FOREST PRESERVE DISTRICT WILL COUNTY
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17540 W. Laraway Road
Joliet, IL 60433
815-727-8700 • Fax 815-722-3608

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2026-2027 Deer Management Plan

Background

The Forest Preserve District of Will County (FPDWC) was established in 1927 to "acquire… and hold lands containing one or more natural forests or parts thereof or land or lands connecting such forests or parts thereof, or lands capable of being reforested, or capable of being restored to a natural condition, for the purpose of protecting and preserving the flora, fauna, and scenic beauties within such district, and to restore, restock, protect, and preserve the natural forests and such lands together with their flora and fauna, as nearly as may be, in their natural state and condition, for the purpose of the education, pleasure, and recreation of the public" (70 ILCS 805/5). Beginning in the early 1990s FPDWC staff noticed deer browse lines in several forest preserves. In 1993, the FPDWC began to document the number of deer in the forest preserve system using aerial surveys. Survey crews of two or more people counted deer between December and March, ideally when the snow is less than three days old, at least three inches deep, and in the absence of foliage to allow better visibility. Without these conditions, it is extremely difficult to observe deer that blend into the brown backdrop of winter. Surveys indicated deer densities that exceed densities of 20 deer per square mile, which is widely considered the maximum density allowable to maintain plant community quality and diversity. The FPDWC also wanted to determine impacts to the vegetation within the affected habitats caused by high deer numbers. Numerous deer browse studies have been conducted on FPDWC properties that indicate significant deer browse pressure from high deer densities result in negative shifts in species composition, decreases in diversity, and an overall decline in the quality of these natural areas. It was also noted during the pilot year of deer management that where there is a lack of preferred native forage, likely due to decades of heavy deer browse, the deer are turning to plants from which they get less nutritional value.

Current regional research and deer management programs use deer densities as a meter to help determine the scale of their deer problem. The damage that white-tailed deer do to local ecosystems, specifically plant communities, is measured to determine the success rate of a program, while deer density numbers provide a guideline for establishing removal targets. Generally, organizations in northeastern Illinois target 10-30 deer per square mile and adjust their plans accordingly over time as recovery in the plant communities occurs and the structure of the deer herds are influenced by annual herd reduction efforts. Current density numbers when looked at in conjunction with floristic surveys and deer browse data indicate that the high numbers of white-tailed deer are major contributors to the altering of ecosystems in Will County Forest Preserves.

During the 2025-2026 season, FPDWC removed a total of 293 deer, including the deer removed at the request of IDNR for Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) monitoring. The winter of 2026-2027 will be the sixteenth year of the District's deer management program. The eight management areas selected for deer removal this season are: Lockport Prairie Complex, Hickory Creek Preserve, Goodenow Grove Nature Preserve, the Romeoville Prairie Complex, the Messenger Woods Complex, McKinley Woods Preserve, Raccoon Grove Complex, and the Sands Complex (previously the Kankakee Sands Complex). These eight management units range in size from 213-1,541 acres and are undergoing habitat management and restoration efforts. This season, the FPDWC proposes removing a total of 300 deer from the preserves listed. While aerial population surveys were not conducted this season, populations can be estimated via site recruitment models, allowing for continued effective management. Although the proposed removal numbers may appear to bring five populations to the target density of 10 deer per square mile, the recruitment models are prone to underestimating populations. While the remaining three sites may not reach target density this season, the proposed numbers have been determined as reasonable removal goals based on experience culling these locations and available resources. The FPDWC expects to continue deer management in the subsequent years to reach browse and density goals.

Program Goals

The FPDWC deer management program goal is to establish and maintain white-tailed deer populations at densities that allow for a sustainable relationship between biological diversity and habitat structure. Succinctly, the deer population will be reduced to allow vegetation to recover from excessive browse.

Program Objectives

The program objectives are as follows:

1. Reduce deer browse damage to acceptable levels to promote the recovery of species diversity and community structure,
2. Monitor deer browse rates on target species to evaluate the effectiveness of deer management efforts over time, and
3. Reduce and maintain deer populations at a target density of 10 deer per square mile within selected management sites.

Site Descriptions

Lockport Prairie Complex (LPN): Lockport Prairie Nature Preserve and Prairie Bluff Preserve
(Sections 22 & 27: Township 36N. - Range 10E.; 0.6 square miles)
Lockport Prairie Nature Preserve, a unique and critically endangered dolomite prairie and wetland habitat, is located on the west side of the Des Plaines River, both north and south of Division Street, east of Route 53 between the cities of Lockport and Crest Hill. There is limited public access to this 320-acre site, and the site is actively managed with prescribed burns, native plant seeding, invasive species removal, and hydrological restoration efforts to enhance and restore the entire property. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has funded a five-year (2019-2023) Aquatic Ecosystem Restoration Project at LPN, which includes significant invasive species removal and 88,000 native plantings. This area is considered one of the highest quality dolomite prairie remnants left in Illinois, containing calcareous fens and seeps, sedge meadow and wetland communities. Given the exceptionally high quality of Lockport Prairie and the significant investment in ecosystem restoration being completed, a low deer density is needed to reduce browse pressure on the native plantings and facilitate habitat recovery. This site has been a part of the deer management program since its inception in 2010. While the vast majority of Prairie Bluff is an open prairie, the 51-acre section of woods on the corner of Renwick Rd. and Route 53 consistently holds deer across the street from LPN. It has been a beneficial addition to the Complex that will continue to be utilized.

Hickory Creek Preserve (HCP)
(Sections 13, 14, & 24: Township 35N. - Range 11E. & Sections 16, 17, 18, 19, & 20: Township 35N. - Range 12E.) (2.41 square miles)
Hickory Creek Preserve is a 1,541-acre mosaic of natural communities including woodland, wetland, barrens, and prairie around numerous public use amenities, all of which is surrounded by private residential properties. This site is a sprawling preserve surrounded by suitable habitat on private property, both capable of supporting a large population of deer. The terrain ranges from flat, to rolling, to steeply sloped areas. This preserve has varying degrees of natural community quality, including some high-quality areas, and provides habitat for several highly conservative species. HCP receives regular management in the form of prescribed burning, invasive species control, selective woody removals, and plantings to maintain higher quality areas while improving more degraded sections. HCP has been a part of the deer management program since 2013.

Goodenow Grove Nature Preserve (GGN)
(Sections 23, 26, 27, 28, 33 & 34: Township 34N. - Range 14E.; 1.39 square miles)
Goodenow Grove Nature Preserve is an 891-acre site located east of I-394 and north of Goodenow Road. The site is characterized by wooded areas along Plum Creek and its tributaries, as well as barrens (shrubby prairies), savannas, and grasslands. Goodenow Grove contains high-quality remnants of a diverse mixture of natural communities including dry-mesic and mesic upland forests, mesic and wet-mesic floodplain forests, forested seeps, savanna, dry-mesic and mesic prairies, wet-mesic prairie/sedge meadow, marshes, and vernal pools. In recent years, the site has received extensive management and restoration including invasive species control, prescribed burning, seeding, and planting efforts. The FPDWC's ecological management activities were assisted by a Habitat Fund grant awarded by the IDNR which contributed funding support for habitat restoration activities (2019-2021). This site has been managed for deer since the second year of the program in 2011.

Romeoville Prairie Complex (RPN): Romeoville Prairie Nature Preserve and Isle a la Cache

(Sections 26, 27, 34 & 35: Township 37N. - Range 10E. & Section 3: Township 36N. – Range 10E.; 1.15 square miles)

Romeoville Prairie Nature Preserve occupies over 590-acres of the Des Plaines River Valley north of 135th Street on the west side of the river. It is dominated by prairie, sedge meadow, and marsh communities. It is comprised of predominantly high-quality remnant wet-mesic dolomite prairie and contains marsh, sedge meadow, springs, fens, and floodplain forest on shallow soils over limestone bedrock. There has been a management emphasis on invasive species removal, hydrological control, and the expansion, enhancement, and monitoring of the property for rare and conservative plant species. The preserve has no public access areas and is well buffered from residential and other public spaces. The Isle a la Cache occupies 106-acres on an island in the Des Plaines River north and south of 135th Street. While the Isle a la Cache Museum and associated amenities occur in the northern unit, the preserve is flat and largely wooded with a few isolated open areas well suited for sharpshooting. Deer management at the Romeoville Prairie Complex began in 2011.

Messenger Woods Complex (MWN): Messenger Woods Nature Preserve and Messenger Marsh Preserve

(Sections 23, 24, 25, 26, 27 & 28: Township 36N. – Range 11E.; 1.82 square miles)

Messenger Woods Nature Preserve consists of 441 acres of high-quality, remnant wet-mesic and mesic Oak/Hickory woodland, wet-mesic floodplain forests, shrub swamps, and wet prairie. Messenger Marsh Preserve which encompasses over 620 acres of cattail marsh, woodlands, grassland, and ponds is adjacent to Messenger Woods Nature Preserve. When combined, these preserves make up the core of the Spring Creek Greenway. Messenger Woods is widely known for beautiful, but once spectacular spring ephemeral displays. Some major mitigation projects have been undertaken at the preserves including a large-scale wetland, prairie, and savanna restoration funded through the O'Hare Modernization and Mitigation Account and savanna/woodland re-creation as required mitigation by the Illinois State Toll Highway Authority for impacts related to the extension of I-355. Management activities throughout Messenger Woods include invasive species removal, understory tree thinning, prescribed burning, seeding, and planting. The Messenger Woods Complex was only part of the deer management program during the inaugural year and then reintroduced to the program in 2021.

McKinley Woods Preserve and Four Rivers Education Center (MWP)

(Sections 20, 29, 30 & 31: Township 34N. - Range 9E.; 0.92 square miles)

McKinley Woods is a 588-acre site situated on bluffs above the I&M Canal and the Des Plaines River. The I&M Canal State Trail is located between the river and the canal. The preserve is characterized by steep wooded bluffs and ravines that provide a very safe backdrop for firing stations. McKinley Woods is a high use, high-quality area currently receiving multiple large-scale management and restoration efforts. This includes clearing out invasive woody species such as buckthorn and honeysuckle to decrease their dominance in the existing woodlands and re-creating prairie and oak/hickory savanna over former agricultural land on the uplands above the river terrace. The Four Rivers Environmental Education Center is a 78-acre area located essentially on an island in the Des Plaines River. Except for the narrow strip of land connecting it to the mainland, this area is surrounded by water providing good isolation for sharpshooting activities. While the northern half of this site is largely open, the southern half is predominately wooded. There have been five positive CWD cases on site since 2022. McKinley Woods has been part of the culling program every year since 2010.

Raccoon Grove Complex (RGN): Raccoon Grove Nature Preserve and Monee Reservoir

(Sections 31 & 32: Township 34N. – Range 13E.; 0.73 square miles)

Raccoon Grove Nature Preserve is a 213-acre wooded preserve south of Goodenow Road, east of Route 50. This preserve is the remnant of an historic prairie grove and supports some of the highest quality woodland habitat including conservative spring ephemerals in Will County. It is characterized by rolling terrain but often features steep slopes where Rock Creek has down-cut through the morainal deposits. A restored prairie area occurs on the south end of the preserve while a former residential property area on the west side provides more of an open savanna structure. The preserve receives regular burn management and invasive species control. This site is considered a Complex with Monee Reservoir in order to provide more accurate herd counts, reasonable removal goals, and additional shooting locations. Monee Reservoir is a popular fishing location with centrally located visitors center and boat launch, both of which close November 1st. There are 1.6 miles of trails through wetlands on the north end of the preserve, the lake occupies the east side, an agricultural field is to the west, and trees border a restored prairie to the south. Monee Reservoir will be used as a secondary shooting location for when the deer are inevitably pressured off Raccoon Grove.

Sands Complex (BSA): Braidwood Dunes and Savanna Nature Preserve, Sand Ridge Savanna Preserve and Nature Preserve (Sections 10, 11, 14, 15, 16, & 26: Township 32N. – Range 9D.; 2.21 square miles)

The Sands Complex is 1,414 acres comprised of three adjacent preserves in southern Will County. Kankakee Sands Preserve has been designated as part of Sand Ridge Savanna Nature Preserve; the complex acronym stands for Braidwood Sands Area. These preserves contain a wide variety of high-quality remnant and restored areas that support a wide variety of species unique to sands habitats. Restoration efforts include invasive species treatments, prescribed burning, seeding, and restoring all agricultural fields to prairie habitats. This Complex has produced ten positive CWD cases since 2013. Previously included in this permit application as part of the CWD surveillance program, it will now be included as a formal DPCP site, including the documentation of browse damage to native vegetation.

Documentation of Problem

Deer Browse Monitoring 2026

Persistent damage from deer browsing reduces the flower and seed production of plants, thus diminishing species' ability to reproduce and persist. To measure the damage done by deer to native vegetation, single species plots are monitored each year at each of the proposed deer management sites. Plots were selected based on known populations of native plant species, with special attention given to listed species, species of concern, and more conservative species in descending order of priority. The coordinates have been recorded for each 3m radius plot. Within each plot, the total number of plants of a designated target species, as well as the number of those plants damaged by deer browse, were recorded. Plants with damage that could not confidently be identified as deer browse, were included in the total number of plants, but not in number browsed. Each season, effort is made to monitor the herbaceous plots within a month of the original survey date.

The deer browse data was recorded in the ArcGIS ap *Field Maps* then loaded into an Excel spreadsheet, sorted by site, and assigned C-values as per *Flora of the Chicago Region* (Wilhelm and Rericha, 2017). Plants were categorized as generalist (C-value 0-3), moderately conservative (C-value 4-6), and highly conservative (C-value 7+). Browse rates above 30% have been deemed an unacceptable level of browse. In time, acceptable browse rates will be developed on a gradient for each C-value group. The results varied by site, but each location experienced browse damage above the 30% threshold.

Proposed Methods and Procedures

The FPDWC sharpshooting program will utilize FPDWC police personnel, staff, and qualified volunteers as sharpshooters, field dressers, and for coordinating transportation of the deer carcasses to an authorized meat processing facility. Deer will be taken at bait stations by FPDWC sharpshooters, and all bait stations will adhere to the IDNR regulations for safety. Bait stations will be located at least 100 yards into management sites as per FPDWC requirements. All bait stations must be pre-approved by IDNR.

All sharpshooter candidates will be tested and seasonally approved by the IDNR prior to deer program implementation. Each volunteer candidate must be an Illinois resident, possess a valid firearm owner's identification (FOID) card, and pass a verbal interview, background check, drug screening, and practice shooting qualification round conducted by FPDWC police before being considered for testing by the IDNR. The program will not authorize the use of archery equipment, handguns, shotguns, muzzle-loading rifles, etc. Only modern rifles firing 0.223, 0.300, or 0.308 rounds are proposed for use in the sharpshooting program.

Techniques authorized under Deer Population Control Permits require that the resulting deer carcasses are suitable for human consumption. The permittee is required to have all usable deer carcasses processed at an IDNR-approved meat processing facility and to donate the processed venison to a bona fide charitable organization. FPDWC utilizes Freedom Sausage in Earlville for meat processing, and the meat is donated to the Northern Illinois Food Bank. Unusable deer carcasses must be disposed of in accordance with the Illinois Dead Animal Disposal Act. Since deer collected under deer population control permits must be used for human consumption, the FPDWC's permit season would take place during the cooler late fall and winter months (November to March).

The FPDWC must return all unused tags along with a deer removal summary within 30 days after permit expiration. The removal summary must list the tag number, location, sex, age, and physical condition of each animal collected, the total amount of processed venison donated, and the names of the charities receiving the donated meat. The FPDWC is responsible for all costs associated with the deer control program.

Staff has reviewed and researched current urban deer programs and recommendations extensively. The FPDWC has set the target density to 10 deer per square mile based on this research (current literature suggests that pre-settlement densities of white-tailed deer were approximately 9 deer per square mile). The target number of deer to be removed from each site was determined based on the stated desired density, the estimated deer population based on the most recent aerial surveys, as well as being contingent on the resources available to the FPDWC.

Proposed Removals

The expected fall densities for the proposed deer management sites range from 24-73 deer/mi², which are above the target density of 10 deer/mi². Therefore, the FPDWC proposes removing 300 deer from eight management units during the 2026 deer management season. Rationale for proposed removals are discussed for each site below.

Aerial surveys were not conducted this winter; therefore, population estimates are based on previous aerial data and site recruitment rates. It has been established that using the recruitment models is more accurate than using aerial survey data alone. Note that recruitment models tend to underestimate population growth, so all proposed population estimates are likely based on underestimates of the actual population size. This means, for example, populations expected to be within target density post-culling will likely be over the desired density, in reality.

Lockport Prairie Complex
As part of the 2025 DPCP, 40 deer were removed from LPN. The post-culling population was estimated to be 18 deer, with average recruitment of 26 deer. The fall 2026 population is estimated to be 44 deer, a density of 73 deer per square mile before management. Removing 40 deer would result in a density of 7 deer per square mile. Even though LPN does consistently hold a deer population, it is not prime deer habitat. Deer numbers here are prone to high levels of fluctuation since this site is part of the river wildlife corridor, and they quickly become gun-shy. These factors make removals difficult and enforce the need for continued yearly management.

Hickory Creek Preserve
As part of the 2025 DPCP, 60 deer were removed from HCP. The post-culling population was estimated to be 97 deer, with average recruitment at 26 deer. The fall 2026 population is estimated to be 123 deer, a density of 51 deer per square mile before management. Removing 60 deer would result in a density of 26 deer per square mile. These estimates are likely an underrepresentation of the population size. Despite heavy management since the 2013/14 season, the large deer population is slow to respond. Therefore, continued aggressive deer management in subsequent years will be necessary to reach density and browse reduction goals.

Goodenow Grove Nature Preserve
Last season's efforts resulted in 44 deer being removed from GGN. The post-culling population was estimated to be 21 deer, with average recruitment of 26 deer. The fall 2026 population is estimated to be 47 deer, a density of 34 deer per square mile before management. Removing 40 deer would result in a density of 5 deer per square mile. Continued management will be necessary to maintain the population at the target density.

Romeoville Prairie Complex
Last season 19 deer were removed from RPN. The post-culling population was estimated to be 17 deer, with average recruitment of 16 deer. The fall 2026 population is estimated to be 33 deer, a density of 31 deer per square mile before management. Removing 20 deer would result in a density of 12 deer per square mile. This complex is a river corridor for wildlife, causing high levels of fluctuation in population counts. Consistent annual management will be continued to maintain this population near the target density.

Messenger Woods Complex
Last season, 50 deer were removed from the Messenger Complex. The post-culling population was estimated to be 78 deer, with average recruitment of 30 deer. The fall 2026 population is estimated to be 108 deer, a density of 59 deer per square mile before management. Removing 60 deer would result in a density of 26 deer per square mile. Until its reintroduction to the program for the 2021-2022 season, this complex had only been managed once during the pilot year of the program. The density of the deer population has increased substantially with the absence of deer management. Continued annual management will be required to bring the deer population down to target density.

McKinley Woods Preserve

Last season, 30 deer were removed from MWP. The post-culling population was estimated to be 15 deer, with average recruitment of 18 deer. The fall 2026 population is estimated to be 33 deer, a density of 36 deer per square mile before management. Removing 30 deer would result in a density of 3 deer per square mile. Consistent annual management should be maintained to manage the spread of CWD and maintain the population near target density.

Raccoon Grove Complex

The 2025 season removed 20 deer from the Raccoon Grove Complex, and the post-culling population was estimated to be 39 deer. The average recruitment of 11 deer fluctuates highly with the population. The fall 2026 population is estimated to be 50 deer, a density of 43 deer per square mile before management. Removing 20 deer would result in a density of 42 deer per square mile. The goal for this site is to maintain culling pressure on the population, which helps protect oak and hickory saplings from being over browsed during the winter season.

Sands Complex

The 2025 season removed 30 deer from the Sands Complex, and the post-culling population was estimated to be 36 deer. The average recruitment of 18 deer fluctuates highly with the population. The fall 2026 population is estimated to be 54 deer, a density of 24 deer per square mile before management. Removing 30 deer would result in a density of 11 deer per square mile. The Sands Complex was part of IDNR's Chronic Wasting Disease monitoring program from 2011-2025. A positive case was discovered in the unit in 2013, and nine additional positive cases have been found since 2021. Culling approximately 30 deer annually at the request of DNR CWD surveillance has been effective at reducing the population size close to target density in recent years.

Literature Cited

Downstate Forest Preserve District Act. 70 ILCS 805/5. Ch. 96 1/2, par. 6308.

Wilhelm, Gerould, and Laura Rericha. *Flora of the Chicago Region: A Floristic and Ecological Synthesis*. Indiana Academy of Science, 2017.