

Weston's Deer Management Program

Frequently Asked Questions

What hunting plan has the Conservation Commission developed?

The Commission have opened five conservation land parcels for bow hunting for deer from October 15 to December 31, which is the state bow hunting season. Twenty-five bow hunters were selected; preference was given to Weston residents and employees. Hunters were assigned to one of the following parcels: Jericho and Ogilvie Town Forests, Dickson Fields, Blaney Aquifer, and Sears Land. Hunting areas are posted.

Well-seasoned and proficient bow hunters have been selected by the Conservation Commission. Background checks were conducted and the hunters passed a Town of Weston proficiency test as well as a State of Massachusetts certified bow hunting safety course. All hunting is done only from portable tree stands within specifically designated areas. Stalking is not allowed. The bow range averages 20 yards from the tree stand down to the ground, and the deer must be broad-side and stationary before the shot can be taken.

The map of the hunting areas as well as the Town's hunting regulations can be found Weston's deer management web page at www.tinyurl.com/westondeerinfo2012. They complement state regulations, which take precedence.

Will hunting disrupt walking and other recreational uses of conservation land?

Only very marginally. The deer hunting stands are located well away from main trails. Due to the height of tree stands, hunters will be shooting into the ground within 20 yards of their sites. This means that people walking on trails will not be near targeted areas. As an added precaution, main trails leading into hunting areas will be posted so that walkers will be aware.

Some passive activities may be disrupted by this new program. Walkers should decide if they are comfortable using the select lands during hunting season. Framingham, Sudbury, Medfield, Dover, Andover, and Duxbury have all launched successful hunting programs on conservation lands where people frequently walk dogs, jog, bike and horse-back ride. They have received no complaints since the inception of those hunting programs.

Since MassWildlife (Mass. Department of Game and Fisheries) began keeping records there have been no reports of non-hunter injuries during bow hunting season. No one has ever been shot by a stray arrow according to the state of Massachusetts' hunting records.

Unfortunately, illegal hunting does take place on conservation land: the Conservation Commission occasionally finds deer stands and blinds. Despite the Commission's best efforts to police the properties, it does not have the resources to be ever-present on all properties. Legally permitted hunters who have a stake in the program will help the Commission deter illegal hunting and reduce this pre-existing risk to the public.

Will this hunting program open Conservation Lands to other forms of hunting?

No. The purpose of this deer hunting program is to stabilize the deer population in a safe manner as part of our land stewardship obligations. We do not foresee hunting with firearms.

Is hunting inconsistent with the purpose of conservation land? Why can't we just let nature take its course?

To protect other species that we appreciate, we must actively manage these human-influenced parcels. Humans are already a key element in the ecological equation that governs these properties, and have been important predators of deer for many thousands of years. An unrestricted deer population is a powerful disruptive force in Weston's forests, wetlands, and fields. In this case, proper management of conservation land requires the strong hand of human intervention to protect and preserve diversity. A hands-off approach would allow deer to threaten many native species.

All the evidence we have received from long-time residents indicates that 20 years ago there were few deer in Weston, whereas today there are many. There's no way to know the exact deer population of Weston, however the evidence gathered is consistent with Massachusetts Department of Fish and Wildlife estimates for our region of about 25 deer/square mile. The Commission's goal is a population of 8-10 per square mile.

While most residents enjoy having some deer in Weston, 72 percent of those who responded to the Conservation Commission Deer Impact online survey felt that the deer population has reached a level that needs to be controlled. These impacts include:

- *Damage to yards and crops.* 72 percent of respondents reported yard damage, and farms such as Land's Sake have been at great expense to fence crops against deer for the past 15 years, with mixed success and significant crop losses.
- *Damage to forest ecosystems.* Our preliminary surveys of Weston's forests have discovered excessive deer browse in many areas, resulting in declines in several species of wildflowers and shrubs, and declining regeneration of some trees, particular maple and oak.
- *Vehicle collisions.* On average, 31 deer/car collisions are reported annually to the Weston police dept. Such collisions cause damage to vehicles and are usually fatal to deer, and can also cause injuries and (rarely) fatalities for drivers and passengers.
- *Lyme disease.* There have been increasing cases of Lyme disease (along with other tick-borne illnesses) in Weston, as well as in surrounding towns, among both people and pets. Over 40 percent of survey respondents reported that they or someone in their family had contracted Lyme disease. Lyme disease is part of a complex relationship involving the life cycle of ticks and several different animal hosts. Deer do not carry the disease (the major reservoir of the disease is field mice); however, deer play a critical role in supporting large populations of adult ticks and spreading them throughout the landscape. While there is scientific debate about how low the deer population must be driven to have a beneficial effect, several studies have indicated that if it can be reduced below 10 deer/square mile, tick population and Lyme disease rates decline.

Questions about Weston's Deer Management Program? Contact the Conservation Commission at 781-786-5068 or conservation@westonmass.org