

# Deer

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One resident suggested that the mice should be eliminated rather than the deer herd being culled. Several people said that a meaningful or successful mouse hunt would be much more difficult than a deer hunt.

Speakers for the workshop included Lori Gibson, supervising wildlife biologist for the state Department of Environmental Management's Division of Fish and Wildlife. It was her division's job to study deer and control them primarily through regulated hunts. The council scheduled the workshop to get an explanation of her department's July report, written by Acting Division Chief Michael Lapisky. She also provided 3,000 copies of a leaflet about deer-related diseases for distribution through town (public) buildings, including the library.

Also speaking, somewhat briefly, was Helen Drew, the legislative liaison for the state Department of Health, and called on for the most information was Dr. Thomas Mather, professor at the University of Rhode Island at Kingston and director of its Center for Vector-Borne Disease.

Gibson identified a significant drawback to culling the island's deer herd by hunting. Property owners tended to deny hunters access to their land, she said. She was not referring to properties where safety would be a factor, but to larger parcels where owners refuse access to hunters. She said that failure to increase hunting means continued herd growth and increasing deer-related problems. "Not adding hunting is the same as taking no action," she noted.

#### Island-wide

Councilor Barbara Szepatowski said she would support more hunting by residents, but not by non-residents. Gibson said restricting

non-residents is not an option because the situation is controlled by federal law and federal funds. Szepatowski also asked why the state did not conduct a survey at Jamestown's north end, which seems to have more deer than the south end on Beavertail, where the state survey was conducted. Gibson explained the reason was access. While Beavertail has the state park, a large public parcel of land, the state is not entitled to enter private land on the north end automatically. The deer problem "is an islandwide issue" regardless of survey limits, Gibson said.

Many Jamestowners this summer have reported relatively high numbers of Lyme and tick-borne diseases, as well as major defoliation of both landscape and forest plants by the deer. Gibson said that deer will feed on more and more plants that they previously avoided as the herd grows, and the supply of preferred plants decreases. She said this feeding leads to destruction of endangered plant species, and also impacts other wildlife wherever there is deer overpopulation. That is happening on a widespread basis because hunting for food and clothing no longer is a major aspect of human survival. "It is a cultural issue," the state specialist said.

Island resident Ann Lane said she knew of some cases of local tick bites that occurred in landscaped areas and not in overgrown areas, which are the usual places ticks are found.

#### Gibson explains

Council President Long said Gibson was at the meeting "to explain the report in layman's terms." Gibson quipped, "Now you tell me." She sped through a computerized explanation and then gave added data and responded to questions.

"Deer are one of the most studied and published topics in both scientific and common vernacular. Numerous (publications) are dedicated to deer research, manage-

ment, and conflict resolution," according to her report. "(State law) vests authority over the wildlife resources of the state" in her division through a 1937 act that provides funds to states, she noted. The funds are raised by an 11 percent excise tax on arms and ammunition and hunting license sales. That money enables land purchases, herd surveys, technical guidance to the public, research, management and hunter education, she said.

Gibson emphasized that data about deer in Rhode Island "are real numbers, derived from samples." She said the data generally underestimates the number of deer because of such factors as illegal hunt takes, auto strikes, thick cover, and the habits of male deer, particularly their use of forests for cover.

She showed graphs of the deer population in the state and in Jamestown growing quickly in recent years. She detailed the dramatic increase of deer on Prudence Island after years of control, followed by less hunting for a few years. She also referred to the Block Island experience, where an effort to avoid hunting led to that island being so overrun with deer that residents agreed to have an aggressive hunt.

Jamestowners for two years or more agreed that the local deer herd has grown significantly, but they disagree about how to cull the herd. While some want more hunting, others are convinced that non-hunting methods, especially contraception, are enough to control the animals. The Humane Society of Jamestown also commissioned a survey that said state numbers on the island's deer population were too high. Gibson said that even if the society's data were used, it still represented a need for a herd cull.

She said deer contraception is not commonly available, still being researched, and involves a high cost. She said sharpshooters are also expensive, and she personally rated veteran hunters as

superior to police trained with handgun skills but not deer hunting techniques. Trapping and transferring excess deer is not possible because no where else will take them. Deer are too plentiful everywhere, she said.

Gibson explained laws that apply to using venison or deer meat to feed the needy. She said laws require that the meat be inspected, but no inspectors are available in Rhode Island. She said hunters, however, can offer it to food banks under a "good Samaritan" rule.

Gibson reported that deer die of old age mainly through starvation because their teeth wear so extensively.

She listed negative effects of too many deer as: damage to both forest and cultivated plants, loss of plant and songbird diversity, increase of disease to humans from deer ticks, and disease and poor nutrition among the deer themselves. "As the habitat degrades, there is more deer death," she emphasized, suggesting that such death was more unpleasant than by death by hunting.

#### Lyme disease

Avoiding ticks and where they are located reduces the opportunity of getting Lyme disease through a deer tick bite, Drew said. She urged people to inspect their bodies, remove their clothes, and immediately wash them in hot water after any outdoor activity. She referred to the leaflet she had about Lyme disease, ehrlichiosis, and babesiosis as being among several tick-borne illnesses.

In response to comments made by Mather, Drew admitted that the state has changed its methods of recording data about Lyme disease so that it may seem like it is not increasing as some health authorities are reporting. She said the change was made because of a lack of funds for staff to carry out the needed followup work. She agreed that even under the old methods, the incidence of the Lyme disease may have been understated. Studies have shown that tick problems in humans are underreported by as much as 90 percent, meaning only one of every 10 incidents of symptoms is reported.

Drew also said that some doctors or other health practitioners may not be as knowledgeable about tick-related diseases because of its relatively fast spread in recent years. Because of that, it is important for people with Lyme disease symptoms to tell their doctors about any possible exposure to

deer ticks and showing them any insects they have removed from their bodies.

#### Ongoing studies

The URI professor said he has been studying ticks since 1983 and the URI Center he oversees operates under grants involving about \$750,000 a year. Mather said more funding and research is still needed and "a solution is still a few years off, including long-term strategies such as a vaccine that is most exciting." He acknowledged support from Rhode Island U.S. senators for the kind of work he is doing.

Brochures are helpful, but not enough people read them "until it is too late. We need to develop more educational approaches," Mather said.

"Seventy-five percent of residents surveyed claimed to know about tick exposure and checks, but only 55 percent of parents check their kids daily and carefully for ticks," Mather noted. "Does that mean they do not care as much for their children as for themselves?" he asked rhetorically.

Mather said repellents sprayed onto skin can be somewhat helpful, but they do not repel well or long enough. However, anti-tick sprays applied to clothing and shoes seems to be better and are being improved, he said.

"Proper landscaping with open canopies" can be effective, but it does not guarantee the end of tick problems, he said. He questioned lawn treatments by inadequately trained people. The URI has a list of workers who are at least trained in the best methods. He said the recommended series of applications is once in May, a second time 30 days later, and a third application right after the first fall frost.

Mather said improvements are possible "but we need to see a ground swell of support to see them happen."

He was asked about ticks carried by other animals and their relevance. "They are not called deer ticks for nothing," Mather responded. He said the problem is with deer and the ticks they carry. He said a dog tick, which can spread spotted fever, is not common in this part of the country, but the area did have a death seven years ago from a dog tick bite. He noted that the deer tick can affect pets, so that owners ought to check their dogs carefully after every outdoor activity, as well as use sprays recommended by veterinarians.

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