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Public Menace

A killer is on the loose in our forests. But how will wildlife managers ever be able to manage the deer if they can't manage the deer hunters?

By Ted Williams

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There's only one way to protect yourself, your family, and native ecosystems from the most dangerous and destructive wild animal in North America, an animal responsible for maiming and killing hundreds of humans each year, an animal that wipes out whole forests along with most of their fauna. You have to kill it with guns.

I'm talking about the white-tailed deer. In what Gary Alt, one of the nation's most respected wildlife biologists, calls "the greatest mistake ever made in wildlife management," deer are being allowed to overpopulate to the point of destroying the ecosystems they're part of and depend on. The annual mortality of roughly 1.5 million deer via collisions on the nation's highways doesn't make a dent, save in motor vehicles and their operators—damage that costs the insurance industry about \$1.1 billion a year.

There are major or minor deer problems in all 50 states—if not with whitetails then with blacktails, mule deer, elk, and such aliens as axis deer. In virtually every case the reason is that natural predators have been eliminated or reduced to the point where they can't effect control.

The situation is especially grim in the East. No state is worse than Pennsylvania, but vast tracts in Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, and Virginia have been stripped of low vegetation. There are so many deer in South Carolina that bag limits are set by the day rather than by the season. On most of the coastal plain you can kill as many bucks as you want—every day for 140 days, using dogs, if you so choose. (The joke is that the deer are so stunted that the dogs retrieve.) Despite this superabundance, hunters burn and plant private land to encourage even more deer. Georgia, which also allows hunting with dogs in some areas, is so overrun with deer that it has set a seasonal bag limit of 12 (only two of which may have antlers) during two and a half months of rifle hunting. And yet, in order to manipulate national forestland to make room for even more deer, the state's Department of Natural Resources opposes federal wilderness designation.

The American public doesn't accept the fact that sport hunting is the only solution. People referring to themselves as "deer advocates" repeatedly call for contraception, which, despite the extravagant claims of the Humane Society of the United States, 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 the release of cougars and wolves in places like eastern Connecticut. Demanding "humane treatment," they prevent local governments from inviting in hunters or even hiring sharpshooters. Then, when deer appear on living room rugs, bleeding and thrashing amid shattered picture-window glass, when their skin hangs on their ribs like canvas on Conestoga wagons, when they are too weak to evade the dogs that will soon sever their hamstrings and eat away their hindquarters, "deer advocates" give them diarrhea by feeding them things like cabbages and broccoli.

But the deer advocates who create the worst trouble for wildlife managers and present the only real threat to biodiversity and the future of hunting are the hunters themselves. In the more than three years since I covered the national deer crisis in the March 2002 Audubon (Incite, "Wanted: More Hunters"), the situation in Pennsylvania has gone from hopeful to hideous. Apparently that state will remain the continent's most graphic

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example of ecological blight wrought by backward, politically inspired management. For the 80 years prior to 1999, Pennsylvania hunters, who fund the Game Commission with their license dollars and therefore dictate policy, had demanded that the commission produce more deer than the woods could sustain. For 80 years they had gotten used to gross deer overabundance so that their sport more closely resembled a baited dove shoot than true deer hunting. If they imagined or perceived the slightest diminution in deer numbers, they shrieked like crated shoats.

As early as 1917 commission director Joseph Kalbfus gazed out over the state's devastated forests and accurately predicted that "someone is going to have hell to pay." In 1950 commission deer biologist Roger Latham publicly scolded deer hunters for their greed and stupidity, and inquired if deer should be managed by "well-trained wildlife men or . . . the whims, fancies, and selfish desires of the deer hunters themselves." The commission answered Latham's question when it gave in to hunters and fired him.

Then, six years ago, with a healthy shove from Audubon Pennsylvania and its partners, the commission suddenly acquired a spine. It turned the deer program over to Gary Alt, its veteran bear biologist, instructing him to reduce the deer herd until it was no longer a threat to itself and native ecosystems. "Suicide," he'd called the job when it was offered to him; then he inspected deer damage. "It just drove me to my knees," he declares. "I couldn't believe it. I'm not talking about little pockets but thousands and thousands of square miles that have been devastated." In study plots in a hemlock-beech forest in western Pennsylvania, deer had reduced plant species from 41 in 1928 to 21. "Natural gardens," providing sanctuary for wildflowers—many imperiled—were seen only in areas inaccessible to deer, such as on the tops of boulders.

In Warren, Pennsylvania, a 10-year study by the U.S. Forest Service determined that at more than 20 deer per square mile, there is complete loss of cerulean warblers (on the Audubon WatchList as a species of global concern), yellow-billed cuckoos, indigo buntings, eastern wood pewees, and least flycatchers. At 64 deer per square mile, eastern phoebes and even robins disappear. In heavily settled parts of Pennsylvania, where hunting pressure is light or nonexistent, it's not unusual to have more than 75 deer per square mile. At one Game Commission meeting, after a state botanist had testified that even mountain laurel was being wiped out, a hunter stood up and yelled: "We don't want the goddamned mountain laurel. We want deer."

But there isn't a choice; in the long run it's both or neither. Jim Grace, Pennsylvania's state forester, tells me this: "We're confronted with a situation where, in order to regenerate a forest following a disturbance, man-caused or natural, we have to put up a deer fence and maintain it for 3 to 10 years. We're spending about \$3 million on deer fence annually." But that's mostly where there's been logging. There are 4.25 million acres of public forestland that is unfenced and 12 million acres of private land that is essentially unfenced. "We're losing all the major tree species," Grace continued, "and virtually all the herbaceous plants. We've got an understory dominated by bracken fern, hay-scented fern, striped maple, beech brush—all commercially worthless and useless to wildlife."

Stephen Mohr, one of the eight politically appointed commissioners who set Game Commission policy, including seasons and bag limits, has it right when he says, "Gary Alt could sell ice water to Eskimos." From January 2000 to April 2004 Alt barnstormed the state, giving 225 lectures and slide shows, not backing up one inch for the noisy minority of hunters who interrupted him by stomping and jeering, who cursed and spat at him, who pushed him and threatened to kill him. No deer biologist before him in Pennsylvania or probably any state had his charisma or gift for language. At his presentations, video feeds had to be set up in gyms and cafeterias to accommodate overflow audiences. One of the first questions Alt would ask was "When you're hunting in the woods, how far away can you see a deer?" Invariably the answer was something like "150

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yards." His next question would be "Do you think there are too many deer in your area?" Invariably the answer was "No, there aren't enough." Then Alt would show photos of healthy forests and explain why it's not good to be able to see for 150 yards.

Every time Alt's team of biologists came up with an innovative way of using hunting as a tool to reduce the herd and get more bucks into the population so they could compete for does, thereby contributing strong genes, Alt would get back out on the lecture circuit and sell it to the public. For four years Pennsylvania hunters shot more deer than they had in history, raising the annual kill to half a million, while at the same time improving the buck-doe ratio. At this writing, deer numbers remain critically high, and it's not clear if Alt's modest first-step goal of reducing the herd by 5 percent has been achieved.

Alt had been on the job only two years when Audubon Pennsylvania and a coalition of environmentalists and sportsmen called the Pennsylvania Habitat Alliance hired 10 eminent scientists to prescribe ecosystem-based deer management for the East, with Pennsylvania the case study. The group's 340-page report, released in January 2005, confirms everything Alt had been saying. "Hunting," wrote the scientists, "is currently the only feasible method of regulating deer populations on a large scale." Attesting to Alt's stunning success as an educator was the finding by the authors that 71 percent of Pennsylvania's citizens support deer hunting as the primary method of controlling deer, and that 70 percent of its sportsmen want more of their license dollars invested in nongame wildlife.

Alt and his mission were supported by the vast majority of sportsmen. The Pennsylvania Wildlife Federation gave him its Outstanding Conservation Professional Award and (along with Audubon Pennsylvania) named him Conservation Educator of the year. Outdoor Life magazine gave him its Public Service Conservation Award. The Safari Club International gave him its Conservation Award. And the Quality Deer Management Association named him Professional Deer Manager of the Year.

But enlightened hunters aren't the ones making the noise. Shrieking into the Game Commission's ears are people who don't "hunt" deer so much as they "shop" for them, who don't want to shoot does because a real man "gets his buck," who long for the days—before Alt's increased hunting pressure sent their quarry to the swamps and ridgetops—when they could sit on stumps and blast away.

As it had done with all of Alt's predecessors, the commission started to slice away his legs. Eventually Alt wasn't even permitted to meet with his deer team without his superiors being present. "We'd get into a meeting," he reports, "and every comment by the administrators and policy makers was that hunters were out of control, that we had to back off. I wasn't allowed to develop new ideas. It became obvious to me that there was no way the commission was going to hold the line. I always said that when the time came that I could no longer be effective, I would leave." So on December 31, 2004, Alt ended his 27-year career with the commission.

Basically, Alt was a sock puppet in an elaborate and sinister plot hatched by Audubon Pennsylvania to eradicate the state's deer, thereby achieving its secret goal of ending all hunting and seizing control of public land, the better to raise dickey birds. Or so goes the mantra of the Unified Sportsmen of Pennsylvania. The outfit has dozens of mouthpieces, none shriller than game commissioner Stephen Mohr and local outdoor writers Karl Power and Jim Slinsky.

Wrote Power in his January 16, 2005, column in the (Tarentum) Valley News Dispatch : "For me, the proverbial 'red flag' immediately goes up any time the bird-watching Audubon people get involved in deer management. I once listened, in disgust, to an Audubon representative complain during a game commission

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meeting about how all of the deer were eating the low bushes where some songbirds build nests. Give me a break!"

Slinsky, who hosts a radio talk show in addition to writing a syndicated column for rural newspapers, and who claims (sans evidence) to be the most widely read outdoor writer in the nation, warns that Audubon has "infiltrated" government across the country, and he reports the following: "Alt's job was to reduce our deer herd to intolerable levels and force the game commission into chaos and financial turmoil. He did his job perfectly. It was never about improving deer hunting. . . . In essence, Alt gambled away his entire career in a political scheme to get promoted. . . . Alt made many, many mistakes in his quest for money and power. . . . Alt's lack of people skills became apparent as he alienated everyone around him. A Napoleon complex began to emerge."

Mohr told me this: "It wasn't Gary Alt's program. What did Gary Alt know about deer management? Nothing! It was a program put together by the Audubon and a few other folks, and basically Gary Alt was the salesperson. The motive was to revert the land back to what it was in the 1800s, when you saw more species. The environmentalists are sitting back, chuckling at the turmoil we have the hunters in." When I inquired which environmentalists these might be, he said: "The same folks that are with the United Nations biosphere agenda. They've already established themselves in Kentucky and Arkansas, and they're trying to establish here. When they do, everything's off-limits to humans." Mohr claims to have it straight from the hunters he represents that deer are at near-record lows. "I'm not sure if you're familiar with the Pennsylvania hunter," he told me. "He's a killing machine. When the Pennsylvania hunter comes back and tells you the deer aren't there, they're not there."

Alas, I am thoroughly familiar with the Pennsylvania hunter, having watched him in action. More often than not he hunts from a seated position, in a place where he has always hunted, and in habitat that doesn't hold deer because it has been ruined by deer or because the deer that had been there have fled at the first rifle cracks of the new season.

Since anecdotal data seem to carry weight in Pennsylvania, I collected some of my own from a hunter who really is "a killing machine." His name is Tim Schaeffer and, in addition to serving on the Governor's Council for Hunting, Fishing and Conservation, he is the executive director of Audubon Pennsylvania. Schaeffer doesn't sit on stumps. He looks for the steepest, nastiest, people-unfriendliest terrain, then makes a beeline for it. I asked him how his season had been. He'd had no trouble getting his deer. With him was his father-in-law, who hadn't hunted a day in his 66 years; he got his deer, too. Moreover, to do their thing for the buck-doe ratio, they'd selected antlerless deer. "The notion that there are no deer left couldn't be more incorrect," he says. "We saw a ton of deer where people are claiming there are none."

Data of a less anecdotal nature were collected last fall by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers at its 22,000-acre property around Raystown Lake, in south-central Pennsylvania. Hunters were complaining bitterly that the deer had been shot out, but an infrared aerial survey revealed that the deer were merely doing what they do when they're hunted—evading hunters. One area contained 80 deer per square mile, and the average was 51—roughly three times what Alt and his management team had determined to be environmentally acceptable.

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Will the game commissioners fold under pressure from the Unified Sportsmen of Pennsylvania and its Greek chorus, and go back to its tradition of raising more deer than the land can support? I put the question to Jan Beyea, a former vice-president of National Audubon and a consultant and facilitator for the deer study commissioned by Audubon Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Habitat Alliance. "If history is any example, they will fold," he said. "Whenever any progress is made in turning deer numbers around, some hunters have a fit, and the game commissioners eliminate the new measures."

So what's the solution? Education? No, because knowing what's good for you is not the same as wanting what's good for you. "You can 'educate' hunters till hell freezes over," says Alt. "But it's like educating children to eat brussels sprouts. They'll get the question right on the exam, but they'll never eat one."

The interesting, pertinent question therefore becomes: "Why do the vocal sportsmen get what they scream for?" The answer: Because they pay the bills. In Pennsylvania 71 percent of the public wants deer brought into balance with the land, but this cannot happen when the hunters provide virtually 100 percent of the Game Commission's money. The hunters and the commission reject all outside funding proposals because they want to keep the power where it is. Mohr, for example, is quoted by the York Daily Record as saying: "The problem with listening to all the special-interest groups is that, once you compromise, they've already gotten into your fort. Once nonhunters are telling you what you're going to accept, our days are over." But hunters, who make up only 8 percent of Pennsylvania's population, qualify eminently as a "special-interest group." The commission is legally mandated to look after all native fauna. Instead, its policy is and always has been: If you can't shoot it, it's not wildlife.

The funding setup at the Game Commission and most state game and fish agencies ensures they present curricula hurtful to everyone and everything—the sort you'd expect in a school where pupils signed their teachers' paychecks. As the deer-study scientists reported, "The Pennsylvania Game Commission needs to establish new funding sources that represent its broader constituencies and provide its full range of stakeholders an opportunity to participate in management decision processes." Bryon Shissler, one of the study's authors and a consultant to Audubon Pennsylvania, speaks for his fellow environmentalists as well as his fellow hunters when he declares: "We [sportsmen] no longer represent the majority of our fellow conservationists, and we cannot afford to pay for what this state needs and deserves to manage its natural resources responsibly and effectively."

In the few states where game and fish agencies get public funding, fish, wildlife, and all human user groups, especially sportsmen, benefit spectacularly. The best example is Missouri, which in 1976 passed a one-eighth-of-a-cent sales tax dedicated to fish, wildlife, and forestry, thereby annually providing the state Department of Conservation with about \$95 million of its \$160 million budget. According to Joel Vance—one of the nation's most respected outdoor writers, a onetime Audubon columnist, and a former Missouri Department of Conservation employee—the tax "has elevated Missouri's conservation program to number one nationally, both in funding and in scope." A one-tenth-of-a-cent sales tax helps fund the state Department of Natural Resources. As a result Missouri has been able to purchase and protect vast tracts of wild land, all of it open to hunting and fishing. Not only does the tax generate fish and wildlife, it generates money. Fishing, hunting, forestry, and wildlife viewing now bring \$7 billion to Missouri's economy each year. Arkansas, which had limped along with one of the nation's stingiest fish and wildlife budgets, went to a one-eighth-of-a-cent conservation tax in 1996 and now gets almost \$50 million a year, most of which is spent on nature centers and major land purchases. The recently rediscovered ivory-billed woodpecker is just one beneficiary of such policies.

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Alt sums up the efficacy of traditional, license-revenue funding when he observes: "There is no animal the states have paid more attention to and spent more money on than white-tailed deer. And there is no better example of malpractice." I knew from working with retired biologists that, like old soldiers, they tend to "just fade away." In a real sense the good ones are old soldiers. So I asked Alt what he intended to do with the remainder of his life. I liked his answer: "I quit the commission because I could do more to solve this deer crisis by working on the outside. I promised the game commissioners that I would spend the rest of my career trying to change the system, that I would become their worst nightmare. That's where I'm headed."

What You Can Do

Support deer hunting, even if you don't like the idea. In the long run it's the only humane solution and the only way to protect the native ecosystems that deer are part of and depend on. Urge your state legislators to introduce bills to procure public funding for your game and fish agency. Read the Audubon Pennsylvania and Habitat Alliance deer-management study at http://pa.audubon.org/deer_forum_report_main.htm.