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Deer hunter at your service

By Dave Hart - *Outdoor Journal*

On the surface, it appears that Dale City resident Eric Huppert is just looking for some prime hunting property for himself. The avid bowhunter is appealing to Fairfax County's landowners and bowhunters to come forward to help thin the ever-expanding deer herd.

But, said Huppert, "I'm not doing this to find hunting places for myself. I've got plenty of land I can hunt on outside of Fairfax. I'm doing this because I really want to do something to help control the deer population."

He is trying to accomplish something that so far, no one has been able to do. David Flagler, the county's chief of animal control, quit his position because of the problems associated with managing the local deer herd, and Fairfax County's leaders seem to have put the issue on the back burner. No one, it seems, wants to face the realities associated with too many deer.

Flagler said that one estimate placed the county's deer herd at a whopping 60,000 animals. He doubted that figure, but said even if it was half that, it was too many. One of his suggestions was to hire "sharpshooters," an idea that drew immediate criticism from citizens and community leaders. But he also said sport hunters could and should, play a role in keeping the deer herd in check.

Last year, hunters tagged about 700 animals in Fairfax, according to Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries

records. But that idea wasn't welcomed with open arms, either.

The only other solution mentioned by county leaders was to sterilize deer with some form of contraceptive. That's an idea that sounds good, but so far, no one has found an affordable, or successful, method, and biologists doubt researchers ever will.

With Flagler's departure, the issue seems to have faded into oblivion. The problem, however, keeps growing.

That's why Huppert is taking matters into his own hands. The Senate service department employee wants to organize a group of safe, ethical bowhunters who would be at the beck and call of county homeowners who have grown tired of what some call "hooved rats."

"There are a lot of homeowners who are fed up with losing their gardens to deer, but they don't know who to turn to," he said. "Plenty of them aren't opposed to hunting, they just don't want some stranger coming on to their land. They want to know something about the person. I met a guy who was an anti-hunter until he lost all his expensive landscaping to deer. He was glad to see me after that."

Huppert, 32, isn't in this for extra cash, either. He has no plans to charge either party, but said he might ask for donations from archers if expenses get out of hand. So far, he's only placed cards advertising his hastily-named outfit, "P.C. Deer Dispatch," at a handful of sporting good stores in the area. The response has been positive.

"I've been getting about three or four calls a night from interested bowhunters," he said. "Right now, I'm just taking down their names and phone numbers. I've also got offers from a few guys to help get this thing rolling."

Finding enough hunters isn't going to be a problem, Huppert admitted. Lining up willing landowners might. So far, he has none; although he gained permission to hunt in Great Falls a few years ago by simply knocking on doors. Now that he has a purpose, and a potential army of willing hunters, he might have little trouble finding fed-up homeowners. The hard part might be simply getting the word out to the right neighborhoods.

"I might look into advertising in local papers or sending out fliers to certain areas of the county," suggested Huppert. "I'm still trying to get this thing going, so I'm not too sure how to approach it."

He does have plenty of good ideas, though. Huppert will take only bowhunters who have passed a state-certified hunter safety course as well as a bowhunter education course. He's also trying to come up with a way to weed out unethical, unsafe and unskilled hunters. Those are probably the main reasons most landowners don't want strangers on their property.

This isn't about getting access to one of the best places to tag a trophy buck in the state, insisted Huppert. Hunters shouldn't look at it that way, although he said plenty probably will. It's about providing a needed service and doing what needs to be done.

"I'm tired of driving down the road and seeing a dead deer laying on the shoulder," he said, "and I'm tired of hearing people complain about the problems associated with too many deer. I want to do something about it."

He admits it will be difficult to convince bowhunters to stick it out if the deer don't show up as predicted. He's afraid too many archers will abandon their tree stand over a backyard flower garden if success doesn't come quickly enough.

Huppert doesn't have any official endorsements from state or local agencies, yet. He has talked to Susan Alger, the state game warden assigned to Fairfax County, but he came up with only a lukewarm response. That's too bad. Because she deals with homeowners on a near-daily basis, she's the one who could help Huppert the most. He figured once his idea gains some momentum, she might take him more seriously and help line up landowners.

Meanwhile, ethical bowhunters and frustrated homeowners can call Mr. Huppert at 703-730-9966 or e-mail, him at vabowhnters@aol.com.

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