Deer in Our Forests

That Maryland’s forested lands are threatened by a variety of influences is no secret. What many people don’t realize, however, is that one of those influences is browsing by whitetail deer. Unlike the visible economic damage deer do to crops, landscapes and cars, the damage they cause to Maryland’s forest ecosystem is not always obvious.

The whitetail deer is one of wildlife conservation’s success stories. Whitetail populations dwindled to near extinction in the early part of this century - the result of commercial hunting and habitat loss. Conservation efforts, including strict hunting laws, were successful in bringing deer populations back up to former levels. In fact, in most parts of the whitetail’s range, populations are higher than ever before.

And therein lies the problem. Many forested tracts in Maryland support more whitetail deer than the habitat can handle. Some of the reasons include: the lack of natural predators to reduce the populations, abundance of farm crops, human population shifts to rural areas and landowner decisions to prevent deer hunting. The effects of this imbalance are visible to those who look carefully.

Typically, a tract of forestland that is overpopulated by deer lacks young trees and shrubs. Whitetails browse on the tender shoots of seedlings and saplings, favoring many of the forest species we value: oaks, ash, poplar, etc. The result is fewer number of forest species as deer abundance increases (Figure 1). Over time, the forest fails to develop the understory that forms the basis for the future forest. Often there is a visible line, called a browse line, that marks the highest point that a deer can reach. When trees are harvested in such an area, the new forest growth often serves as a feeding area, and remains relatively open.

Young trees are not the only living things that suffer from increasing number of deer. A number of songbirds prefer to nest between 5 and 25 feet from the ground; the absence of young trees and other understory vegetation often results in reduced numbers of these birds (Figure 1). In addition, many woodland wildflowers disappear.

What can be done? None of the solutions is simple or easy. Fencing tracts, for example, can be very effective in reducing the impact of whitetail browsing, but is expensive. Repellants are not practical on large areas. And protecting some locations from deer browsing only

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increases the problem in surrounding areas.

The benefits of supplemental feeding are short-lived. Given sufficient supplemental food and other habitat elements, a population of whitetails can double in just a few years. Then the problem returns, even worse than before! A better option is to create more natural browse using sound forest management practices.

The most practical way to deal with excessive deer populations is a hunting program that harvests adequate numbers of female deer. In fact, 30 to 40 percent of the does should be harvested annually to maintain the same population. Many landowners are hesitant to allow strangers to hunt on their property because of liability and damage concerns. A good alternative is to work with a local group of responsible hunters who will harvest the appropriate number of deer and look out for the security of the property. Landowners have broad liability protection under Maryland law when allowing recreational access with no fee.

Whatever plans are put into effect to control the whitetail's harmful effects on our forests, one thing is certain - in problem areas the effects are real. Reducing the population of the whitetail deer to healthy levels is necessary for a balanced, healthy forest, and ultimately, for a vigorous deer population, too.

**Dollars from Woodlots**

Many older woodland owners may remember the time when timber, especially hardwood, was not worth much. Things have changed.

Since the 1970's, stumpage prices (the amount paid to landowners for standing trees) of timber have increased dramatically. In 1977, the average stumpage price of oak sawtimber in the Mid-Atlantic region was about $60-90 per thousand board feet (MBF). In 1993, oak sawtimber averaged $385 per MBF (southeast PA area). However, averages fail to tell the whole story, because timber buyers will pay premium stumpage prices of $400-1000 per MBF and more for large diameter logs of red oak, cherry, walnut, paulownia and ash.

This means that the decision by landowners to sell forest products, as well as the outcome of the sale, should not be left to chance. The sale should be executed properly using qualified assistance and sound business principles. This includes the involvement of the landowner, forester and logger. Here are a few things to remember:

* Marketing decisions should be part of a long-term management plan. Your forest is an asset, when if well managed and properly harvested can produce timber, wildlife habitat, firewood, and recreation opportunities. Properly timed harvests can provide income to make wildlife and recreation improvements that you could not otherwise afford. On the other hand, poorly timed or executed harvests can cost you money if they remove trees before they reach their peak size and value. They can also cause environmental damage that reduce forest benefits.

* Seek the assistance of a professional forester. Thousands of dollars have been lost and many forests damaged when landowners failed to include a professional forester in the sale of forest products. In Maryland, professional foresters must be registered with the state, and each has a seal with an identification number: ask to see it. A county forester with the Maryland Forest Service can develop a forest stewardship plan for your land; however, they cannot sell forest products for you.

The other types of registered professional foresters are consultant and industrial foresters. Your county forester or local Cooperative Extension office will have a list of them.

Industrial foresters work for a particular mill to purchase timber for that mill. Many larger companies will develop management plans free of charge, requesting in return that they have the first right of refusal on any timber sale.

Consultant foresters are independent foresters who work as your agent in the sale of forest products for a commission (usually 5 to 15 percent). They will mark and inventory the timber to be sold, then mail to forest product companies a notice that describes the details of the sale. Sealed bids are solicited and an offer selected. Perhaps most important, the consultant will develop the sale contract with the buyer and inspect the job to make sure it is done properly. Consultant foresters also can develop a forest management plan for your property, with cost-share assistance available from the Stewardship Incentive Program.

* Get all agreements and contracts in writing.

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**Branching Out**

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Editors: Jonathan Kays, Linda Bittner

Phone: (301) 432-2735

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The sponsoring agencies' programs are open to all citizens without regard to race, color, sex, or handicap.
Groves' Farm Named Tree Farm of the Year

For 18 years, Don and Linda Grove of Hagerstown have developed their 85-acre farm as an example of how good forestry can produce timber, abundant hunting recreation. In their efforts, they have been honored as professionals as Tree Farmers of the Year. They have accomplished this using their own labor and care of their land, while providing others the chance to see what they have done. Besides their personal satisfaction, they have been recognized by resource professionals as the 1994 Maryland Tree Farmer of the Year.

The Tree Farmer of the Year award is sponsored each year by the Maryland Tree Farm Program, a national organization that recognizes private woodland owners for good forest management and the example they set for others. The Groves are two of the more than 1,400 private woodland owners who manage over 270,000 acres in the Maryland Tree Farm system.

The Groves started their tree farm in the late 1970's when their beef business took a downturn and Don started working off the farm. Much of the land, which is bordered on three sides by Conococheague Creek, is in floodplain, which makes it difficult for conventional crop farming. That, along with an eye to supplemental income, motivated the Groves to plant 25 acres of white pine in 1980.

"As the white pines began to mature and the remaining hardwoods were getting hit by gypsy moth, we realized we needed some help," says Don. With the help of the local forester, the Groves developed a management plan and harvested 12 acres of gypsy moth damaged mature oaks. "It broke my heart to see those trees cut, but the increase in deer and other wildlife has been great," lamented Don. Six years after the cut, native oak and ash are abundant in the area.

The Groves have implemented other management practices for the wildlife and timber: hedgerows around the fields, wildlife food plots of sorghum and corn, hardwood plantings, and a hunting program to control the deer population.

The Groves have held many tours and demonstrations since they turned their property into a tree farm. As a cooperator in the Maryland Coverts program, their farm has been used as a demonstration site for each of Maryland's Coverts Workshops since 1990.

The Groves long-term stewardship of their land is reflected in Don's remarks, "I won't see the final timber cutting of many of the trees in my lifetime, but I will have the pleasure of watching them grow."

Interested in a "Covert" Project?

The Coverts Project focuses not on spying, but on showing how good forest management can make wildlife more abundant, healthy, and diverse while improving timber growth and woodland beauty. To this end, a training workshop will be held October 6-9 in Washington County for woodland owners, managers and others interested in forest and wildlife management. The Coverts Project is sponsored by the Maryland Cooperative Extension Service and the Ruffed Grouse Society and gets its name from thickets that provide shelter for wildlife.

Thirty individuals will be chosen for the Coverts workshop, which will focus on general forestry and wildlife management principles. In return for the free training, reference materials and follow-up seminars, the participants, dubbed Coverts Cooperators, will be asked to establish a sound forest and wildlife management plan for their property and to share what they have learned with others.

Since 1990, 107 Covert Cooperators have completed the program and their efforts to reach others in the community are paying off. More than 8,000 people have received forest/wildlife information through one-on-one contacts, tours and other outreach efforts.

"By enriching my outlook on what I can do, I have a whole new attitude that I can leave this life and others will be better off for what I have given."

- Covert Cooperator

If you are interested in receiving an application for the fall workshop, contact your local Cooperative Extension office or the editor of Branching Out. Applications will be accepted until June 25.
Forest Health Update

Many areas of the Eastern Shore are experiencing an increase in gypsy moth populations. Characteristically, after gypsy moth invades an area it takes two or three years before the population increases to defoliating levels, it then collapses and rebuilds again. The western portion of Charles County is the only area currently experiencing an outbreak in Southern Maryland, while Garrett County is the most severely infested western county. Populations in the Northeast and Central Regions of the state are low, but rebuilding.

Although the Maryland Department of Agriculture will spray twice as many acres as last year, few of these will be private woodlands. Some counties have cooperative spray programs for woodland owners. A list of licensed commercial sprayers is available from the Maryland Department of Agriculture (410)841-5922. Local foresters can help you determine what forest management practices you can implement to reduce the susceptibility of your woodland to gypsy moth defoliation.

The icestorms that occurred this winter were most severe in Calvert, Caroline and Talbot Counties. The impact on forest health may not be immediate. Limb breakage allows entry of fungi, causing stain and decay. Weakened branches and trees are susceptible to attack by secondary insects, such as woodborers. Trees uprooted and severely bent should be salvaged quickly, before decay affects timber quality. In additions, downed trees and branches can lead to the buildup of insects and increase the potential for fire this summer.

IRS Changes Rule on SIP Funds

The Internal Revenue Service has changed the way it treats funds from the Stewardship Incentive Program (SIP) on tax returns. SIP funds will not be considered as income for tax purposes but will be handled like FIP and ACP funds. This change is retroactive to the beginning of the SIP program.

New Resources


* **Forest Resource Systems Institute (FORS) is a non-profit association formed to promote the use of computers in forestry and natural resource professions. FORS serves as a source of information on computer technology and publishes a software directory, meeting proceedings, and a magazine called The Compiler. For membership information, contact: Forest Resources Systems Institute, 122 Helton Ct., Florence, AL 35630; (205)767-0250.**