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Baltimore to close parks at night as sharpshooters work to thin deer herds

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Baltimore will close multiple parks at night this month as federal sharpshooters move in to thin deer herds that officials say are overwhelming forests and choking off new tree growth.

The city's Recreation and Parks Department held a community meeting Wednesday to go over the details, approved last month by the Baltimore Board of Estimates. The $110,442 agreement asks the U.S. Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services to remove up to 271 white-tailed deer through April. The effort targets herds in Druid Hill Park, Gwynns Falls-Leakin Park and Herring Run Park — the city's largest forested parks.

Crews will work after hours while parks are closed and secured. Sharpshooters using thermal imaging and bait sites will take deer from 20 to 50 yards away, aiming for quick, humane kills, according to city officials. Police will help clear and secure areas before operations begin, including helicopter flyovers.

“This is the first time Baltimore City has taken a comprehensive approach to managing deer overpopulation,” Recreation and Parks Executive Director Reginald Moore said in a statement, calling the program the result of scientific analysis and community input.

Details of the plan

The city is seeking to reduce deer density to about 20 per square mile — a level the Maryland Department of Natural Resources considers sustainable for forest regeneration. Current estimates far exceed that benchmark: roughly 120 deer per square mile in Druid Hill Park and up to 86 per square mile in Gwynns Falls-Leakin Park. Powder Hill Park in West Baltimore has the city’s highest concentration, state officials say.

At Druid Hill Park alone, crews aim to remove 132 deer between March 30 and April 9. The park will close daily at 4 p.m. and reopen at 7 a.m. during that period. Gwynns Falls-Leakin Park and Herring Run Park will see similar overnight closures through April 9.

By night, 11 volunteer-manned stations around the perimeter will intercept anyone trying to get in the park, three gates will be shut to traffic, and park entrances will be blocked by traffic cones or construction barrels, said Shane Boehne, a wildlife conservation analyst for the city’s Recreation and Parks Department. The park will be cleared each day starting at 4 p.m., with assistance from the Baltimore Police Department.

“This is going to ensure that any trail runners, anybody who might be walking their dog, or making sure that we can intercept anybody who might in a homeless encampment in these areas, we’re making sure that they have all vacated the area before the wildlife biologists come in and start their management strategies,” Boehne said.

The concern is that overbrowsing by deer is stripping forests of saplings and native plants. A 150-pound deer can eat up to 36 oak saplings a day, according to Baltimore County environmental officials. The loss of understory growth can invite invasive species, worsen erosion and limit tree canopy that cools neighborhoods. High deer populations also are linked to increased vehicle collisions and tick-borne illnesses.

Deer killed in this operation will be processed and could provide up to 40,000 servings of venison for the food bank, Boehne said, if the city hits its target.

What about the alternatives?

City leaders say alternatives are either too slow or too costly to curb the herd in the near term. A contraceptive vaccine known as GonaCon — approved in Maryland as a pesticide — can induce multi-year infertility, according to a 2022 USDA report. But city parks officials said it requires capturing or darting does individually and may take years to meaningfully reduce populations

Boehne said Wednesday that using GonaCon could cost over $80,000 at the low end to over $412,000, which would exhaust the deer management program’s grant funding, in addition to being labor intensive. Relocation would also be too expensive, he said.

Another way to manage the deer population is fencing them out of forested areas. Above a Gwynns Falls tributary, researchers used a 6-foot-tall plastic fence that kept deer out for more than a year, leading to flourishing saplings and native plants within the quarter-acre enclosure, according to DNR.

“The city plans to construct a 15-acre enclosure with galvanized woven wire 10-feet high, tall enough to keep deer isolated and strong enough to protect from falling trees and branches. It’s being done in hopes of showing city residents and the general public how vegetation can rebound when deer are kept out,” DNR wrote of its exclusion fencing experiment.

That plan is still going forward at Gwynns Falls-Leakin Park, with construction slated for fall, said Alex Silverman, a spokesperson for the city’s parks department. “This will primarily serve as a demonstration site to show the outcomes of sustained deer management,” she wrote in an email Wednesday.

But that project would cost about $150,000, Boehne said, for 15 acres. Druid Hill Park is 607 acres, making fencing in the whole park prohibitively expensive at current funding levels.

What are other areas doing?

Baltimore City is not the first Maryland jurisdiction to find shooting deer a solution to overpopulation. Baltimore County’s cooperation with USDA has been in play since 2011, most recently renewed last year.

Howard and Montgomery counties’ deer management programs have had zero public safety incidents since the 1990s when they were established, according to Boehne. The USDA team that manages deer herds in Delaware, Maryland and Virginia region also had no such incidents, he said.

The city will conduct annual deer counts and monitor forest recovery to gauge whether culling meets its goals.

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