

Deer Overabundance

White-tailed deer grazing on wildflowers in the woods or bounding across a pasture are a sight to behold, but an overabundance of deer has its downsides. Appearing more often in the suburbs, a growing deer population boosts the chances of deer-vehicle collisions, disease and disease transmission, overgrazing of plants, and spread of invasive species.

DEER-VEHICLE COLLISIONS Cook County has the most deer-vehicle collisions in the state, with 460 in 2012 alone, according to the Illinois Department of Transportation. An increasing number of vehicle accidents happen when deer adapt to living in suburbs and cities and their populations grow, or when the number of vehicles on roadways increase. In addition, forest areas and streams, such as those in the forest preserves, are ideal locations for deer to seek shelter and forage, increasing the likelihood of them straying onto adjacent highways.

DEER DISEASES Disease outbreaks become more widespread when the deer population exceeds the environment's ability to sustain it. Large populations of deer become more vulnerable to disease, particularly if food becomes scarce. Chronic wasting disease (CWD) is fatal to deer. CWD is contagious among deer herds, causing the brains of infected animals to waste away. The Illinois Department of Natural Resources reported 59 cases of CWD statewide in 2014. Thus far, 13 counties have been affected by the disease. Cook County has had no cases detected, but CWD has been reported in adjoining Kane, Lake, McHenry, and Will counties. When there are large populations of deer in one place the likelihood of CWD spreading increases.

Another fatal disease, epizootic hemorrhagic disease (EHD), works much more quickly than CWD. Once bitten by the midge, a flying insect that carries the disease, deer exposed to the virus may die within days or even hours. Large groups of deer are attracted to water where the midge appears.

An outbreak of EHD occurred in northern Cook County in 2012, partly because of the especially hot and dry summer. The Forest Preserves of Cook County reported about 90 deer that had died from the disease. Since EHD is so lethal, it can have a large effect on the deer population locally, particularly at high population densities. An outbreak usually ends in the fall when the frost kills off the infected insects.

WHITE-TAILED DEER © M. JEFFORDS ►

RUNNING WHITE-TAILED DEER © C. BENDA ▼







EATING HUMAN FOODS MAY CAUSE SERIOUS HEALTH PROBLEMS FOR DEER



LEFT TO RIGHT

DEER EATING CORN COB © C. BENDA

DOE AND FAWN © M. JEFFORDS

DEER AT BUNKER HILL © C. BENDA

OVERGRAZING BY DEER As deer herds grow, there may be too many deer and not enough food. Their large numbers pose a risk to themselves and to plants and animals. Deer are hearty eaters; you can tell when a forest has too many deer because a “browse line” can be seen. All the plants are eaten as high up as the deer can reach. When they eat all the plant undergrowth, they remove the covering that serves as nesting spots for ground-nesting birds and cover for frogs and salamanders. Overpopulated deer herds can also reduce the number of woody plants and increase the crop damage for Illinois nurseries and gardeners. When too much plant material is removed, deer no longer have an adequate supply to sustain the herds. Starvation can result.

Still, feeding deer and other wild animals the foods that we eat is no solution, and can be very harmful. Our foods contain preservatives and other chemicals which may cause serious health problems in deer. Also, wildlife may lose their fear of humans, becoming a nuisance in recreational areas. For the best nutritional value, deer should eat the foods they find naturally in the forest preserves.



DEER MANAGEMENT White-tailed deer are particularly abundant in the Forest Preserves of Cook County and are often a point of interest to preserve visitors. However, as a result of the increasing population size and limited management measures, deer are seriously impacting the native wildflowers and shrubs the forest preserves were created to protect. Browse lines within the forested sites and damage to wildflowers are observed in nearly every preserve. The loss of the native vegetation leads to additional concerns such as increases in invasive plants deer find unpalatable, soil erosion from denuded herb layers, and decreases in nesting success for ground-nesting birds. It also may increase the incidence of Lyme disease, which is transmitted by deer ticks.

To date there are no safe or practical non-lethal methods available to natural resource agencies for managing deer overabundance. Contraception methods either require repeat captures of individuals, which is impractical, or large doses of contraceptives that would pose a health risk if a treated animal were somehow eaten by humans, dogs, or coyotes. Moving deer to another location is not practical because no enclosed facilities are available to take them, and movement of deer and release to the wild is not allowed by the State of Illinois because of documented high levels of subsequent deaths and the potential for disease transfer, for example CWD. Gun hunting is not allowed in Cook County and, due to high human population densities, unlikely to ever be allowed. Bow hunting has only been shown to be effective in managing deer populations in very limited situations.

The FPCC has implemented a limited deer management program employing sharpshooters in a few preserves, and the results of these efforts are both obvious and significant. The native flora and fauna of these areas are in much better condition than areas where management efforts have not been used. Deer-vehicle collisions are also reduced in these areas. Furthermore, deer are healthier in these areas. However, to achieve the goals it will be necessary to expand current efforts. Such an expansion will require developing and initiating an extensive public education and engagement strategy with a special focus on neighboring landowners.