

Deer Management Project FAQs

August, 2024

Project Information

What is the Deer Management Project?

- The Deer Management Project is Arlington's initiative to assess the County's white-tailed deer population and their potential impact on County-owned natural land parks to ensure that we are meeting our management goals and conserving our ecological inheritance.

What prompted the need for the Deer Management Project?

- While native and an important part of Arlington's ecology, studies have shown that above certain population densities, white-tailed deer can degrade the function of local ecosystems like forests by eating certain key plants faster than they can regenerate themselves.
- As herbivores, a single adult deer consumes 5 to 7 lbs. of plant matter in one day. Over 1 ton of vegetation is consumed by one deer in one year.
- Because Arlington's deer population is not constrained by any predators, it is able to grow exponentially to levels at which it may no longer be in balance with our local ecology.
- By managing the deer population, our goal is to conserve our forests for all native plants and animals, and retain the public health, urban cooling, and flood reduction benefits that forests provide our community as we seek to address problem of climate change.

Will Arlington County conduct a Deer Management Program?

- After careful consideration of multiple factors, including community feedback, regional benchmark data, comprehensive research, and [consultant recommendations](#), the County has decided to implement a Deer Management Program. The program will use professional sharpshooting as the primary method of population control, which is considered a valid form of euthanasia by the American Veterinary Medical Association.

What does the Deer Management Program include?

- **Professional Sharpshooting:** Primary method to immediately reduce the deer population in County-owned natural land parks. This method is safe, cost-effective, and is supported by peer-reviewed scientific studies as an effective method of population control. Changes to Arlington County Code are required in order to implement professional sharpshooting on County natural land parks. Harvested deer will be tested for disease and if appropriate, the venison will be donated to local food banks.
- **Fencing/Repellents:** Recommended for small areas to protect priority plant species.
- **Continued Monitoring:** Conduct periodic deer population surveys using drones and assess impact from deer feeding on plants annually (herbivory impact assessment) based on established methods.
- **Review Deer Vehicle Collision Data and Intake Collection Methods:** [Review](#) Arlington County Police Department, Animal Welfare League of Arlington, and VDOT tracking methods.
- **Monitor Tick-Borne Disease:** Incorporate Center for Disease Control annual Lyme disease numbers into monitoring program. Explore options for monitoring other relevant diseases such as alpha-gal.

Is professional sharpshooting safe and how is it conducted?

- Public safety is Arlington's top priority. Professional contracted sharpshooters would operate at night while parks are closed, shooting downward from tree stands at short range. They use sound suppressors to mitigate noise and use special non-lead-based ammunition that is designed to be humane for deer and safe to use in urban and suburban landscapes.
- Parks would be closed prior to and during sharpshooting operations and closely monitored by the Arlington Police Department and Park Rangers. Sharpshooting operations have been carried out nationwide for decades with zero reported injuries to bystanders.

How effective is professional sharpshooting?

- Research suggests that sharpshooting can reduce deer populations enough to increase native forest regeneration.
- Professional sharpshooting is more efficient and cost-effective at scale relative to surgical sterilization.
- Professional sharpshooting requires two stages of management. An initial larger population reduction followed by smaller annual efforts as needed. Management is informed by regular monitoring.
- This method requires state permit approval and amendments to the Arlington County Code.

What are the next steps for the Deer Management Program in Arlington?

- **Fall 2024:** Staff will propose amendments to the County Code to permit professional sharpshooting in Arlington County-owned natural land parks.
- **Winter 2025:** Staff will develop a deer management operations plan that prepares for the program's implementation.
- **Winter 2026:** Contracted professional sharpshooting will commence in parks.

General Information

How was the overpopulation of deer in Arlington determined?

- In April 2021, Arlington County contracted with [Steward Green](#) LLC, to conduct an aerial drone survey to assess the number and locations of deer within the County using infrared cameras.
- The survey counted 290 deer County-wide (not including federal lands) and while this could be read as 13 deer per square mile, the key takeaway is that the deer were not evenly distributed throughout the County, but were highly concentrated in our County-owned natural land parks at levels beyond what those parks can sustain.
- While ecological carrying capacity (or maximum population size) is regionally understood to be less than or equal to 15–20 deer per square mile, population densities were 1.9–17 times the recommended levels in key County-owned natural land parks.
- Arlington County followed up its 2021 deer population count with herbivory impact surveys in 12 ecologically significant parks in 2022. These field surveys directly measured deer damage to plant communities to determine if overpopulated deer were harming forest health and sustainability. In 12/12 parks surveyed, the County's consultant, White Buffalo Inc., observed substantial damage to native plant communities from deer overpopulation.

How does an overpopulation of white-tailed deer impact Arlington's County-owned natural land parks?

- A single adult deer consumes 5 to 7 lbs. of plant matter per day or 1 ton of vegetation per year. While an important part of Arlington's ecology, studies have shown that above certain population densities, white-tailed deer can degrade the function of local ecosystems like forests by eating certain key plants faster than they can regenerate themselves.
- As these plants are repeatedly browsed, they are unable to reproduce and often die out. This inability to reproduce has long term effects as plants are not replaced when lost.
- The first signs of negative impacts to other plants and wildlife are often subtle – certain preferred species may still be present but will not consistently be able to flower, fruit, and disperse their seeds. They may remain as low sprouts except where deer don't feed – on a steep bank or close to a trail.
- When deer start to feed on wider ranges of species, impacts to wildlife become more pronounced. Animals that live or nest in this part of the forest – from box turtles to ground nesting birds – will decline with the loss of the habitat they depend on.
- Eventually, entire forests can disappear as large, mature trees die out and there are no young trees to replace them.
- When deer populations increase to unsustainable densities, it is better ecologically and financially to act sooner, rather than later, as deer populations, and their impacts can grow exponentially.

What deer management strategies do surrounding jurisdictions use?

- Professional sharpshooting is taking place in neighboring areas, such as Fairfax County, Washington D.C., Montgomery County, and Prince George's County, to successfully manage deer populations.
- Programs like those in Fairfax and Montgomery County are made up of hybrid approaches including police sharpshooting, firearms-based managed hunting, and archery-based managed hunting. These programs have provided venison to individuals and organizations such as the Capital Area Food Bank.
- Active public archery has been occurring at the Army Navy Country Club since 2012.