



Audubon PENNSYLVANIA

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Too Many Deer In Too Many Places Damaging Forest Ecosystems, Agricultural Production

**Comments of
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Before the
Senate Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee
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The over-browsing of our forests and agricultural areas by too many deer in too many places eliminates thousands of acres of habitat for birds and other wildlife, and represents the largest single threat to bird habitat, after urban sprawl.

My name is Tim Schaeffer. I am the Executive Director of Audubon Pennsylvania, the state office of the National Audubon Society, and here in the Commonwealth we have over 30,000 members very concerned about the impact deer are having on our forest ecosystems and bird and wildlife habitat.

You may be surprised to see someone from the Audubon Society here today, but we have been actively engaged with the Game Commission and the departments of Conservation and Natural Resources and Agriculture and other groups on the deer management issue for the last four years.

Let me say right up-front that Audubon strongly supports hunting as a means to bring deer into balance with their habitats. Hunters are critical to the success of deer population management, because hunting is currently the only feasible method of regulating deer populations on a large scale.

Any assertion that Audubon Pennsylvania is an anti-hunting organization is false. Indeed, a survey several years ago showed that Audubon members are 53 percent more likely than the general public to be hunters.

And on a personal note, I got three deer myself this past season.

Although we have differences, we support the Game Commission's efforts to base its deer management policies on three factors— maintaining a healthy habitat, promoting a healthy deer herd and reducing human-deer impacts.

We have a lot at stake in Pennsylvania if the deer herd is not brought under control because 60 percent of the Commonwealth is forested habitat.

Studies by both Audubon Pennsylvania in 2005 and one released last month by the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources clearly show damage to forest ecosystems are continuing and forest regeneration just isn't happening in many areas of the state because the deer population is still too high.

In the DCNR study, fewer than 25 percent of the 41,650 forest plots they looked at showed desirable forest regeneration and almost 45 percent lacked any new, woody growth.

Here in the Lebanon area—the Conrad Weiser Forest District—the results are even worse. 59 percent of the 1,126 plots surveyed showed NO forest regeneration and 28 percent showed regeneration with undesirable species.

From a bird and wildlife resource perspective, nearly every one of Audubon's 84 Important Bird Areas in Pennsylvania have experienced significant damage caused by deer over-browsing, reducing much-needed habitat areas. These are areas of habitat critical to the survival and diversity of bird populations that must meet dozens of science-base criteria for designation.

More specifically is the threat to particular bird species. We have 17 percent of the worldwide population of Scarlet Tanagers nesting in Pennsylvania and 10 percent of the world's Wood Thrushes.

This documented damage from deer over-browsing and the threats it represents also has direct economic consequences for agriculture and rural Pennsylvania.

There is an estimated \$90 million in agricultural crop loss and \$73 million in damage to our forest products every year caused by deer, according to the Department of Agriculture, and state taxpayers lose \$18 million a year in deferred and lost timber stumpage sales.

In addition, consider these facts from a 2006 hearing by the House Agriculture and Rural Affairs Committee--

- Over \$78 million in property damage occur in the over 39,000 deer/car collisions each year in Pennsylvania, not counting the deaths and injuries to the people involved, the highest of any state in the nation; and
- The incidence of Lyme disease, a debilitating and sometimes fatal illness spread by deer ticks, has increased by over 9,000 percent between 1987 and 2004, according to the Department of Health.

But what can we do?

Recommendations

- 1) The first priority should be the restoration and maintenance of fully functional forest ecosystems, containing a full component of native biological diversity at all levels. It is the best way to serve the long-term interests of the people and wildlife of Pennsylvania.
 - a) We support an open, transparent science-based deer management system to make decisions consistent with the Game Commission's mission of being responsible for all birds and mammals, game and non-game species.

- 2) Audubon Pennsylvania strongly supports hunting as the only effective means to bring deer into balance with their habitats.
 - a) Deer densities in Pennsylvania's major forested areas should be brought down to levels that allow the restoration of full forest structure, diversity and ecological processes and functions.
 - b) Until we have data that show our forests are recovering, it would be imprudent and irresponsible to further limit hunter effectiveness through restrictions on hunting such as shorter seasons and smaller antlerless allocations.
 - c) We support House Bill 550, sponsored by Rep. Hershey (R-Chester) and Rep. Tom Caltagirone (D-Berks), that allows the owners of farms, forestland and landscape nurseries to better protect agricultural commodities from the damage caused by deer and other wildlife and would make it easier for landowners, local governments and communities to obtain deer removal permits. We understand Sen. McIlhinney (R-Bucks) is considering introduction of a similar bill in the Senate.

- 3) The General Assembly, Governor's Office and the Game Commission should identify a funding base that is more stable and equitable than funding derived almost exclusively from sources such as license dollars and timber sales on game lands in order to facilitate the shift from single-species management to ecosystem management.
 - a) A recent survey found that 71 percent of the public and 70 percent of hunters agreed that more of the agency's budget should be devoted to non-game wildlife and threatened and endangered species.

Hunters will never agree on how many deer there should be in the woods, and deer certainly don't go where hunters want them to; they go where there's food and cover. Deer are having a devastating impact on forest ecosystems and in many agricultural areas, and we need to continue common sense policies to stem these losses.

The impact of deer on our forest habitat, the crop and forest products losses, the loss of life and property from deer/car collisions and the impact on public health from the incidence of Lyme disease carried by deer have all been documented and the picture these number paint is not good.

The good news is some areas are beginning to recover because good policies remain in place, but we have a long way to go and we need new tools to accomplish our goal.

Thank you for the opportunity to present Audubon Pennsylvania's position and recommendation on the deer management issue.

I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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