

2023 Season Report: Deer Management Subcommittee Harvard, Massachusetts

The Deer Management Subcommittee (DMS) has been entrusted by the Conservation Commission and the Town of Harvard to conduct controlled archery hunts on designated Town parcels to help control the deer population. The 2023 deer hunting season concluded at dusk on December 30. This report is to share a few observations on deer management and hunting activity from the past season.

DMS continued to survey conservation land in the Town of Harvard that might be appropriate for deer management. DMS volunteers made note of access points, distance to dwellings, trails, and roadways, and evaluated if the property had signs of deer activity. Following a number of hunter inquiries about land in town that was not under the care and custody of the Conservation Commission, DMS volunteers evaluated several of those as well. A Spring Town Meeting article brought forth by Harvard Police Chief Babu put the Selectmen in charge of giving permission to hunt on Town Land other than Conservation land, clarifying the authority DMS would need to contact to include those town parcels.

After consulting with its DMS Volunteer Scouts, the Conservation Stewardship Committee, the Select Board Chair, and the Harvard Conservation Trust, the DMS requested that the Conservation Commission approve adding two new conservation properties and two Town properties to the land under Deer Management. These four properties were the Conservation properties Tripp/Stephenson (west) and Old Mill, and the Town's Warila and Gravel Pit properties.

The Conservation Commission voted on September 7th to approve the inclusion of these properties in the program and recommended to the Select Board that permission be granted for deer management of the Warila and Gravel Pit properties. The Select Board voted on September 19th to include those two town-managed parcels in the program.

Currently 17 properties (or contiguous groups of properties) are approved for Deer Management: Barrett, Blomfelt, Coke, Damon/Stephenson (east), Dunlap, Gillette, Gravel Pit, Great Elms, Hermann Orchard/Rodriquez, Maxant, Old Mill, Perini, Shaker Spring House, Tripp/Stephenson (west), Vesenka, Warila, and Willard/Poitras.

DMS began preparation for our fourth season by hosting qualification sessions at the Harvard Sportsman's Club. This location has been a great facility for our purposes. It is large enough for archers to be socially distanced at all times and provides tables to lay out their gear and for the range DMS staff to process the paperwork. Each qualifier was supervised by a certified Archery instructor and followed proper range protocols. A DMS member and Rangemaster, Joe Pulido, was present at all qualifiers, recorded their paperwork, and 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, which is the strict requirement specified in our original plan. Eight new archers successfully passed the test. A total of 25 qualified hunters were issued Harvard Hunter ID numbers for the 2023 season, and 23 actively participated.

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. While all deer consume nearly 2000 pounds of vegetative material a year, harvesting does is more effective in controlling the deer population. A number of hunters in the program have told us they "save their doe tags" for their hunting in Harvard. They understand the DMS and Commission program and actively work toward the program's goals.

Each approved hunter was issued a photo ID with their hunter number on it and a dashboard parking placard, as well as two bright orange numbered stand tags. Each hunter was vetted by the Harvard Police Department and the Environmental Police Officer (EPO). The hunters carried the contact numbers of the Harvard Police, Environmental Police, the Conservation office and a DMS member. They also were required to have in their possession their Hunter ID, hunting license, doe and buck tags, and a map of their assigned properties. Hunters also follow the regulations and rules as stated by the MA Division of Fisheries & Wildlife. The hunters were required to complete a daily log after each hunt or scouting activity.

DMS has had discussions regarding the best way to distribute hunters over designated properties. The majority of towns in the Commonwealth simply open their designated properties so that qualified hunters may choose where to set

their stands. A minority of towns and land trusts assign hunters to specific properties. Both distribution strategies have their benefits. DMS has interviewed and surveyed the participating hunters from previous seasons and several different towns and land trusts in an effort to determine which method would best serve the Town of Harvard conservation lands.

DMS decided in 2023 to continue to assign the hunters to specific properties. Each hunter would have their own parcel, or in the case of larger lots, share a parcel with one other hunter. This allowed each hunter to have responsibility and 'ownership' of each property assigned to them. (The Great Elms, Tripp/Stephenson (west) and Barrett properties were each assigned a team of two hunters).

If a hunter shared the property with a second hunter, they were given their contact information and could coordinate hunts if they chose to. In some cases, previously qualified hunters came to the qualifier with an existing hunting buddy. The DMS saw this as an opportunity to increase hunting on the properties by assigning the pair to a single parcel. This made sense as the two were familiar with each other's hunting style, and there was already good communication in place. Three different pairs of hunters have been successful in harvesting a deer during the past three years.

DMS made a concerted effort to match hunters with their desired parcels. Hunters were asked to select their top five preferred properties and given the best match available. The properties were then assigned based on participation in the previous year program, Harvard residency, or Town of Harvard employment. Those that participated more in the past were given a priority for their properties of choice.

When asked how the system of fixed assignments worked this year, DMS received the following replies:

- The assigned properties worked great. We had our best year as a group.
- For me this location is in my back yard. I think it takes time each season to learn your property well and the deer traffic. That traffic changes as the deer get hunted. They learn to change their patterns. I see nothing positive in moving locations during the season unless someone is ill or moves.

- I feel strongly that assigned properties are a huge contributor to success with the program.
- Assigned properties is great. It takes about 2-3 seasons to really dissect a property so bouncing people around would only hurt us.
- Yes, it absolutely works. No rotation. You get to know the property and deer patterns.
- I prefer the locations fixed. Give you a sense of responsibility and gets you to know the area and pattern deer year to year. This is why I was able to harvest a deer this year, I was able to use last year's knowledge to move my stand to a spot I thought was better based on what I saw last year, and I was right.
- I like the system that's in place. If someone is unable to hunt a property, it's offered up to another that can like this year.
- I would like to hunt another area.
- I wanted to move to other properties later in the season but being only limited to bow hunting, I decided to hunt other places where I could use my blackpowder gun.
- Definitely rotating annually.

Other hunter comments included:

- I'd like to see more of under hunted properties opened up to the rest of DMS hunters before shotgun season starts.
- Very well-run program and administrators made themselves very accessible for questions and concerns.
- Getting the hunter documents earlier and correct would be a good improvement.
- I wouldn't change anything with the current program. It would be interesting to have an in-person meeting of the hunters to meet and know each other a little better. Like at the Harvard Sportsman's Club some afternoon.
- If the program is about deer management and harvesting does, then once a doe is harvested, then other hunters [*with doe tags still available—ed.*] should be allowed the opportunity to hunt the parcel.
- I was hoping I would have better luck knowing more about my assigned property this year, but it didn't work out. It would be nice if other plots opened up sooner than December if people weren't hunting them.

A number of hunters who qualified for the program requested a longer period to scout and setup their tree stands/equipment. We hope to accommodate this request in the future. We believe that hunter assignments to the same parcel year after year provides a hunter more time to study the terrain and “pattern” the deer activity. In order to be successful, hunters continue to make observations throughout the seasons to predict where the deer will be at a given time and make stand location adjustments appropriately. The skilled hunter looks for deer prints in the winter’s snow. They check pathways, grazing patterns, bedding areas, territorial marking “rubs” and “scrapes.” Ideally, their hunting stands are installed weeks or months before the season begins so the deer become used to them. We can reasonably expect a continuing increase in harvested deer each year going forward due to our experienced hunters having a better command and knowledge of the properties and the deer movements across them.

One goal of the individual parcel assignment method was to increase the number of individual stand visits by each hunter. Of the 288 hunter log entries that were collected through Google Forms, 85% of all hunting and scouting activity was on 10 (out of 17) parcels: Barrett, Blomfelt, Coke, Daman/Stephenson (east), Gillette, Great Elms, Hermann Orchard/Rodriquez, Tripp/Stephenson (west), Warila and Willard/Poitras.

23 of the 25 approved hunters got out to hunt during the season. Of these, 10 accounted for 85% 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. According to other programs and the State Deer Biologist, Dr. Feehan, it is common that the people hunting most actively will be a minority within the group of hunters. Our selection of hunters is a meritocracy in that hunters that put in the most time scouting and hunting are more likely to receive their preferred choices of hunting areas for the next year. In the future if there are more hunters than can be assigned to parcels, hunters who do not participate as much may be asked to step back to allow new hunters in. We want to follow Dr. Feehan’s advice to keep a pathway open for new hunters to come in, because “they may be your future super stars.” One new hunter, Tom, proved that this is good advice; he spent a lot of time in the woods and harvested two deer.

Ten deer — six does and four bucks — were harvested by seven of the DMS hunters on Town property in the program. The deer were harvested from Barrett (doe), Blomfelt (buck), Coke (doe), Damon/Stephenson east (doe and 2 bucks), Hermann Orchard/Rodriguez (doe), Tripp/Stephenson west (doe and buck) and Willard/Poitras (doe).

There was a single report of hunter harassment or vandalism. A camera was interfered with, and the police were contacted.

Unpermitted hunting and poaching on DMS program parcels continue to be observed and reported by our hunters:

- The brother of a nearby resident was found in a stand on posted Conservation land. This is likely a repeat offender that had been caught hunting over bait the first season we posted the hunt. The person in the stand immediately apologized and left the area with his gear. DMS contacted the Stewardship Chair who in turn contacted the neighboring property owner.
- A DMS hunter approached two gun hunters entering Conservation Land and told them the property was restricted to DMS program archery hunters. The gun hunters apologized and left the scene.
- A DMS hunter saw a gun hunter hunting at night with a headlamp. The Environmental Police were contacted along with Harvard Police dispatch. The program hunter relayed the precise location to the EPOs and HPD. Hunting deer with a flashlight “jacklighting” is a crime.
- During routine parking surveillance, a DMS Committee member found a parked car at the Stow Road Gravel Pit. Both the HPD and EPO responded and caught a poacher that apparently had a record in other Massachusetts towns.

It is clear that having authorized hunters in the woods can discourage illegal hunters. Word will get around about the police actions, and this will likely reduce the unpermitted hunters attempting to hunt on Town Conservation Land. We would like to commend the hunters, the Harvard Police, State Environmental Police, the Conservation and Town Administrator’s offices, and the Conservation Chairman for their quick responses and hard work in helping to stop illegal hunting.

We are satisfied with all important aspects of the program in 2023. 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 (not counting the incident of vandalism of a camera) Archery continues to show itself as a very effective means to reduce deer population.

The development and implementation of a local hunting program can be frustratingly complex and slow, as the Harvard Conservation Commission and the Deer Management Subcommittee has seen. However, after almost 5 years, the 2023 season appears to be an inflection point beginning to show the yields of all of the hard work by everyone involved. There has been a consistent effort put forth by the Commission to carefully consider and approve additional properties each year with corresponding increased deer harvest. The 2023 harvest of 10 deer was a resounding success with a harvest exceeding the previous years' combined totals. The more than doubling of the harvest for the program in 2023 over 2022 far exceeded the harvest gains of 8% across the entire town and 1% across Zone 9. The results show how fostering a community of active hunters that have gained local experience combined with increasing property access can lead the program to continued success. MassWildlife continues to encourage the Harvard Conservation Commission to increase property access where possible to further foster the success of the deer management program.

*—Martin Feehan, Deer & Moose Biologist,
Wildlife Health Specialist, Mass Fisheries & Wildlife*

Deer Harvest in Town of Harvard, 2023

Season	Female	Male	Total
Archery	20	26	46
Shotgun	11	12	23
Primitive	5	4	9
Total	36	42	78

With a harvest of 10 deer in 2023, the DMS feels that it played a significant role in protecting the ecological value of our conservation land by helping control the

overpopulation of deer. It is estimated that a deer consumes approximately 2000 pounds of plant material each year, so removing 10 deer makes a difference of 20,000 pounds. It is particularly valuable that our hunter team prioritizes taking does, as that is more effective in controlling the deer population. While we cannot assume we will double our harvest every year, it is likely that our hunters will continue to have good success based on the increased time they are putting into scouting and hunting, and their increased knowledge of the movement of the deer herds in town. This year's results seem to confirm what MassWildlife told DMS, that opening more of the landscape to hunting increases the season's yield, both on DMS properties and elsewhere, because the deer move around more.

Evidence continues to mount for how critical it is for the health of our forests to manage deer populations. Biologist Karro Frost shared this with the DMS: "Deer browse mostly on native species. They tend to avoid the invasive species because their systems, just like those of native insects, aren't capable of digesting the invasives. As the deer numbers go up, so will invasive plants, because the natives don't stand a chance between browsing by deer and then being shaded out. I've also seen results of primarily deer spreading seeds of invasives that get stuck in the fur on their legs. This is particularly true for Japanese stilt grass. Unfortunately, deer overabundance is a part of the invasive species problem."

The DMS is very pleased that the management program was successful again this year. Bow hunting is an inherently difficult activity, and we are proud of all of the volunteers that worked with us this year. We are pleased that our archery team harvested a new record for a season. We appreciate that more properties were approved to expand the managed area.

We are grateful for the continued support of the Conservation Commission, and we are looking forward to next year's deer season!

Robert Douglas, Chair
Tom Cotton
Ben Urquhart
Jessie Panek, Conservation Liaison
Joe Pulido, Rangemaster/Hunt Coordinator