

No exaggeration, deer are everywhere in the Baltimore area

Hallie Miller, Liz Bowie

They're prancing in your garden, chomping away at flowers. They're grazing in herds, populating bushy forests and parks. They're stalking busy roads, waiting for an opening to dart across.

Deer are everywhere in the Baltimore area — and that's not an exaggeration.

While the statewide population has dropped by about a third after peaking in the early 2000s, state officials say their numbers have since grown stronger in the Baltimore-Washington corridor, where they have fewer natural predators, are protected by stricter hunting guidelines and people who believe wildlife should be protected. In some areas, there are densities of 200 to 300 deer per square mile — in areas with sensitive plant species that deer will eat, the recommended density is five to 10 deer per square mile.

State officials who oversee Maryland's deer populations said they have urged Baltimore-area executives and legislators to enact looser restrictions on hunting and to hire more staff dedicated to deer management but have not been successful.

"You just have overabundance, deer are taking refuge in the suburbs, parklands, people's backyards; anyplace they're not being either hunted or predated," said George Timko, assistant deer project leader at the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, who has tracked the state's deer population for decades. "You need dedicated staffing and resources to try to address these issues. But frankly, there's very limited staff ... and it's a political hot potato."

In addition to deer being a nuisance to some, they also may have Lyme disease-carrying ticks and run into cars and cause accidents. And environmentalists are worried about the havoc they can wreak on forests and other areas that rely on greenery.

As part of The Baltimore Banner's "Better Baltimore" series, which examines what's going well in the region and what stands to be improved, we explored the complexities of reducing Maryland's deer population.

'Increasing conflicts'

Deer have long been ingrained in Maryland's state fabric as sources of food, clothing and trade. In 1729, Maryland colonists passed legislation that prohibited killing deer from Jan. 15 to July 31, with violators fined 400 pounds of tobacco per deer, [according to state records](#).

Deer hunting was further regulated in the early 20th century and herds were more protected through animal refuge sites and wildlife management efforts, according to the [Maryland Department of Natural Resources' deer management plan from 2020 to 2034](#). Deer and human populations were rapidly expanding by the mid-1980s, causing "increasing conflicts" between the two groups, per the plan.

More recently, the numbers have dropped significantly in rural Maryland after state officials responded to complaints from farmers, gardeners and motorists in the 2000s about rambunctious deer. Both lethal tools — such as hunting, sharpshooting and bow hunting — and non-lethal measures — female deer sterilization, fencing and repellent sprays — were used.

"Hunters [are] even complaining, 'ain't no deer,'" Timko said about the state's rural regions. "We know there's plenty of deer, but not as many as they would like."

Deer, which can easily adapt to different environments, have gotten smarter over time and have learned to avoid sites they might be hunted, gravitating instead to better food sites and safer resting spots, such as in the Baltimore region.

Data from 2018 show the state's estimated deer population peaked in 2002 at close to 300,000, to slightly more than 200,000 now. The majority are outside of Garrett and Allegany counties, in Washington County and much of the rest of the state.

While some Maryland gardeners said they grow specifically to feed wildlife, others have become more exasperated with the surging deer population.

"We are definitely hearing about it more and more," said Carrie Engel, the retail greenhouse manager at Valley View Farms in Baltimore County.

Valley View Farms has increased their selection of deer-repellent sprays and resistant plants, held seminars for fed-up gardeners and begun handing out brochures with tips for plant protection.

Engel has firsthand experience with rogue deer: A deer snacked on new hydrangeas in the half hour she was inside eating a quick lunch. Some also nibbled at a beautiful variety of flowering lily left next to her front door.

Engel uses environmentally-friendly, concentrated deer spray mixed with water to spray on plants every 30 days, which she says has helped keep them away. She has also found another trick: owning a big dog.

Deer legislation

Hunting, or “lethal deer management,” is considered the most effective way to control population numbers, state officials say, but each county has its own rules and regulations.

In Baltimore, for example, bow hunting is permitted on the city’s watersheds: Liberty, Loch Raven and Prettyboy reservoirs in Baltimore County. Hunters can only kill limited numbers of male deer, and no hunting is permitted on Sundays.

In place of more lax restrictions on deer hunting, some private businesses and institutions have sought more immediate relief and sometimes found themselves in political crossfire. In 2007, Goucher College sparked an outcry from students [when it shared it would hire professional bowmen to lessen the white-tailed deer population that roamed the campus.](#)

Timko said state parks and other jurisdictions have worked with sharpshooters to remove deer from some parcels. The carcasses are then taken to processors or butchers, with much of the meat donated. He estimates 1,700 to 1,900 deer are “processed” statewide each year.

Adding to the problem of population control, hunting has become “frowned upon” by suburban communities and there are fewer hunters as hobbyists age out, Timko said.

Prince George’s County legislators’ attempts to pass looser deer hunting laws in the 2022 General Assembly session underscores just how politically divisive and fraught the topic can be. Introduced by the county’s House delegation and Sen. Michael A. Jackson, a bill that initially would’ve permitted Sunday hunting in the county didn’t advance in this year’s legislative session.

The bill also would’ve cut the safety zone for archery hunters from 150 yards to 50 yards from a house, church or other human-occupied building. It was quickly amended to strike out the Sunday hunting provision.

Several testified against the bill, including representatives from the Maryland Horse Council, as well as residents of the county and those who said they’ve been in the vicinity of stray bullets on hunting days.

“The idea that some yo-yo can be shooting 50 yards from my house now is not a great idea,” said Barbara Sollner-Webb, who testified that she was riding a horse when she was shot at from neighboring land where hunting is allowed. “The hunters don’t have infinitely good shots so allowing them to shoot yet nearer to residents ... I think is just setting up for shooting residents and their animals.”

‘If you can’t beat them, join them’

As some residents learn to shrug off their unwanted encounters with deer, others have gotten creative — but even that hasn’t always worked.

Jill-Ann Mark of Ellicott City built an 8-foot fence around her garden, using a rain gutter as the top rail so she can grow even more greens there. Over time, the deer have learned to jump the fence.

One doe jumped and died in her yard, and Mark and her husband had to dispose of the body.

Motion-detecting sprinklers were costly and didn’t deter the deer. Sprays also have failed.

“I am angry, but not with the deer,” Mark said. “I think Howard County needs to look much more strongly at control measures. If they’re not willing to let any kind of hunting happen in residential areas, I think they need to do something like birth control, even if it’s expensive. We can’t continue like this.”

Some gardeners have had small wins.

In Baltimore County, Adam Laye said he’s spent “an insane amount” of money to protect his plants; years of trial and error finally have paid off. He plants what deer don’t want closer to where they tend to browse. “If you can’t beat them, join them,” he said.

Nancy Raskin, president of the Horticulture Society of Maryland, plants deer resistant varieties of perennials along the perimeter of her garden. A stand of Monarda, also known as bee balm, attracts large numbers of butterflies; deer can’t bear the smell and stay away.

Maryland wholesale growers, such as The Perennial Farm, have specialized in developing product lines for deer resistant plants, said Vanessa Finney, executive director of the Maryland Nursery, Landscape and Greenhouse Association. But everyone still likes to grow the old favorites that deer love, such as hostas and other perennials.

“It is definitely a thing, but growers aren’t going to give up growing their standard inventory,” she said.

The Perennial Farm has built high deer fences around their campus and decided to feed deer in certain corners of their property to keep them from munching on the valuable merchandise they are growing closer to the center.

“It is very common for a grower to have several property dogs that run the property and keep the deer away,” she said. Some have hunting rights on their property so that they can hunt deer during certain times of the year, she added.

On the home front, Finney said she has twin fawns bedding down in her lawn this year: “You can’t escape it,” she said.

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