After first culling season, Baltimore parks have 230 fewer deer

Adam Willis 4/28/2026

A deer wanders through Lake Roland Park in June. (Ariel Zambelich/The Banner)

This spring, Baltimore tried something new to address its unchecked deer population, placing sharpshooters in three parks after dark to cull the rampant ungulates that have decimated habitats and native plants.

Managing these lethal, live-fire operations was a serious undertaking. On any given night, close to two dozen staff and volunteers enforced closures in Gwynns Falls/Leakin, Druid Hill and Herring Run parks while the sharpshooters — working in small teams or alone with night vision gear — targeted deer.

Aerial support from Foxtrot, Baltimore Police's helicopter unit, helped ensure the parks were clear of civilians. Nearly 90 people took part, not including police.

The sharpshooters killed 227 deer in the three parks over about four weeks in March and April. The effort fell shy of the 271 deer the city was permitted to take, but the shooters killed enough that officials with Baltimore City Recreation and Parks deemed the inaugural culling a success.

Shane Boehne, who leads the department's new deer management program, said it will require repeated efforts to tame the population and account for decades of damage to the ecosystem. The city will bring the program back to the same three sites next year, along with an additional park. Officials declined to share which one for now.

This year's culling season drew on state funding to pay $110,000 for sharpshooters from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which has carried out similar programs in jurisdictions around the country.

Recreation and Parks' naturalists aren't the first to turn to culling to manage rampant deer. Howard, Montgomery and Baltimore counties have all used sharpshooters to manage their deer populations for years.

Without natural predators, Baltimore deer have proliferated in recent decades. Surrounding counties may benefit from the help of hunters, but Baltimore has become a kind of haven where, until this season, deer grazed with impunity, devastating plant life and the habitats of birds and pollinators.

The city's deer densities far outstrip sustainable levels, according to the Maryland Department of Natural Resources, which suggests a population of 20 deer per square mile. Surveys have found deer at over 20 times that density in Powder Mill

Park, on Baltimore's western border, while even the city's lowest-density area had populations more than double DNR's recommended level.

Sharpshooters met their limits in both Druid Hill, killing 132 deer, and Herring Run, killing 36. They fell short of the target in Gwynns Falls/Leakin Park, shooting 59 out of a 103-deer quota. Boehne said the team had trouble drawing deer away from the edges of the wooded West Baltimore park and also had to call off one night's shoot there because of severe weather.

Officials worked to close the parks hours before shoots, and Boehne said the city's program had no public safety incidents. Recreation and Parks is soliciting feedback ahead of next year's season and plans to issue a report soon detailing this year's results.

The department also plans to conduct additional deer population surveys in December.

Baltimore should be home to a vast diversity of native plants, but under deer's dominion, invasive plants have thrived. Fast-growing English ivy and porcelain berry have become particularly problematic, said Ashley Bowers, a Recreation and Parks natural areas unit manager, while native trees like oak have faltered. Young saplings can hardly sprout in Baltimore parks before becoming lunch.

Bowers said Recreation and Parks has worked to foster native species by planting seeds and setting up protections. As the deer count falls, she hopes native species can begin to thrive on their own.

It may take years to see the benefits of deer management for woody species like oak, but Boehne and Bowers hope flowers and ephemerals begin to rebound this spring. Recreation and Parks plans to monitor 18 vegetation plots across the city to study how the ecosystem responds.

Pollinators might return quickly, and, longer-term, Boehne thinks ground-nesting birds like eastern towhees, American woodcocks and turkeys could find homes in Baltimore.

He hopes other benefits could follow: More plant life can soak up stormwater and cool Baltimore's heat islands.

"By reducing our deer densities overall," he said, "we can start to be a small piece of the puzzle in improving our overall conditions that we have here in Baltimore City."

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