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A Walk on the Wild Side: Wildlife Crop Damage

Though the heat of the summer has not yet left us, the day length wanes as we move closer and closer to autumn. August can be a month of reprieve for some farmers as some crops enter their last stages of development before harvest. Though the crop management stresses are slightly lessened, it remains a critical time for preserving optimal crop yields.

Yet there lurks a reaper of sorts in these fields; one not made of iron or wood. A nearly unmanageable thief that winnows away at crop yields and the farmer's bottom dollar: wildlife feeding.

In particular, white tailed deer feed on many of the cultivated crops in our area including grains, forages, fruits, and vegetables. Their grazing occurs throughout the growing season as they devour seedlings and young crops, dramatically limiting production before they even have a chance to fully develop. Late season damage is almost more demoralizing as deer feed on the emerged flowers, fruit, or grain itself exacting yield loss right then and there.

Though seemingly hyperbolic, a more annoying pest is hard to imagine this time of year. It may seem trivial to have some deer in one's field, but these yield robbing bandits can reduce crop yields by 40%. More commonly, farmers readily experience at least a 10% yield reduction in affected regions compared to those that were less or unaffected in the same field.

As an example, with today's corn prices and assuming a county average corn yield, farmers experience about a $80/acre loss. Other farmers with more severe deer-induced crop damage or those growing other crops experience losses far exceeding this conservative estimate that can make or break a year's worth of work.

Imagine thumbing-out four, $20 bills and feeding it to a deer for every acre of land in production. A strange visual, I know, but these pests are a significant expense.

These examples and figures are those that are readily quantifiable; there are hidden costs to deer damage as well. Farmers may decide to alter crop rotations or remove lands from production just for the sake of mitigating deer damage. Having spent hundreds or thousands of dollars per acre on a crop, it makes sense to outright avoid experiencing major losses late in the season. Through all of this, the emotional toll of these losses is indeed significant as well.

Anecdotes of 50-100 head in a herd of deer grazing a soybean field are not uncommon. Recent work from Rutgers University notes that this is an extreme overpopulation as the socially optimal deer population is about 10 deer per square mile.

There exist management strategies to mitigate deer damage like repellants, fences, vegetation buffers, and sacrifice crops. Each of these have some cost and vary in efficacy

whereby growers face further economic pressures and must choose wisely in adopting practices to prevent additional losses.

It appears that the truly most effective tactic in preventing frustrating, costly, and seemingly avoidable deer damage is to reduce the deer population in a sustainable, thoughtful, conservation-minded manner. The Maryland Department of Natural Resources acknowledges that areas with managed hunting have lower deer densities. No doubt, taking a life is nothing short of solemnly consequential. Yet I contend that the benefits of thoughtful population management offer a net benefit agriculture and food security that outweigh their counterparts.

I implore you, please take a young person hunting this year. Attend a hunter-safety course and learn the ways of thoughtful harvest to protect our agricultural viability. And please, enjoy the protein-rich, wild caught, local venison!

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