

URBAN DEER

What Can We Do?

By Gary Foster

West Virginia is blessed with an abundance of wildlife resources which provide endless hours of enjoyment and recreation for our state's citizens. Hunting, wildlife observation, trapping, bird watching, wildlife photography and feeding birds are the more popular activities associated with our state's wildlife. Unfortunately, in many cities and suburban settings across West Virginia, deer and other species of wildlife currently exceed levels which are desired by many home and property owners, often resulting in human/wildlife conflicts.

White-tailed deer have become common inhabitants in many of our state's cities and suburban areas. These areas are commonly characterized by significant expanses of woodland habitat associated with land which is unsuitable for development (steep terrain, for example) which provides quality habitat for deer and other forest creatures, while at the same time providing non-hunted refuges where deer and other wildlife populations for the most part thrive. Subsequently, human/wildlife conflicts often become common occurrences in these situations.

Interactions and conflicts with wildlife have increased over the past 25 years as urban and suburban sprawl have impacted the landscape and associated habitat. In most of these scenarios, deer populations are typically below their biological carrying capacity (population level at which the habitat can support and sustain the population), but are often at levels which can't be tolerated by homeowners and property owners.

Subsequently, what is often referred to as the "cultural carrying capacity" in these areas is exceeded. Deer/human interactions which are most often reported include browsing damage to ornamental flowers and shrubs, increased deer/auto collisions, horning (rubbing of antlers) of small fruit trees and shrubs, and browsing damage to home gardens.

Human tolerance levels for deer and other wildlife species vary significantly among individuals based upon a person's background, values and life experiences. This in itself often creates additional challenges in developing solutions to deal with a property owner's concerns. For example, it is not uncommon for one homeowner to feed deer while their neighbors are dealing with a browsing problem in their shrubs and gardens due in large part to the artificial feeding which is occurring nearby. Unfortunately, all too often deer/human conflicts are exacerbated by good-hearted individuals feeding deer to attract them to their yards for viewing. Feeding corn or other products to deer

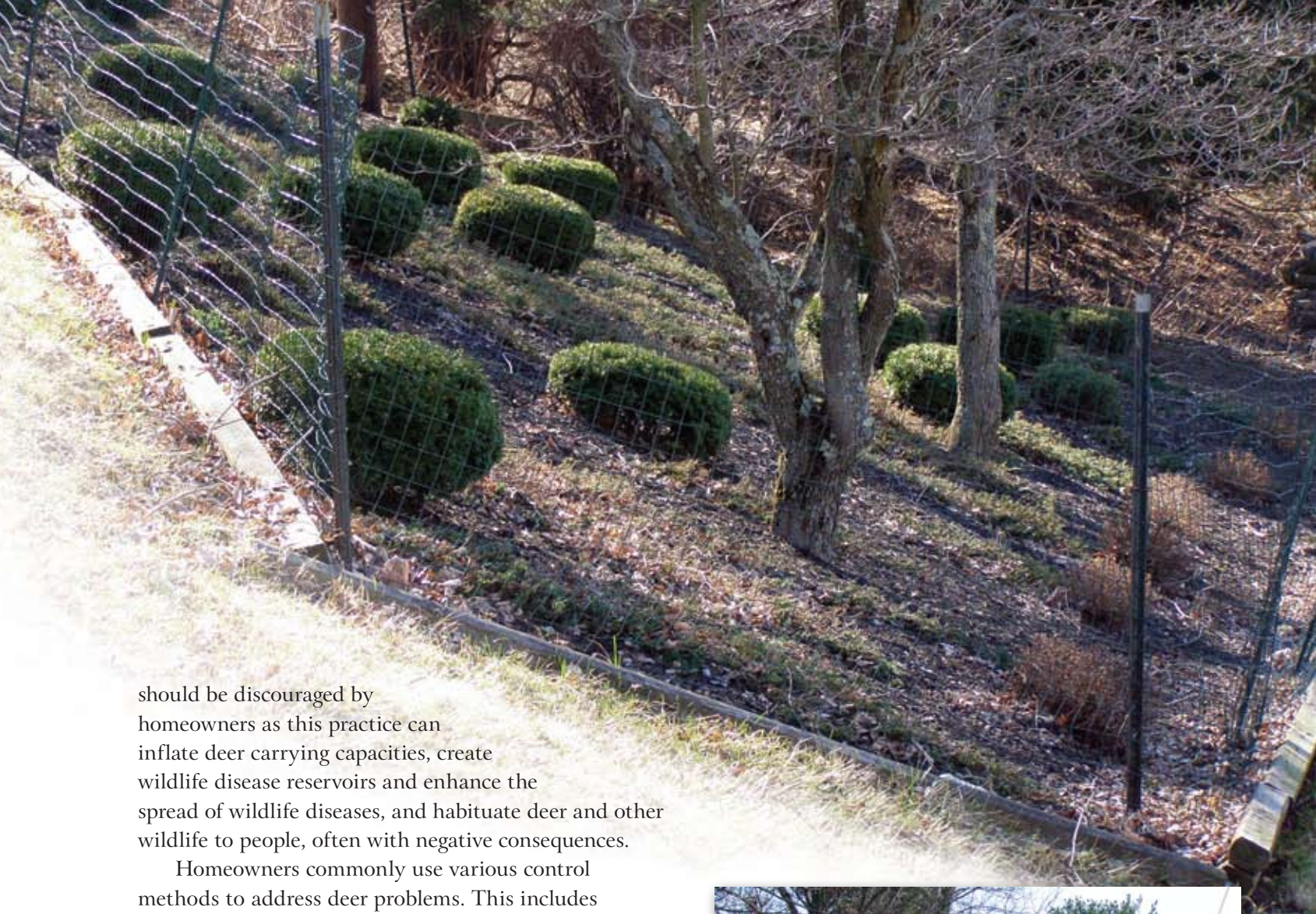
should be discouraged by homeowners as this practice can inflate deer carrying capacities, create wildlife disease reservoirs and enhance the spread of wildlife diseases, and habituate deer and other wildlife to people, often with negative consequences.

Homeowners commonly use various control methods to address deer problems. This includes installing various types of fencing (electric or woven wire for example) and using repellents. Properly installed electric fences have been proven to be very effective at deterring deer in addition to groundhogs, skunks and raccoons which are also common invaders of home gardens. Proper wire placement and adequate voltage are necessary for an electric fence to be effective. Repellents, whether home remedies or commercially manufactured products, have also been used effectively in site-specific situations and smaller scale problems, but reapplication of repellents is often required after rainstorms.

Deer depredation permits have also been used in select situations in urban and suburban settings. This approach often is not an option, however, due to weapon restrictions in these areas. Alternative methods such as using sharpshooters, trapping and relocation, chemical immobilization and relocation, and the use of fertility control compounds are extremely expensive, often ineffective, and for many other reasons are typically not practical options for deer population management.



Art Shorno



Obvious browse line created by deer before the fence was put in place.

Top photo: Fencing is one measure homeowners can use to protect trees, shrubs and other plants.

Photo by Gary Foster

Gary Foster

Hunting under controlled conditions continues to be the most effective way to manage deer populations throughout the United States. Although public perception of hunting as a management tool in populated areas is often negative, controlled deer hunts have been found to be safe and effective in many urban and suburban settings. Currently, numerous state wildlife agencies throughout the country have established special deer hunting season regulations to provide local governing bodies with a potential solution to address deer overpopulation problems in cities and suburban areas.

In West Virginia, regulations were implemented years ago which provide incorporated cities and homeowner associations with a potential solution to address deer overabundance problems. A special urban deer archery season, which typically opens two weeks prior to the statewide traditional deer archery season in October and runs through the end of December, has been used effectively by several cities and homeowner associations throughout the state. The municipalities of Barboursville, Bethlehem, Charleston, Ronceverte, Weirton and Wheeling took advantage of the special urban archery season regulations during the fall of 2008, with varying degrees of success. In addition, several homeowner associations throughout West Virginia implemented these special regulations this past fall.

Hunters participating in this special season are permitted to take up to two deer which do not count toward a hunter's annual archery deer season bag limit. The special urban deer archery season

regulations do not supercede city ordinances, local regulations or community prohibitions on hunting. Typically, local governing bodies are required to modify regulations and ordinances to permit the use of archery equipment in these areas. The local governing board often incorporates special conditions such as hunter proficiency requirements, shooting from elevated locations, and minimum acreage requirements into the special archery season regulations to address various concerns and to minimize conflicts with other homeowners. Homeowner associations interested in participating in this special season must submit a written request for consideration to the DNR Director by March 1 of the year the hunt is requested.

Dealing with deer in populated areas often requires a multi-faceted approach with controlled archery hunting in many cases being a potential solution. The implementation of a special urban hunting season, preferably prior to a deer population growing to an undesirable level, can be an integral component of a sound management program, in conjunction with the more traditional approaches including fencing and repellents in dealing with deer damage problems.

City officials and/or property owners needing additional information in addressing deer problems in urban settings should contact the District Wildlife Biologist at their local DNR District Office for additional guidance.

Gary Foster is the Supervisor of Game Management stationed in Elkins.

Large amounts of forested land exist within Wheeling's city limits, which has held an urban deer season since 1995.

A four-foot-high chain link fence does little to stop deer.



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