

Did You Know That the overabundance of deer has had an adverse effect on habitat for birds, other wildlife and plants.

When reading through New York State's Deer Management Plan (Goal 5: Deer Habitat), "deer are intricately connected to the habitat in which they live, relying on habitat resources for food, water, and cover. Yet as herbivores feeding on a wide variety of herbaceous and woody plants, deer are capable of dramatically altering the structure and composition of their forest habitat. Accordingly, deep impacts on forest ecosystems are an important consideration for managing deer populations through-out New York."

There is a direct relationship between deer density and forage availability. By selectively feeding on the highest quality and most palatable forage available, excessive deer browsing can result in mortality or reduced growth of young plants and prohibit successful regeneration of preferred forage species. Highly preferred herbaceous and woody plants may be suppressed, and the forest may slowly transition toward less palatable and browse-tolerant vegetation (Horsley et al. 2003). This reduces the ability of a forest to replace itself and creates conditions that favor exotic and invasive species (Baiser et al. 2008). Areas heavily impacted by deer are typified by clear browse lines, lacking much of the understory

vegetation up to the height deer can reach. This is what people see as they travel and hike around Shelter Island.

In an article written on January 25, 2015 in The Suffolk Times by John Bredemeyer, “the overpopulation of deer is increasingly affecting the human and natural landscape in Southold Town. It is directly and indirectly impacting our water quality, our shoreline bluffs (due to destruction of vegetation), headlands and wetlands. Even when attempts are made to groom and re-vegetate damaged areas, deer promptly trample or eat the repairs. Areas that used to be oak-hickory forests, such as Mashomack Preserve, with thick understory of beneficial native vegetation – such as wild blueberries and huckleberries that provide food and nesting sites for birds, butterflies and the like – are now devoid of vegetation or are being overtaken by invasive plant species. The loss of the understory, of new trees and tree and plant diversity, has altered food sources, mating, nesting and nursery sites for insects, birds and small mammals. In addition, as older trees are lost to disease and storm damage, with no new trees coming to replace them, birds like the woodpecker, chickadee and tree swallow have no place to nest. And with no ground cover, towhee and bobwhite numbers have plummeted.

Whether a longtime resident or visitor, you’ve seen the difference. Over the past 10 years, studies in the Pine Barrens, at Mashomack Preserve here on Shelter Island and at various Southold properties, experts have

documented the significant loss of our woodlands, which in turn will endanger not only wildlife but the protection of our land and our water.

The number of deer in a given area depends on the availability of food and winter cover. If food sources dwindle, herd size would decrease through disease, starvation and lower birth rates. The trouble is that man has thrown the natural system out of balance.

Landscaping and agricultural operations have provided abundant food supplies. As a result, deer are reproducing without limit. Because of low mortality rate for adult deer and favorable conditions for reproduction, suburban deer can double in size every 2-5 years.

The true barometer of health is the ability of our ecosystems to flourish, self-renew and continue in balance. Because deer have a large and varied diet, there is little that they won't eat. Twigs, leaves, bark, grasses, weeds and soft stemmed plants, acorns, other nuts, fruits, mushrooms, algae and mosses are all on their menu. But at their base, deer thrive on the seedlings of most species and, over a short period of time, strip the understory bare. In its current state, it could take decades to restore our woodlands. This is why effective deer management plans need to be adopted and implemented here on Shelter Island. We need to protect all our ecosystems and the other animal species that inhabit our island. Now is the time to act.

References:

New York State's Deer Management Plan – Goal 5: Deer Habitat 2012

The Suffolk Times: Guest Column, 11/29/14: “How Deer Have Decimated Our Woodlands” by Bill Toedter

The Suffolk Times: Guest Column, 1/25/15: “The Effects of Deer Overpopulation: by John Bredemeyer