins asked.

That question is being asked on the outskirts of many large cities, including Atlanta. As suburbia moves deeper into normal deer habitats, herds become seriously overpopulated, causing health, driving and landscaping problems.

Insurance companies reported nearly 50,000 deer-car collisions in Georgia last year. A statewide figure on landscape losses was not available, but experts estimate that it might be as much as \$5,000 per home in some subdivisions.

The deer population has increased to an estimated 1 million in Georgia. A large percentage roam the metro suburbs, where no natural predators exist and hunting with guns generally is not allowed.

But in some states, including Georgia, organizations of specialized, highly trained bowhunters are being formed to thin the herds during hunting season. The fledgling Suburban Whitetail Management of North Georgia group is patterned after the Suburban Whitetail Management of Northern Virginia, which has enjoyed three years of success in the Washington area.

The Virginia group was started in 1997 by Eric Huppert, 35, a customer-service representative for the U.S. Senate, after the Fairfax County animal-control office recommended that the only way to control deer in suburban areas was to kill them.

Alternatives, including relocating the estimated 60,000 herd, hiring U.S. Department of Agriculture shooters or using birth control, were considered too expensive.

An animal-control director gave Huppert the idea to use bowhunters. "He said ideally what he'd like was to have a list of people with certain qualifications who would be available for special hunts," Huppert said.

Huppert also had read an article in Bowhunter magazine about a Pennsylvania group, Bowhunt Associates, who were hunting in people's back yards. He began studying the concept, which presented two major obstacles: Hunting in neighborhoods would require a high degree of competency in bowhunting; it would require even more in human relations.

Thus the debate: Thinning herds would save hundreds of thousands of dollars each year in auto-repair, landscaping and health costs. But residents struggle with the idea of having hunters in backyard trees shooting arrows at neighborhood Bambi's.

"Hunting is the win-win situation," said Dan Forster, assistant chief of the game management section of the Wildlife Resources Division of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

"You have needs on both sides of the table --- desire to reduce the deer population and individuals who desire to do that for you," Forster said. "Not to mention the money you save by allowing sportsmen to come in and legally hunt."

But some neighborhoods are not excited about the prospect. Chateau Elan, with almost 3,500 acres of homes and golf courses, has a deer problem, but it does not allow hunting.

"There are too many public places here --- all those golf courses,--- said Phil Mulherin, vice president of development at Chateau Elan. "There's the financial liability and the concern that someone might get hurt by a bullet or an arrow. Even at night, there's too much liability."

And there are groups opposed to any type of hunting.

"Killing is a phony solution," said John Eberhart, spokesman for the Georgia Earth Alliance based in Fayetteville. "Wildlife Resources Division should get out of the deer business, and its constituents should find another way to amuse themselves."

Eberhart, 50, says his alternative is, "Accept the deer and live in peace with them as you would human neighbors." He said one solution is, "to the maximum extent feasible, let native vegetation grow up, keep it trimmed from the immediate vicinity of houses and use zero landscaping and native plants."

But suburban hunting is getting support from some non-hunting groups.

"The biggest problem in America is we've wiped out our predatory species, and the reason we have a deer problem in Georgia and America is because there are no natural predators," said

Augusta native Sam Booher, state chairman for the Georgia chapter of the Sierra Club.

Booher, who recently attended a Sierra Club meeting in Macon, said he saw a dozen dead deer beside the road during his trip. The Sierra Club's diverse membership includes anti-hunters, but the group is not opposed to suburban hunting.

"My only concern is that the people know they're there and keep their kids away from them," Booher said.

Some residents think that would be impossible.

"I wouldn't like it at all," said Kathy Farmer, who lives in Flowery Branch. "We have a lot of young children in the neighborhood, and they play in the woods. They make little forts, play in the creeks, and to have men in the woods hunting, there's no way they can be safe."

## Population Rise

It takes a large number of deer kills to control a population. Hunters need to eliminate more than 50 percent of a deer population to see a decrease, says Kent Kammermeyer, a state WRD biologist. Take out 40 percent of a population and the remaining 60 percent can regenerate to the original figure in the next year. Take less and the population explodes.

That's what's happening in metro counties that don't allow hunting with a gun and where it is difficult to find landowners who allow bowhunting. Wildlife experts say that deer populations in metro Atlanta counties are as large as in any suburban areas in the nation. In the 1950s, the deer population in Georgia was estimated at 3,000. It has grown to an estimated 1 million.

WRD estimates that Hall and Henry counties lead the metro area with 45-55 deer per square mile. Fayette, Carroll and Coweta are next with an estimated 40-50 deer per square mile.

Kammermeyer said the optimum deer population in Coweta would probably be about 30 deer per square mile. "But you can get up to 100 deer per square mile, if you have enough food for them," Kammermeyer said. "And no people, no cars, no landscaping."

Kammermeyer said overpopulation often leads to disease and starvation among deer herds.

It also can be painful for man. Fast-growing Coweta led the state with 1,262 deer-car collisions, followed by Gwinnett (744), DeKalb (685) and Fulton (439).

The deer also are creating landscaping problems for homeowners.

"Landscaping is expensive, and deer will eat up everything," said Luke Carman, owner of Carman Customs landscaping. Carman estimated the cost of landscaping his home in the Wesley Chapel area at \$3,500 to \$4,000.

And there is the disease factor. According to CDC statistics, reported cases of Lyme disease in the United States have increased annually about 25-fold since the study began in 1982. Lyme disease is spread by deer ticks.

"We're just seeing the tip of the iceberg," said Terry Johnson a wildlife biologist with DNR. "People are straining, trying to find solutions."

### **Cost-effective solution**

The Port Armor homeowners association first took its deer problem to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which offered to send professional hunters to kill deer at night. But the cost was prohibitive.

The USDA told homeowners that it would cost \$9,000 to remove the right number of deer. Homeowners also were told they would have to pay for processing the deer, about \$70 each, and would be responsible for distributing the meat to food banks.

Sardella and several friends in the community, members of Safari Club International, were not comfortable seeing deer shot at night. So they offered a free alternative: Let them hunt the deer and bring the herd down to a healthy level.

"I wouldn't say it was overwhelming 'Let's do it,' but it was bad enough that 80 percent of the people supported removing the deer by some kind of lethal method," Sardella said. "There were still a few homeowners against it, but others wanted hunters on their back porch, protecting their plants."

The Port Armor Sportsman's Club hunted at specific, announced times, mostly with bows but sometimes with firearms, in larger wooded areas. Club members killed some 160 deer the first year, 120 the next season and nearly 100 last season.

The Atlanta bowhunting group, recently formed by Ray Hammond of Flowery Branch, is in the process of certifying members for neighborhood hunts and hopes it will operate during the upcoming season. The requirements are tough: In the Virginia group, only 10 of 100 members have passed.

"Virginia folks created the wheel, and we took advantage of what they've done," Hammond said.

### **The Atlanta group receives high marks from state officials.**

"This is one of the most conscientious, top-notch group of deer hunters I've ever seen in (Atlanta)," Kammermeyer said. "(Bowhunting) is a tool that's going to fit into the big picture and really help. We're convinced there's not going to be just one thing anymore, but a group of bowhunters like that will definitely help."

"We have to be very careful about personnel we recruit," Hammond said. "They have to be political animals even though, in a sense, none of us are politically correct (because we hunt)."

Hunters from the Atlanta group will wear gray or green clothing, with no camouflage. They will not be allowed to display game taken --- no deer strapped to hoods --- and tree stands are carried in and out to avoid accidents to children. They also will work with landowners to set the best times to hunt.

Hammond wants to keep the group very small and get one or two landowners involved to "get the ball rolling and develop a track record."

Hammond is a traditional archer, but the Atlanta group also has bowhunters who use modern compound bows. "I'm more interested in ethics than the kind of bows they use," he said.

That's what Kammermeyer likes about these groups.

"What we envision is someone is going to call our office with a deer problem," Kammermeyer said. "We'll ask if they are willing to allow someone to hunt and will they allow a deer to be killed. If they answer yes, we'll refer them to (Atlanta Whitetail) or a group like that.

"It's going to work out in some places, some places not, but using USDA hunters (at night) is the end of the road to me. Deer were rare only a few years ago, and here we are sending people out to kill them like a bunch of rats."

It took awhile, but Collins, hunting in the Port Armor neighborhood, finally got over his nervousness and killed three deer during two backyard hunting seasons. Now, he's sold on the process.

"I think we need to do more of it," Collins said. "Let's kill them with a bow instead of a bumper."

#### REQUIREMENTS

All hunters applying for membership with Suburban Whitetail Management of Northern Virginia must have experience killing at least three big game animals with bow and arrow before completing the following:

All hunters must provide evidence of the successful completion of a state-sponsored hunter-safety course. Then each hunter must successfully pass the International Bowhunter Education Program safety course.

All hunters must pass a shooting proficiency test. This test meets or exceeds the stringent shooting proficiency tests required on area military bases before hunters are deemed qualified to hunt on those federal properties.

An evaluation committee examines all of the above information and decides whether to accept the hunter for membership

Reports of any unsafe, unethical or improper activities are solicited from cooperating landowners, game wardens and biologists. The evaluation committee continually re-evaluates hunters and takes necessary disciplinary action, including removal from membership.

Illustration of a deer in someone's yard, with a bullseye drawn on the deer. / WALTER CUMMING / Staff

#### DEER VS. CAR

A look at the deer-car collisions in the metro Atlanta area in 1999, listed by state rank:

<u>Rank</u>	<u>County</u>	<u>Collisions</u>
1.....	Coweta	1,262
7.....	Gwinnett	744
11.....	DeKalb	685
13.....	Fayette	659
14.....	Clayton	652
17.....	Carroll	624
19.....	Henry	595
22.....	Hall	564
34.....	Cobb	455
35.....	Cherokee	452
38.....	Fulton	439
49.....	Rockdale	353
56.....	Bartow	333
74.....	Paulding	283
103.....	Forsyth	207
104.....	Douglas	206

#### OH, MY DEER

Where deer can be found in metro Atlanta:

Total-Square-Deer per County....  
 estimated..... miles of.....square  
 ..... deer..... Forest land..... mile

<u>County</u>	<u>Deer per Sq. Mile</u>
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Coweta.....	40-50
Hall.....	45-55
Cherokee.....	20-30
Fulton.....	30-40
Walton.....	30-40
Gwinnett.....	25-35
Fayette.....	40-50
Douglas.....	20-30
Forsyth.....	25-35
Barrow.....	30-40
Rockdale.....	25-35
DeKalb.....	20-30
Clayton.....	20-30
Cobb.....	10-20

Source: Georgia Department of Natural Resources/ ROB SMOAK / Staff