

Deerbusters!

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS - MONDAY, NOVEMBER 8, 1999

BOWHUNTING GROUP RIDS SUBURBAN BACK YARDS OF WHITETAIL "NUISANCE"

BY PAUL TOLME - *Associated Press*

SPRINGFIELD, Va. (AP) — Years ago, Tom Williamson got excited when a deer wandered into his backyard. Then they multiplied and devoured his shrubs. "One morning I got up and counted 18 of them in my yard. If I had an apple I could have hit one of them," he said.

Exasperated by the growing deer population in Washington's suburbs, Williamson called in the hit squad.

Suburban Whitetail Management of Northern Virginia, a nonprofit organization that kills deer for free, sent over one of its bow hunters to rub out a few of the shrub-munching pests at Williamson's Lorton home.

The group's hunters wear camouflage and sit in trees while homeowners remain nestled in bed.

When a deer ambles into a yard at dawn or dusk for a meal - THWOCK! - it gets an arrow between the ribs. The hunters even hide from neighbors to prevent ugly confrontations with animal lovers.

"If a neighbor has a problem, we will back off that property," said Whit Wagner, the group's spokesman. "If the neighbor has a Cub Scout meeting on Thursday, we won't hunt on Thursday."

With no predators and a diminishing amount of open space, deer are crowding into American suburbs in ever larger numbers. Virginia officials estimate there are a million deer statewide and hundreds of thousands in Northern Virginia, where they are particularly hazardous on the region's crowded roads.

There were 167 documented collisions in Fairfax County last year, but the number of unreported collisions is

believed to be much higher because 1,131 carcasses were removed from Fairfax County roadsides last year. County officials recently voted to allow hunters and police officers to shoot deer in seven county parks.

"They are bedding down in people's yards almost and becoming accustomed to dogs barking," said Earl Hodnett, Fairfax County's wildlife biologist and deer expert. "You've got evolution occurring. The new millennium deer is a different animal than the ones we were dealing with just 20 years ago."

Hodnett, a fan of the group, said the county's ban on rifle hunting makes it difficult to control the deer population.

Homeowners can get a permit to kill nuisance deer on their properties, but how many soccer moms or white-collar dads can wield a bow and arrow? Suburban Whitetail Management uses nuisance permits obtained by the homeowners to kill female deer out of season, and the hunters can use their own permits to bag bucks during the fall hunt.

Wagner argues that bowhunting is cheap and safe. "An arrow tipped with a razor-sharp broadhead, launched from a modern compound bow, can pass through a deer and bring a swift, painless death," says a pamphlet provided by the group.

Only top archers are accepted - Wagner hit a circle the size of a doughnut three straight times from 30 yards when asked to demonstrate - and the group even provides liability coverage.

Despite his pride in the group, Wagner is mindful that many people dislike hunting. He prefers to say his group

"harvests" rather than "kills" deer.

The group has operated for about six months and is modeled after similar organizations in Connecticut and Pennsylvania, Wagner said. Homeowners can keep the deer meat, but most opt to have it donated to the hungry.

"We are not in this to make money. We are in this for game management and to help the homeowner," Wagner said, but Michael Markarian of The Fund for Animals, a nonprofit anti-hunting group, dismisses Wagner's outfit as bloodthirsty.

"If a deer eats your flowers, should that warrant capital punishment?" Markarian said.

Homeowners can use repellants or plant shrubs and flowers that deer dislike, such as rhododendrons, hydrangeas or marigolds, he said. "For every person out there who complains about deer, I think there are 10 people who get excited when they see deer in their yard," Markarian said. "These guys are just looking for more opportunities to hunt."

Joe of Great Falls, who declined to give his last name for fear of upsetting the "liberal New Yorkers" next door, called the group when his wife became distraught over the mounting damage to their shrubs and flowers.

An avowed pacifist who has never hunted, Joe said the deer have caused so much damage that a neighbor paid thousands of dollars to erect a 10-foot-high wire fence around his seven acres.

"They're beautiful animals, but it was either them or my marriage," Joe said with a shrug.