

By reducing a deer population that is a costly nuisance in Ozaukee County, hunters are performing a service to the environment

Deer hunters are afield in Ozaukee County this week. Let us hope their numbers are large, their stalking skills sharp and their aim true so that this is a successful hunt with many deer slain.

The whitetail deer that overpopulate the county, not just in the countryside but amid suburban sprawl and in urban confines, have no predators besides man. Deer hunting here is more than an autumn ritual avidly performed by its devotees; it is an environmental necessity that benefits everyone by asserting at least a modicum of control over a costly and sometimes dangerous nuisance.

Deer are too numerous here because our habitat is irresistible, more alluring than the north woods thanks to the abundance of food in farm fields, gardens and back yards surrounded by a wealth of forested land for cover and shelter.

Secure in this accidental largesse, the deer reproduce abundantly and in their vast numbers menace roads and lay waste to plants in virtually every form, from the shoots of spring flowers to garden vegetables to ornamental trees. The animals munch away through the four seasons and in winter when other plants are dormant are content to graze on the likes of arbor vitae trees, vibrant evergreens that can be left disfigured or ruined by a single night's visit by foraging deer.

This all comes at a high cost. Deer-vehicle crashes on Ozaukee roads number in the hundreds each year, running up a steep bill for vehicle repairs and medical treatment for injured passengers. (Nationally, there are more than 4,000 deer-vehicle collisions every day, resulting in more than 250 deaths and 30,000 injuries requiring hospital treatment a year.)

Few gardens or produce-raising fields can withstand the deer onslaught without elaborate and costly fencing. The massive, fortresslike fence surrounding the Hales Trail Community Garden in Port Washington gives a sense of the extreme measures needed to defend human food production against deer predation.

And so—bring on the hunters.

Yes, we know, that's not a universal sentiment. Some people disapprove of hunting on the grounds that humans simply should not kill animals; others because they like having deer around. (Granted, Bambis are adorable and an adult whitetail bounding with exquisite grace over hill and dale is a stirring sight. If there were just a few of them looking adorable and graceful, there would be no need for hunting. Unfortunately, that isn't reality.) There are also worries about guns being discharged near populated areas.

Deerslayers on a mission

Written by Ozaukee Press

Tuesday, 20 November 2012 18:08

These attitudes deserve respect, but they offer no help in dealing with the problems caused by a superabundance of wild animals in urbanized places. The more clear-eyed view is expressed in direct language by an environmental studies professor in the just-published book “Nature Wars” by Jim Sterba: “Hunting is good—one of the best, most responsible forms of stewardship of nature.”

Hunting is carefully managed, and while there have been a few conflicts between hunters and homeowners over the years in Ozaukee County, it has a good safety record. Deer hunting here is limited to shotguns using short-range slugs, muzzle-loaders and bows.

It is also limited to rural areas, which means that hunting doesn't have much effect on deer in the areas where they do the most damage. A few communities in Wisconsin and elsewhere have responded by hiring sharpshooters to kill deer. Some cities and villages, particularly on the East Coast, have opened their deer-infested areas to bow hunters, a tactic that could be considered here if the deer problem worsens.

As Ozaukee hunters pursue their prey, we might reflect on the one positive aspect of the deer population explosion: It's a sign of the amazing comeback of the American forest. Millions of acres once laid bare by logging are now covered by trees. Today more than half of the land in Wisconsin is forest, with more trees, it is thought, than before the state was settled. In the eastern half of the country, the forest has grown back to 88% of what it was in 1630. In Ozaukee County, thousands of acres are covered with trees. No wonder wildlife feels at home.

We can celebrate the fact that when it comes to trees, the American landscape is much like it was described by James Fennimore Cooper in the Leatherstocking Tale “Deerslayer,” set in the 18th century, while acknowledging that the deerslayers of today are doing their part to rebalance nature in Ozaukee County.