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Protecting Nature from Deer

By Ted Williams

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The question was: What is the most dangerous and destructive wild animal in America? White-tailed deer kill, maim and sicken thousands of people each year. In Pennsylvania, one of the few states keeping tabs, deer annually destroy \$70 million worth of crops and \$75 million worth of trees, and about 40,000 of them collide with motor vehicles, doing \$80 million worth of damage. They wipe out wildflowers, mid-level plant communities, shrub-nesting birds.

Deer do all this because they are grossly mismanaged. In fact, they've always been grossly mismanaged. First we killed too many. Now we kill too few. In 1900 there were about 500,000 whitetails in the U.S. Today there are 33 million. Mild winters and a lack of natural predators make the irruption particularly severe in the Southeast, where the population has increased by something like 25 percent since 1990. In South Carolina there are now so many deer that in much of the coastal plain you can legally kill as many as you like every day all year. In 28 coastal counties you can even hunt them with dogs. Still, the state's hunters, who annually kill about 300,000 deer, can't keep the herd in balance with the land. Although Georgia hunters kill close to half a million deer a year, there's a bill in the legislature to increase the seasonal limit from 8 to 12. Even that won't be enough.

In South Carolina's piedmont and coastal plain there are 30 to 40 deer per square mile; in Georgia's between 30 and 45. A 10-year study by the U.S. Forest Service reveals that at more than 20 deer per square mile you lose shrub nesters including least flycatchers, eastern wood pewees, indigo buntings, yellow-billed cuckoos and cerulean warblers. At 38 deer per square mile you lose eastern phoebes and even robins. Ground nesters such as quail, grouse, ovenbirds, woodcock and wild turkeys can nest in ferns, which deer dislike; but because these birds need cover, they too are vastly reduced.

For the past decade Dr. Douglas Rayner of Wofford College in Spartanburg, S.C., has compared plant growth outside and inside a small deer-proof area in 7,054-acre Croft State Park. Outside this "exclosure" he reports "absolute devastation of virtually all spring wildflowers." Inside the exclosure Catesby's trillium stems were 68 times more dense than in suitable habitats outside. Elsewhere in the Southeast deer are wiping out endangered plants such as the relict trillium.

From Massachusetts to Georgia and west through the Great Plains there are often as many as 100 whitetails per square mile. After they denude the understory they fill their bellies with indigestible material like pine needles; their skin stretches over ribs like canvas on Conestoga wagons; they are eaten from the inside out by parasites and the outside in by dogs.

It's a hard death, but animal rights groups such as Friends of Animals actually advocate starvation as a management tool, observing that Gandhi, while fasting, claimed to have been comfortable enough. They call for chemical contraception despite the fact that it doesn't work. They call for trap-and-transfer, despite the facts that deer don't live through it and that no other community wants more deer. They call for release of wolves and cougars in suburban settings. They procure hunting bans, then - when deer spread Lyme disease and crash through picture windows - they prevent the community from inviting in hunters or hiring sharpshooters. When the community is eventually forced to reduce the population, they flounce around with placards, hold candlelight vigils, contaminate bait sites, throw themselves between deer and guns, and otherwise disrupt the cull. They find loss of entire ecosystems perfectly acceptable, provided the components die "painlessly."

But not all animal rights advocates are inflexible. "What's sadder than an innocent animal taking a bullet for the conservation cause?" asks David Seideman, editor of Audubon magazine, in his March-April issue. His answer: "Extinction that causes forests in spring to turn silent and barren for want of songbirds and wildflowers." That stance didn't come easily for a member of the radical animal rights

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group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals or an officer of an organization whose traditional stance on hunting has been militant neutrality.

Animals do have rights; it's just that those rights have been given a bad name by ecological illiterates. Deer, for example, have the right to healthy habitat, genetic integrity, and humane treatment, which includes—indeed, depends on—ethical, regulated hunting.