

# Southeastern towns in Mass. saw the most deer collisions last year. Now, the state hopes hunters will help clear the roads.

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## FULL TEXT

The Monday after Thanksgiving signals the beginning of the two-week shotgun season for Massachusetts deer hunters, and this year it arrives as state officials are implementing new measures to manage a deer population that is at an all-time recorded high, including a pilot program to allow hunters to donate the deer they kill. New data from AAA show that deer-vehicle collisions in Massachusetts —the leading cause of deer mortality in the state —jumped 18 percent last fall, compared to the previous year. The carnage peaked during the November mating season, with an average of one deer-related crash every 50 minutes.

For years, MassWildlife, the state's conservation agency, has been sounding the alarm about the deer overpopulation, which endangers drivers and contributes to deforestation and the spread of Lyme disease. A "healthy" density is considered to be 12 to 18 deer per square mile of forest; in much of the state, MassWildlife estimates, that number is currently north of 50.

In an attempt to increase the number of deer that are harvested for food, rather than killed by cars, the agency has unveiled two major measures this hunting season. In most of Eastern Massachusetts, as well as on Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, hunters may kill an unlimited number of female deer, in addition to the two male deer allotted to all licensed hunters in the state.

And for the first time ever, hunters will be able to donate surplus venison to people in need.

MassWildlife's new "Hunters Share the Harvest" program, which was announced Sunday, allows hunters to drop deer at Haskins Custom Butchering in Hanover, where the venison will be inspected by state biologists, processed, and then distributed through the Massachusetts Military Support Foundation's Food 4 Vets program.

"We're using a multiprong approach of increasing access for hunters, increasing the number of permits in their hands, and increasing the number of deer they will take," said Martin Feehan, the state's deer biologist. "This program allows hunters who have already filled their freezer a chance to stay in the woods, help those communities that need a little help with food, and help us accomplish our management goals."

There have long been many challenges facing Massachusetts when it comes to deer management. Hunting isn't very popular here, for one; less than 1 percent of the population purchases a hunting license, and most of those hunters are found in the western half of the state. Meanwhile, the eastern half of the state has evolved to be a near-perfect breeding ground for deer, who actually prefer a suburban-ish ecosystem, with its lack of predators, edge habitats of smaller plants, and many vegetable and flower gardens.

But culling those deer is tricky, with strict setback laws that require hunters to be more than 150 feet from a paved road and 500 feet from a house when discharging a weapon. In addition, many cities and towns, particularly inside Interstate 495, restrict hunting or prohibit the discharge of a firearm.

In those communities where hunting is banned, vehicle collisions account for well over 80 percent of all deer deaths, Feehan said. "When you take away fawn mortality, which can happen for a number of reasons, the only way an adult deer is going to die in those communities is if they get hit by a vehicle," Feehan said.

MassWildlife has long advocated for increased access for hunters, including the use of crossbows during archery

season and hunting on Sundays (both are banned by state statute).

But the number of deer each hunter is willing to take is an issue that has been trickier to increase. Most hunters will only kill what they can eat, and there's only so much venison one family can eat (let alone store). So officials see opening up the possibility of donating deer as a way to encourage hunters to increase their harvest, ethically, for a good cause.

The donation program is seen as overdue and has been a longtime project of MassWildlife director Mark Tisa. Massachusetts is the 46th state to implement such a program.

"It's essentially a pilot program this year, but the goal is to grow the program and use it to connect to communities who may not be familiar with venison and introduce them to this very high quality source of lean, organic, local meat," Feehan said.

Meanwhile, drivers are cautioned to be on the lookout for deer, especially at sunset. That's when most of the 1,656 crashes in the state last fall occurred, according to an AAA analysis. That number represents an increase of 254 collisions over the same period the previous year, and includes Mary Maguire, the spokesperson for AAA Northeast.

Last November, she was on her way home from the mall when she struck a deer near her home in Norton. The buck walked away, but left Maguire with \$6,000 in damage to her vehicle.

## DETAILS

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