

"Federation Corner" column
Montgomery Sentinel - February 18, 2010

Oh, Deer!

by Carole Ann Barth, Chair, MCCF Parks and Recreation Committee

This is the first of two columns on the Montgomery County deer situation.

If you spend any time in the parks, you are probably aware of the skyrocketing deer population. In fact, you can see them everywhere; from small suburban backyards to roadsides; and even in urban areas. It is astonishing to see a group of such large, gangly-looking animals leap effortlessly over obstacles and disappear into the tiniest patch of cover in an instant.

When I was a child, it was an extremely rare treat to actually see any of the deer that lived in the woods in our neighborhood. Even today, the sudden sight of a deer can still put a catch in my breath. However, I know that these frequent sightings are the symptoms of an ecological disaster.

Deer are most evident during breeding season, from October through December. They are also most unpredictable at this time of year. A few years ago, a deer wandered into a Metro station, hopped the turnstile and proceeded to the platform. Recently, a deer actually jumped into the lion enclosure at the National Zoo. So it is not surprising that 1,841 deer-car collisions were reported in Montgomery County in 2008.

Why are there so many deer? To begin with, deer are an "edge" species. They thrive on the variety of food found in the interface of forest and field. Before European colonization, most of the region was covered in dense woods, so deer habitat was quite limited. As forests were cut, the balance shifted. More deer habitat equaled more deer. In addition, large predators--wolves and mountain lions--were eliminated, so there was little except for hunting to stop expanding deer numbers.

As suburban development became widespread, the landscape became almost all edge, and hunting was banned or heavily regulated in the newly developed areas. Deer breed quickly; in fact, they can have as many as three young a year. Populations can more than double in two years' time. So in hindsight, it is not surprising that deer populations have rapidly soared in the wake of recent land-use changes.

Just how much has the deer population grown in the eastern U.S.? New Jersey provides an interesting example. Estimates are that in 1500, New Jersey's deer population density was about 9 deer per square mile, spread across the state. Today, the average population density is 50 per square mile. In some natural areas, the density is over 100 animals per square mile.

An average deer eats six to eight pounds of plants a day, or one and one-quarter tons per year. So it is easy to see how even a few deer can wipe out a garden or significantly damage a farmer's crops. But the lasting damage is to our remaining forests.

Forests heavily browsed by deer have little or no understory. With no saplings and seedlings, there are no replacements for trees that die. With no shrubs and wildflowers, there is no nesting area for shrub or ground-nesting birds. There is no safe place on the forest floor for amphibians and small mammals. In fact, deer sometimes consume baby birds in the nest and rare butterfly eggs along with the plants on which they rest. And because deer usually prefer native plants, deer overpopulation also helps exotic invasive plants spread and thrive. The result is a forest missing both its structural complexity and its species diversity.

Eventually, with no population controls, food becomes scarce and the deer begin to suffer. Starving, diseased, and suffering from parasites, deer can no longer be selective about what they eat. This has already happened in many areas.

The following are some useful contact numbers for county residents to keep handy.

Removal of dead deer from roads - The Montgomery County Animal Shelter at 240-777-5960

Report damage to agricultural crops, gardens and ornamental plants- The Deer Management Work Group at 301-949-2909

Preventing deer damage - The Nuisance Animal Information Line 1-877-463-6497 or the Montgomery County Cooperative Extension Service at 301-590-9650

General questions about deer - the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) or their Wildlife Division at 301-258-7308.

The following are emergency contact numbers:

Montgomery County Animal Shelter - 240-773-5960

Maryland-National Capital Park & Planning Commission (M-NCPPC) Park Police, Montgomery County - 301-949-3010

Montgomery County Police - 301-279-8000

Maryland DNR Wildlife Division (Monday-Friday, 8 am-4:30 pm) - 301-258-7308

Maryland DNR Wildlife Division (after hours) - 410-260-8888

In the second part of Oh, Deer!, coming this spring, we will look at what management options and population control strategies are available to manage deer in the county.

The views expressed in this column do not necessarily reflect formal positions adopted by the Federation. To submit an 800-1000 word column for consideration, send as an email attachment to theelms518@earthlink.net