

Managing Deer for Ecosystem Health

BLUE MOUNTAIN—
KITTATINNY RIDGE
CONSERVATION
PROJECT

In many areas of Pennsylvania, including many within the Blue Mountain-Kittatinny Ridge corridor, overbrowsing by a white-tailed deer herd out of balance with its habitat is threatening the future of our forests. Overabundant deer can eliminate the shrub and sapling layer of a forest, leaving little cover for nesting birds and other wildlife. When an old tree falls, too often there is no young tree waiting to take its place in the canopy. Deer must be properly managed to maintain our forested lands for future generations. Private landowners sometimes feel helpless when it comes to this issue, but they can make a significant impact on their lands by taking affirmative steps to bring the deer herd into balance with its habitat.



Jake Dingel/PGC Photo

Shouldn't deer naturally fall into balance with their habitat?

In a pristine setting this may be the case, but our natural areas are now severely altered and require management to sustain proper ecosystem function. The most glaring changes since pre-Colonial times are conversion of forest to other land uses and the removal of predators. Deer populations have benefited from the conversion of forest lands to more open land uses, including residential development, golf courses and agriculture. While deer used to be kept in check by wolves, mountain lions, and other predators, we now depend on human hunters to mimic the predator-prey balance.

Managing Deer for Ecosystem Health (cont'd)

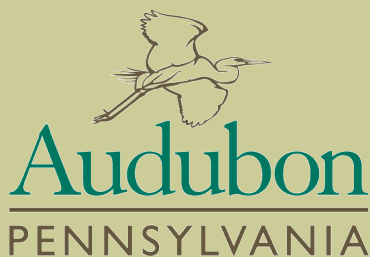
RESOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION

Managing White-tailed Deer in Forest Habitat from an Ecosystem Perspective. Report by the Deer Management Forum for Audubon Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Habitat Alliance. Available for free download at: pa.audubon.org/deer_report.html

For all rules, regulations, and license information, visit the Pennsylvania Game Commission at: www.pgc.state.pa.us.

Pennsylvania Deer Management Assistance Program: www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/open=514&objID=622401&mode=2

Hunters Sharing the Harvest. A program designed to allow hunters to donate venison to those in need by bringing their deer to a participating butcher shop. Online at sharedeer.org.



What deer management tools are available to private landowners?

In addition to the ability to hunt or allow hunting on their properties (subject to safety zone and other restrictions), there are other programs available to help private landowners manage deer. The Deer Management Assistance Program, coordinated by the Pennsylvania Game Commission, allows private landowners to receive additional antlerless deer tags in accordance with their management plans. There are also ways of receiving additional tags if you are experiencing crop damage due to deer.

I already allow hunting on my property, but it doesn't seem to be having an impact. What else can I do?

Depending on the circumstances, there are a number of options that may be considered. You can require people hunting on your property to take one or more does in a season before they can take a buck. Hunting on private property is a privilege, and hunters should be willing to help you meet your management goals in exchange for that privilege. Coordinating hunting activities with neighboring properties can increase the effectiveness of your hunters. You may also want to consider fencing especially sensitive ecological areas while you work to get the deer population down to an appropriate level.



Photo by Brian Byrnes/Audubon

Overbrowsing by deer has left many of Pennsylvania's forests devoid of an understory. When deer are out of balance with their habitat, they suppress growth of many preferred foods, including shrubs and young trees. Without this cover, birds struggle to find appropriate nesting sites and fallen trees are replaced by invasive plants instead of young native trees.

Is hunting the only option for controlling the deer population? What about birth control?

Until recently, there were no approved methods of birth control in Pennsylvania. While there is now an approved method, its effectiveness at bringing deer populations down far enough for habitat to recover is questionable. Birth control can only reduce deer populations if a large percentage of does are treated consistently over a long period of time.

In some situations, recreational hunting is simply not possible. Another option that has been used successfully, especially in urban and suburban areas, is sharpshooting. Although more expensive than recreational hunting, sharpshooting can quickly and safely reduce the local deer population.