

2020 Season Report: Deer Management Subcommittee

Harvard, Massachusetts

The 2020 deer hunting season has ended. This report is to share few observations from the past year. The DMS is currently researching and compiling recommendations for the 2021 Season and these will be submitted as a separate report.

The year 2020 will be remembered as the year Corona virus changed everyone's lives. Despite the limitations that Covid placed on our activities, the DMS successfully conducted a set of springtime deer pellet transects under the direction of the State Deer Biologist, David Stainbrook. The transects are used to monitor and estimate deer population by doing an assessment of deer scat deposited after the Autumn leaf-drop and before the spring green-out. This method is used by the State and other land trusts in their population studies. The DMS and volunteers from other towns were trained by MassWildlife's Biologists David Stainbrook and Susan McCarthy on the Williams Land property. This study consisted of a set of strait lines – some miles long – across a set area. At designated intervals the trained observers would stop and see if there were any deer pellets within a 4-foot radius circle. The study covered two large areas of town and took hundreds of volunteer hours to complete. The results of the survey can be found in the DMS on-line library on the town website.

Our subcommittee began preparation for the hunting season by hosting qualification sessions at the Harvard Sportsman's Club and at a small private range. The Sportsman club proved to be a near ideal facility as it allowed for a larger number of archers to be socially distanced at all times. Each qualifier was supervised by Archery instructors and done with proper range protocols.

Participants were required to hit a six-inch round target at 25 yards with at least three of five arrows. We strictly adhered to the archery trial specified in our original report. Some hunters failed to pass this test and were therefore not allowed to participate in the hunt. Forty-two archers attempted to pass the test. Thirty qualified hunters were issued Harvard Hunter ID numbers. Several disabled hunters passed the qualifier and participated in the hunt.

The approved archers were allowed to hunt on designated conservation properties and required to complete a daily log and call their activity into the local dispatch. Each hunter was issued a photo ID with their Hunter number on it and a dash placard. Each hunters had been vetted by the Harvard PD and the Environmental Police. Each Department had their full information. The hunters carried with them the contact numbers of the Harvard Police, Environmental Police and a DMS member.

There was discussion on whether hunters should be specifically assigned to locations. Our committee decided to allow these hunters to choose from among the program properties, which seemed to be mostly successful.

In interviews with the hunters, it appears there was a misapprehension as to the numbers of Harvard Program hunters in the woods. While some had a perception that the properties had a very dense component of hunters - some of the properties actually received very little scouting or hunting activity. As it turns out some of the hunters encountered the tagged-for-removal stands of un-authorized poachers on Town Conservation land and had the misapprehension that the stands were those of

program hunters. This occurred at least once on the Willard Property and twice on the Perini Property. Some felt with 30-hunters on the roster the parcels would be crowded – the reality there were just a handful of program hunters at any one time. DMS members did random spot checks of hunting parking areas. Willard, Rodriguez and the MassAve/Barrett properties were not hunted very often according to the log and confirmed by our spot checks.

Some hunters commented that the log was unnecessarily time consuming. Many complained about frustration using the dispatch call in – as the dispatch would not always take down their information or would tell them to stop calling in. This was remedied with Dispatch and the HPD later in the season. Some approved hunters only hunted once or twice due to other time commitments, hunting opportunities at other locations, plan changes due to Covid, or personal challenges.

A program did report an off occurrence a specific property where an abutter twice barricaded access to the pathways on conservation land – once with a fence, and once with dumped loads of chord wood. Furthermore, the abutter posted on conservation land a “No Trespassing” sign. The sign and barricades were placed on public lands in the care and custody of the Harvard Conservation Commission. The rules regulating Conservation property ensure that is not to be used for private use, and that it be available to the public. The barricades and sign and a non-program deer stand were removed at a Commissioner’s request.

The five sites that were opened to approved for hunting were Barrett, Daman / Stephenson, Perini, Rodriguez, and Willard / Poitras. Overall, participation in our hunting program was low. Of the thirty approved individuals, only about half recorded hunting or scouting activity on town lands. Of the 192 log entries that we collected through Google Forms, 88% of all hunting and scouting activity was on Perini and Daman / Stephenson. Only 23 individual reports were filed for the other three locations. Four individuals accounted for more than 75% of all log entries. In consultation with other programs, it has been found that the majority of people actively hunting will be a minority within the group of hunters.

To this point, our subcommittee collected comments saying that the three less popular sites were less appealing for hunting, whether due to difficult access, road noise, forest type, lack of deer sign, parking restrictions, or other environmental conditions. One suggestion for future years is to increase the lands that are approved for hunting in consideration of acreage, and a hunter’s evaluation of these conditions that increase or decrease the probability of hunting success.

One deer was reported as taken by a program hunter on town conservation property. An adult antlered deer was harvested on December 31st on Daman Stephenson.

While the results for the first season were disappointing, it was not unexpected. Bowhunting is an inherently difficult activity. We have been told both by the state deer biologist and our participants that only one in every three hunters will successfully take a deer in a season. With four active hunters, the result is not unexpected. To increase the number of deer taken will require an increase in participation and a change/ additions made in the list of approved lands. Furthermore, a number of hunters that qualified for the hunt did not participate due to the short term available to them for scouting the town lands. Ideally a hunter will have a year or more to “pattern” the deer population. The skilled hunter looks for deer prints in the winter’s snow. They check pathways, grazing patterns, bedding areas, territorial marking “rubs” and “scrapes”. Before the season begins, they are able to predict where the

deer may be at a given time. Their hunting stands are installed weeks or months before the season begins - so the deer become used to them – and are not alarmed by their sudden presence.

Due to the slow start caused by the Covid crisis; the hunters were forced into difficult task of scouting and setting up during the course of the season itself – which is far from optimal. Some hunters chose to hunt on non-program lands that they had already scouted and had previous permission to hunt – both in Harvard and other towns. The hunters that stayed with the program had to both learn where the deer were – and at the same time be not be too active on the properties – as their presence, scent and movement on the property would “spook” the deer out of the area. The one deer that was harvested came close to the end of the season and it was the extra time that gave the hunter the opportunity to pattern the deer in that area. In order to be successful, that hunter had to use his observations in November and December to know where the deer would be at a given time and set his stand appropriately.

Statistics from MassWildlife state for this season for the town of Harvard show:

Of the 69 Deer harvested in town; 53 were on private property and 16 were in public property. (Note: the program’s deer was included in the public property numbers)

Archery hunting in Harvard took 48 deer (33 bows, 15 crossbow); 13 by shotgun, 8 by muzzleloaders.

Although this first hunting season on town conservation lands in Harvard did not remove very many deer, we are satisfied with other important aspects of the program. First, there were no reported safety incidents involving participants in the hunt. Secondly, there were no conflicts or negative interactions that we are aware of in the woods between hunters and the general public. Our mandated goal to manage the deer population took a step forward. It is estimated that an adult deer can consume as much as 2000-pounds of vegetation every year. The removal of the one adult deer was a step toward that management goal. Finally, based upon our work before the hunting season and of illegal deer stands that were removed from town land, it is our opinion that substantial hunting activity was already happening on town lands without oversight.