

Goucher aims to thin deer with bowmen

Gadi Dechter

Goucher College plans to hire professional bowmen over the holidays to thin the population of white-tailed deer that roam the leafy 287-acre campus - a move that has provoked an outcry from surprised students.

An hour after campus officials sent an e-mail Wednesday announcing the deer kill, a protest petition was circulating among a student body known for its activism. On Facebook, a student group titled "F - - Goucher, save the DEER!" had 79 members last night.

"I'm so upset," said sophomore Lily Alden, who is organizing the petition drive and had collected more than 50 signatures in 24 hours. "They sent the e-mail right before exams, right before we leave for break, which I'm sure was not an accident."

College officials say that sharply reducing the population of roughly 200 deer that share the wooded Towson campus with about 1,500 undergraduates is necessary to maintain the health of the remaining deer, reduce the risk of car crashes, protect landscaping and prevent the spread of Lyme disease. The campus health center this year saw five confirmed cases of the potentially serious illness, which is spread by deer ticks.

"There are simply too many Bambis," said President Sanford J. Ungar by phone last night from New York City. "Everybody tends to look at this as we're slaughtering poor defenseless Bambi and her relatives. It's not that simple. Bambi is starving to death. Bambi is so skinny now, it's pathetic."

A biologist with the Maryland Department of Natural Resources told campus officials that the wooded areas of the school should support only about 40 deer, said Goucher director of public safety Alexis Marchesiello.

Over the holiday break, a Fallston-based wildlife control company licensed by DNR will bring in a team of bow hunters who will try from tree stands to kill about 50 of the animals, she said.

Harvested venison meat will be donated to homeless shelters.

Roaming families of spotted deer are a common sight at the private liberal arts college, which prides itself on its environmentally-friendly grounds. The saucer-eyed creatures are featured on Goucher's Web site and mentioned in commencement speeches. "Deer of all ages and sizes run freely around campus as soon as dusk falls," senior Lisa Gulian said in a graduation address last spring when reminding the Class of 2007 "what makes Goucher, Goucher."

Ungar concedes the deer are charming but said they have become so habituated to being among cars and people that they constitute a real danger in large numbers. "There are nights when I drive up my driveway to my [on-campus] house and I have to slow down while six or 10 deer move aside," he said.

George Timko, an urban deer biologist with the natural resources department, said that he first began advising the college about its growing deer problem in 2004, and that thinning the herd is an effective strategy to promote the health of the surviving animals and protect the humans occupying their habitats.

Overpopulated herds of deer living in confined spaces, particularly in the suburbs, tend to be "not too healthy and not too happy," Timko said.

The state estimates there are about 245,000 deer in Maryland, and the goal is to reduce that number to 215,000. Timko said that estimates of suburban deer are more difficult to gauge, and that those herds are especially problematic because they are removed from natural predators that feast on them in the wild.

Hagerstown Community College and other suburban campuses have recently experienced deer problems, Timko said.

At Goucher, Marchesiello said that several carcasses have recently been found near Dulaney Valley Road, and that deer droppings on the athletic fields are a growing nuisance to student athletes. There have been no recent deer-involved car accidents on campus, she said.

The hunt should take from two days to a week, Marchesiello said. The holiday break begins Dec. 14, but Marchesiello declined to reveal when the hunt would occur. "We're trying to avoid having outside protests or other unnecessary attention," she said.

Still, officials disputed the suggestion they timed the announcement to diminish protest. "If we wanted to mute campus comment, we would have done it when [the students] were gone," Ungar said.

Matt Simon, managing editor of the student newspaper, said the deer kill "is going to be probably a really huge issue here. It's kind of baffling to a lot of people that they're going to be hunting what Goucher's known for."

Not all students were outraged. Sophomore Erika Cardona called the deer hunt a "necessary evil," and said most of her friends feel the same way. "It has to happen; otherwise, all the other deer will get sick, and we'll lose the whole population," she said. "And I don't want that."

While some students expressed frustration at the late notice of the impending deer hunt, they will likely have opportunities for future protests. Even if the hunters manage to bag 50 deer in the coming weeks, that would leave the campus herd about 100 animals larger than its ideal population. "We realize this is going to have to be an ongoing process," said Marchesiello. "We may have to do something annually."

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