

Board of Commissioners Forest Preserve District of Will County

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Deer Management

in Will County Forest Preserves



Bringing People and Nature Together

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Bringing People and Nature Together

Why Manage Deer Populations?

The District recognizes white-tailed deer as an important part of Will County's biodiversity.

However, high density levels of white-tailed deer in many of our preserves are damaging the health and well-being of our forests. Overbrowsing by deer over the last decade has become quite noticeable, and if left unmanaged will result in rapid and dramatic changes in these woodland areas.

Environmental Stewardship

The Forest Preserve's mission dedicates our agency to the protection and conservation of the natural heritage of Will County.

Overbrowsing by deer not only negatively affects the vegetation within our natural areas, but also the availability of food sources for wildlife, threatening the well-being of the deer themselves as well as other animal species.

With drastic changes in the number and diversity of plants will come the reduction or elimination of animals and insects that count on those plants for food and cover. Additionally, such changes in the forest floor advance erosion which leads to increased sedimentation in surface water and greater potential for flooding as rich top soil is washed away and deposited in nearby streams, reducing the streams' ability to transport water. Sedimentation also diminishes water quality.

Proactive Management

Proactive management to reduce the number of deer will allow the District to move strategically to accomplish its goal of maintaining healthy and sustainable natural areas.

Public safety is the top priority with any management program initiated by the District. In addition, this program will in no way ever pose a threat to the existence of deer in Will County.

Management Options

At a special working session of members of the District's Operations Committee, District staff presented a detailed analysis of deer management options that best met the Forest Preserve's management goals and its ability to manage safely.

The District's Operations Committee directed staff to develop a management program that utilizes sharpshooting and public hunting including archery and firearms, as research suggests these to be the most feasible options. The District is now seeking public comment on this plan.

Maintaining the Health of Our Preserves

The Forest Preserve District is at a critical juncture in regard to deer management activities. Unless managed, deer will continue to negatively impact our natural areas and their population could grow until they cannot be sustained by the local habitat. Maintaining the health of our preserves is key.

In implementing a management program, the District will strictly comply to all rules and regulations mandated by the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR). Moreover, the Forest Preserve District will work to model its program after those that have had proven success by IDNR standards.

For more information, please visit ReconnectWithNature.org. Updates on the District's management program will be posted there as they become available. You can also provide your comments by visiting ReconnectWithNature.org/ContactUs.

Deer Management

Q&A

Why conduct deer management?

It is understandable that the decision to manage deer may cause some public concern. However, the Forest Preserve District has made this decision based on extensive research, consultation and discussion. If deer are left unmanaged, their large number will eventually cause dramatic changes in our natural areas, resulting in irreversible damage and potential loss of species.

What is the impact of overbrowsing by deer?

Excessive overbrowsing:

- Shifts dominant canopy tree species. Deer preferentially feed on young oak and hickory saplings, as well as the acorns and hickory nuts of mature trees, resulting in few new trees of these kind to replace the older ones. This shift will eventually mean the loss of these forests as we now know them.
- Reduces ground layer vegetation abundance and diversity. Deer consumption of seeds and flower buds decreases and, in some cases, eliminates the ability of plants to reproduce. This takes away important food sources for other species.
- Increases sedimentation in surface water due to advanced erosion. Reduced ground cover leads to accelerated soil erosion. As soil erodes, it often becomes deposited in nearby streams. This sedimentation has negative effects on the habitat quality for the organisms living in the streams, and can lead to flooding by reducing the streams' ability to transport water.
- Affects the availability of food sources for wildlife, threatening the well-being of the deer themselves and other animal species. With drastic changes in the abundance and diversity of plants will come the reduction or elimination of animals that count on those plants for food and cover.

How do management practices align with the Forest Preserve's mission?

The Forest Preserve's mission dedicates it to the protection and conservation of the natural heritage of Will County. As a steward of the environment, the Forest Preserve District is taking a proactive approach to protect, maintain and restore the balance and sustainability of our natural areas. This includes the health of deer as well as other species. Deer herds that reach high density levels tend to be in poor health, and are prone to cyclic population fluctuations and catastrophic losses. Excessive deer populations are also incompatible with human interests and land-use practices. These can include public safety risks through increased deer-vehicle collisions, as well as transmission of disease such as Lyme disease. Losses related to agricultural production are also a consideration.

What methods of management are being considered?

Sharpshooting and public hunting, including archery and firearms, are being considered as the most feasible options. Any program initiated by the District will place public safety first and will in no way threaten the existence of deer in Will County.

How many deer will be managed?

Because the Forest Preserve is taking a proactive approach, this is a multi-year program that will allow the District to develop a well thought out management plan. The intention is to reduce deer populations until the negative impact to our preserves is alleviated, and then to maintain deer populations as needed to have a balanced ecosystem. While the District is less focused on a target number and more focused on what the ecosystem is indicating, the widely accepted deer density is a maximum of 20 deer per square mile. Most of our preserves are well above this maximum level. Regular assessment of our preserves' vegetation will allow us to adapt the program as needed.

How soon will the deer management program begin?

It is anticipated that the District's deer management program would begin in autumn 2010.

Other than just seeing some vegetation impacted, what actual studies have been done and what were the results?

As early as 1997, the District became aware of significant changes in forest structure upon completion of a vegetation study which compared two periods in time, 20 years apart. Additional browse studies have been conducted at select sites. These studies have documented the negative changes in forest structure related to overbrowsing due to the excessive deer population.

One study of Large-flowered Trillium at Messenger Woods Nature Preserve documented significant browse impacts affecting the number of Trillium and how well they were reproducing. The most dramatic evidence for these findings was recorded in 2007 when no flowering Trillium were observed in two study plots exposed to deer browse while flower abundance existed in fenced study plots protected from deer browse.

Another study in seven of our highest quality woodlands demonstrated significant recovery of the vegetation after only three years of data collection, including the increasing abundance of desirable native trees such as oaks and hickories within study plots protected from deer browse.

In 1993, the District implemented an aerial deer census program to allow the deer population levels to be correlated to vegetation monitoring results. This data clearly shows that white-tailed deer exist at densities well above levels that can be sustained by the preserves without resulting in severe degradation of the ecosystem.

Has the District consulted with other agencies about deer management?

The Forest Preserve District of Will County is one of the few forest preserve/conservation districts in Illinois currently not engaged in some form of deer management. In developing and operating a deer management program, the Forest Preserve District of Will County will be working closely with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR), the regulating agency responsible for conservation of the state's wildlife resources. The Forest Preserve District will strictly comply with all rules and regulations mandated by the IDNR, and will work to model its program after those that have had proven success by IDNR standards.

Can't the District feed the deer to offset the loss of vegetation?

State law prohibits the feeding of deer, and feeding will not solve the problem. Deer will continue to reproduce, and studies have shown that feeding actually serves to concentrate deer in small areas year after year where animals do serious and potentially irreparable damage to native vegetation. This makes deer increasingly dependent upon supplemental feed. Moreover, decades of research has shown that feeding leads to increased disease risk, long-term habitat destruction, increased vehicle collisions, habituation to humans and alteration of other deer behavioral patterns. It can also increase winter starvation by luring more animals than the feed can support. In one study, feeding was found to increase the winter death rate by 25 to 42 percent.

Can't the deer be relocated?

Deer often experience physiological trauma during capture and transportation, and relocation often results in high mortality rates for deer. Mortality after relocation within the first year has ranged from 25 to 89 percent from a wide range of causes.

Additionally, the identification of large blocks of landowners willing to serve as receptor sites in urbanized areas and the resolution of liability concerns associated with relocation make relocation extremely difficult. Many relocated deer will settle in suburban or agricultural habitats and create nuisance problems for communities and landowners.

Which preserves will be managed?

The District will prioritize preserves where habitat destruction is greatest, with special attention given to nature preserves which contain species of rare or unique ecological value. However, several criteria – including ownership, compatible use, annexation status, acreage, suitable adjacent land use buffer and deer density – will be considered as part of the District's efforts to identify deer management sites.

How will you ensure that the public is kept safe?

Public safety is priority #1. The program will provide for the area being managed to be temporarily closed to the general public during management. An additional perimeter will be generously established outside of that area as a buffer, taking into close consideration the range of the weapons to be used. A public information campaign will also be utilized to keep the public informed of locations and dates of management.

Will we no longer be able to use the preserves when we would like?

It is the District's intention to keep our preserves as available to the public as possible and to have no impact on our regularly scheduled programming.

What will you do with the deer that are removed?

If sharpshooters are used, the meat will be donated to local food pantries. If a hunting program is established, hunters would be allowed to take them.

If a hunting program is established, will it be open to Will County residents only?

This is part of the management program specifics, which are still to be developed. In any instance, Will County residents will be given preference.