

# 2021 Season Report: Deer Management Subcommittee

Harvard, Massachusetts

The Deer Management Subcommittee (DMS) has been entrusted by the Conservation Commission to conduct a controlled hunt on designated Town parcels to control the deer population. The 2021 deer hunting season concluded at dusk on December 31. This report is to share a few observations on the deer management and hunting activity from the past year.

Two deer pellet transects were performed within Harvard this last spring. These transects were conducted between the time when the snow melts and before the spring 'green up' and are used as tool to estimate the deer population.

The two transects were done by MassWildlife and DMS has requested the data from the local office. Once received, it will be made available on the Town website.

In an effort to effectively site our resources, the DMS conducted a comprehensive land survey on conservation properties in the Town of Harvard. This involved DMS volunteers checking each property for a number of different criteria. They made note of access points, distance to dwellings, trails and roadways, and evaluated if the property had signs of deer activity. These results were reported to DMS, who used this information to make recommendations to the Conservation Commission. At the Commission meeting of September 2, 2021, the DMS presented a list of properties to add to the program for 2021. The properties recommended by DMS were Blomfelt, Dunlap, Great Elms, Hermann Orchard, Maxant, Prospect Hill, Shaker Spring House, Vesenska and Williams. The Commission decided that Prospect Hill and the Williams lands should not be included for this season, and suggested the Gillette land be included, which DMS attendees agreed to. The Commission then voted to approve the updated list for inclusion in the program. These eight properties (Blomfelt, Dunlap, Gillette, Great Elms, Hermann Orchard, Maxant, Shaker Spring House and Vesenska) are in addition to the previously approved properties in 2020 of Barrett, Damon/Stephenson, Perini, Rodriguez and Willard/Poitras.

DMS began preparation for our second deer management season by hosting qualification sessions at the Harvard Sportsman's Club. 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 certified Archery instructors and done with proper range protocols. DMS member and Rangemaster, Joe Pulido, was present at all qualifiers, and recorded their paperwork, as well as performed a poundage-pull check on each of their bows.

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 program. Two new archers successfully passed the test. A total of 14 qualified hunters were issued Harvard Hunter ID numbers for the 2021 season. Each hunter has taken a State mandated hunter safety class and has a current Massachusetts hunting license. Each hunter is requested by DMS to purchase antlerless deer permits, commonly known as doe tags in addition to the buck tags that come with the hunting license.

The approved hunters were allowed to hunt on designated conservation properties and required to complete a daily log. Each hunter was issued a photo ID with their Hunter number on it and a dashboard parking placard, as well as two bright orange stand tags. Each hunter had been vetted by the Harvard Police Department and the Environmental Police Officer (EPO). The Harvard Police and the EPOs as well as the Town Conservation office had their full information. The hunters carried with them the contact numbers of the Harvard Police, Environmental Police, the Conservation office and a DMS member. They also were required to have on their possession Hunter ID, Hunting License, doe and buck tags, and a map of their assigned properties. During the season from November 29 to its end on December 31 each hunter must wear 500 square inches of blaze orange.

DMS had considerable discussions regarding the best way to distribute hunters over the designated properties. The majority of towns in the Commonwealth simply “open” their designated properties to the public – or their designated hunter teams. In these municipalities the qualified hunters may choose which properties they wish to set their stands on and they have the freedom to switch locations. A minority of towns and Land Trusts assign hunters to specific properties. Both distribution strategies have their benefits. DMS interviewed and surveyed the qualified hunters from last season and several different towns and Land Trusts in an effort to determine which method would best serve the Town of Harvard conservation lands.

After careful study, DMS decided to assign the hunters to specific properties. During our first season (2020) DMS recommended that the qualified hunters could openly choose from amongst the program properties available, and for 2021 DMS made a concerted effort to match hunters with their desired parcels. Each hunter would have their own lot, or in the case of larger lots, share with one or a pair of other hunters. This allowed each hunter to have responsibility and ‘ownership’ of each property assigned to them. They were given the contact information of those they shared the property with, and could coordinate visits if they chose to. Hunters were asked to select their top three preferred properties, and given the best match available. The properties were then assigned based on participation in the 2020 program, Harvard residency or a Town of Harvard employee.

When asked how the new system worked this year for the archery crew, DMS received the following replies:

- Yes, this definitely worked and I am hoping it continues. I was able to coordinate with other hunters and know who and when the properties were being hunted. Please keep this going!
- My opinion sometimes it takes a couple years to figure out a hunting spot. where are the deer feeding, what are they feeding on early season, late season. Travel routes. So, I like assigned hunting spots. Gives the hunter time to learn the spot.
- At first I was against assigning hunters to properties but by assigning hunters they are technically the only hunters on that property. It's like having their own private property to hunt. They don't have to worry about if another hunter was there earlier to spoil their hunt and not too mention ensuring a higher success rate in harvesting a deer.

One stated goal of this method was to increase the number of individual stand visits by each hunter. Of the 122 hunter log entries that were collected through Google Forms, 81% of all hunting and scouting activity was on Blomfelt, Daman/Stephenson, Gillette, Great Elms, Hermann Orchards and Vesenska.

All 14 approved hunters did get out to hunt. Of these, 6 accounted for 80% of the trips to scout or hunt. 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. In consultation with other programs and the State Deer Biologist, Dr. Feehan, it has been found that the majority of people actively hunting will be a minority within the group of hunters.

Three deer were reported as taken by approved hunters on Town conservation property. One adult doe was taken from each of the following properties: Blomfelt, Gillette, and Hermann Orchard. All were taken in the month of December.

Hunter harassment continues to be a concern of DMS and the program participants. We had two instances reported. One was a tree stand that was vandalized and the second a trail camera was stolen. Reports were filed with the Environmental Police and the Harvard Police Department.

During the course of scouting and hunting, the DMS volunteers tagged five unpermitted stands on conservation property. Some stands such as the one tagged at Barrett and the two at Hermann Orchard were likely removed by their owners after given notice. One stand was removed in January from Dunlap. Others will be removed by the end of winter or spring by DMS.

The DMS is satisfied that the program was a success this year. While we wish the harvest numbers were higher, 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. We are grateful that more properties were approved to expand the managed area. MassWildlife has shared with DMS that by opening more of the landscape to hunting, it is a way to increase the season's yield.

Many municipalities have stated that this has been a low harvest year for their programs. Anecdotally it has been said that the 'mast' or acorn drop has been especially low this year, which has led to deer changing their locations.

A number of the hunters that qualified for the hunt did comment that a longer period to scout the Town lands would be appreciated. While we did have more advance knowledge than we did last year, many of the sites were new to our team members. 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. Ideally, 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. In order to be successful on the new parcels, hunters used their scouting observations in October and November to know where the deer would be at a given time and make stand location adjustments appropriately. We do expect that if the hunt is allowed to continue into the fall of 2022, that our hunters will have a better command of the properties and the movements of deer across them, and we will see an increase in early season deer harvested.

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. Of all of the program hunters, one was successful in harvesting a deer on Harvard land outside of the program that was open to him. All of the other hunters also stated that they hunt private property but did not note the location of them. This group harvested 8 deer from those properties.

Statistics from MassWildlife showing the number of deer harvested in the Town of Harvard both on public and private lands will be released later this year. Once received it will be added to the DMS library on the Town website.

We are satisfied with many 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. We were forwarded a request for guidance to hikers on conservation land during the season, and DMS and Conservation staff was able to fulfill that request in just a few days.

Our mandated goal to manage the deer population has taken another step forward. It is estimated that an adult deer can consume as much as 2000-pounds of vegetation every year. The removal of three adult deer is a step toward that management goal. It is particularly valuable from a land management standpoint that our hunter team harvested does, as that is an affirmative way to assist in controlling population.

Robert Douglas, Chair

Tom Cotton

Ben Urquhart

Paul Willard

Joe Pulido, Rangemaster