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11/7/06 - Posted from the Daily Record newsroom

Great Swamp deer hunting may be scaled back

Wildlife biologist says population drop could lead to tighter kill limits at refuge

BY KRISTINA FIORE
DAILY RECORD

The deer population at the Great Swamp has dropped so significantly that the annual hunt within the refuge may be limited in future years.

"(Deer population) has been coming down for four years, so we may put the brakes on here," said Great Swamp wildlife biologist Craig Bitler.

In an effort to curb a booming deer population, the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge in 1999 began requiring hunters to kill a doe before obtaining a buck-hunting permit during the refuge's annual deer hunt.

Though the first few years of the program seemed unsuccessful, the recent decline in deer at the Great Swamp has been so significant that the refuge is considering changing the rules.

For the refuge's 33rd annual hunt, which begins Saturday and continues on five other days this month, the doe-first rules will still apply. But in the "near future," Bitler said, the refuge may try to minimize the impact on the deer population.

"We don't want to drive the herd into the ground," Bitler said.

40 percent drop

The number of deer in the refuge has dropped about 40 percent, Bitler said, from 40 per square mile in 1999 to about 25 per square mile today. He said the ideal range would be 16 to 20 deer per square mile, and expects to hit that mark within a couple of years.

A smaller population decreases the "take," or the total number of deer killed during the annual hunt. In 1999, the take was about 225 deer. Over the last four years, it fell to last year's low of 150, and Bitler forecasts this year's take may drop to 135.

"Our goal is about 110 a year," he said, which would signify an ideal population level. "Within a couple years, we'll be at that goal and we'll have to make some modifications."

One change may be in capping the number of female and young bucks killed by individual hunters, who currently have no limit, he said. Hunters are only limited to shooting one mature buck over all four days of the

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MARY IUVONE / DAILY RECORD

Craig Bitler, a wildlife biologist at the Great Swamp, stands in a shrub-layered area that is indicative of a lower deer density.

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hunt.

Bitler, who is a hunter, said a dwindling deer population may not only be bad for the environment, but also for the swamp's economy. If hunters start going home empty-handed after a hunt, they'll be less likely to return the following season.

"As the deer herd continues to drop, there will be fewer hunters," he said. "They'll lose interest."

High levels

Bitler isn't yet worried about losing the 300 hunters who participate in the harvest annually, though he said he received about a dozen e-mails from those who say they won't participate this year because of the falling population.

But allowing the population to reach pre-1999 levels would also be hazardous, ecologists say, because deer would destroy native vegetation -- something the hunt is designed to protect. Overgrazing allows invasive plant species to infiltrate forests, and takes away food or nest materials for other species, especially birds.

Sara Webb, an ecologist at Drew University, said controlling deer allows forest succession to thrive. In areas where deer feed on seedlings, there are no younger ones to replace dying older trees.

In one study, Webb fenced off a section of the Drew University forest preserve to see what plant life thrives where deer aren't allowed to tread.

"The difference is phenomenal," she said. "Inside the fence, young trees are sprouting -- beech, sweet gum. Outside, you find little nubs of woody sprouts chewed to nothing."

'A terrible tragedy'

She also talked about Jockey Hollow at Morristown Historical National Park, which does not open its grounds for an annual hunt.

"It's a terrible tragedy," she said. "The ground is bare of covered with invasive plants that choke out biodiversity."

Randy Turner, superintendent for Morristown Historical National Park, said the park does have a problem with deer, which has resulted in the overgrowth of invasive plants like Japanese barberry and wire grass.

Since hunting is not normally allowed in a national park -- the laws are different for national wildlife refuges like the Great Swamp -- a federal agency would have to carry out an environmental assessment before permitting a hunt.

Turner said the park doesn't have an active deer reduction program, but may consider one in order to restore the forest's health.

The dwindling deer population may come as a surprise to towns that neighbor the Great Swamp. Over the years, surrounding towns have held special hunts to halt deer-related car accidents and backyard overgrazing, and a number believe overpopulation is still a problem.

Pete Graziano, northern region coordinator for United Bowhunters of New Jersey, said a handful of Morris County towns still rely on his organization to manage their deer hunts.

"You hunt one area, but then the deer get smart and move to the outskirts and get into backyards," Graziano said. "They're still ruining ... the landscapes of people's homes and causing traffic accidents."