Sharpshooting biologists with the U.S. Department of Agriculture carried out the culling in three closed parks from late March through April 9, targeting herds that exceed sustainable levels by as much as six times, according to the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. FILE

Baltimore sharpshooters reduce deer herds, miss goal in Leakin Park

By Racquel Bazos

Baltimore's first effort to curb an overgrown deer population hit its targets in two of three major parks, city officials said, marking what they called a strong start despite falling short in one location.

Sharpshooting biologists with the U.S. Department of Agriculture carried out the culling in three closed parks from late March through April 9, targeting herds that exceed sustainable levels by as much as six times, according to the Maryland Department of Natural Resources.

The results were mixed

The operation met its goals at Druid Hill Park, where 132 deer were killed, and Herring Run Park, where 36 were removed. At Gwynns Falls-Leakin Park, biologists culled 59 deer, down 44 from their goal of 103, according to Shane Boehne, a wildlife conservation analyst for the city's Recreation and Parks Department in charge of the deer management program.

Boehne blamed a rainout and deer remaining in nearby residential areas for the shortfall. The animals stayed along forest edges near neighborhoods instead of moving deeper into the park, making them harder to reach, he said. Boehne added the human activity involved in clearing and closing off the park to guests probably didn't spook the deer away, though.

"They would have been up there pretty much already, eating on, like, all the forest edges that are right up there," especially in areas near Seminole Avenue and Windsor Mill, Boehne said. "They were just using those areas like they normally would, and it was just hard to draw them away."

Boehne said the program was still "very successful" despite not meeting the goal at Gwynns Falls-Leakin Park. The 59 deer biologists were able to take out represented "a good start in being able to address the deer density issues."

No public safety incidents occurred during the operation, which lasted from the end of March through April 9. Closing down and clearing the three large parks wasn't a simple operation, either. Identifying highly trafficked areas of the parks where staff could intercept would-be parkgoers coming in on foot and more effectively using barriers were learning curves the parks' teams navigated, according to Boehne. Having Baltimore Police on hand to escort people off the properties was helpful, too, he added.

An upcoming deer count this winter will give greater clarity as to how the first year of the program actually impacted the city's large, forested parks. The city's goal is 20 deer per square mile, a level cited by DNR as being sustainable. Druid Hill's deer density is estimated to be about 120, with Gwynns Falls-Leakin at 86.

It's too early to say whether the program has positively impacted vegetation yet, as new leaves and buds continue to sprout this spring, according to Boehne. Protecting young trees is one of the main reasons the city intervened in its out-of-control deer herds.

"We won't see kind of a flush of vegetation for a little while yet, especially ones that wouldn't have been eaten off by deer," he said.

But residents and parkgoers have already been reaching out to Boehne and park and recreation department employees, saying "they were happy with how things went," according to him. There were no protests over the program, he said. Some people reached out to Boehne with concerns, but after explaining the need for the operation and the different safety mechanisms in place, he said he was able to quell their worries.

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