VOLUME 38, NUMBER 4 ·FALL 2024

VIRGINIA FOREST LANDOWNER UPDATE

Events, News, and Information Promoting the Stewardship of Virginia's Forest Resources

INSIDE

FIND US ONLINE

VFLEP

VIRGINIAFOREST LANDOWNER EDUCATIONPROGRAM

VFLEP

@VFLEP

FORESTUPDATE.FREC.VT.EDU

Jennifer L. Gagnon, Editor

Address all correspondence to:
Virginia Forest Landowner Update
228 Cheatham Hall (0324)
Blacksburg, VA 24061
540-231-6391
jgagnon@vt.edu
https://forestupdate.frec.vt.edu

Virginia Forest Landowner Update is published four times per year (January, April, July, and October) by the Virginia Forest Landowner Education Program. Circulation 4,000.

Subscriptions are free of charge to citizens of the Commonwealth of Virginia and non-resident Virginia forest landowners. Subscriptions to other non-Virginia residents at the discretion of the publisher. Contact the editor to make your subscription request.

New Virginia Department of Forestry Program Provides Free Riparian Buffers

by Virginia Department of Forestry

Improving Virginia's water resources with free assistance for landowners

The Virginia Department of Forestry (VDOF) has a new program that provides landowners free, flexible riparian forest buffer installation plus one year of maintenance. Riparian forest buffers are transition areas that protect streams, creeks, or other water features by capturing sediment, nutrients, and pollutants in the soil before they reach the water.

The Riparian Forests for Landowners (RFFL) program is a unique watershed-based partnership including VDOF, the Alliance for the Chesapeake Bay, Friends of the Rappahannock, James River Association, Terra Habitats LLC, and York River Steward.

This program is open to all Virginia private property owners including homeowner associations and civic leagues in rural, urban, and suburban areas. Funding is provided by the Inflation Reduction Act through the USDA Forest Service and the Commonwealth of Virginia's Water Quality Improvement Fund Act. Complete this survey-style Landowner Interest Form and a VDOF forester or partner organization representative will contact you: https://tinyurl.com/RFFLProgram.

"*This turnkey program covers free services including planning, site preparation, and planting of buffers, as well as one year of maintenance*," said RFFL Program Coordinator Deya Ramsden. "*Trees established in these buffers will act as filters to provide cleaner water, reduce erosion and flooding, and help replenish underground aquifers*."

DOF is accepting continuous sign-ups for this program until funding is depleted. Eligible projects will be awarded on a first-come, first-served basis with planned buffer establishment from fall 2024 to spring 2025, with follow-up maintenance support through 2026.

Buffer installation details:

- Buffers can be installed on open land adjacent to a water feature where a forested buffer of at least 35 feet in width from the water's edge can be planted.
- Existing buffers may be expanded up to 300 feet from the water's edge.
- Buffers may be planted with pine seedlings, hardwood seedlings, or a mix of both.
- Buffers must be at least 35 feet wide and no greater than 300 feet wide per side from the water's edge.
- Land must have less than 20% coverage by invasive plant species to qualify for this program.
- Landowners must agree to retain the buffer as forest for 15 years.

–Riparian Buffers, continued on page 5.

Events Calendar

For a complete listing of natural resource education events, visit the online events calendar at https://forestupdate.frec.vt.edu. Online registration is available at https://forestupdate.frec.vt.edu/onlineregistration.html

SCHEDULED EVENTS - OCTOBER 2024 TO FEBRUARY 2025

DATE	LOCATION / DETAILS	EVENT DESCRIPTION	CONTACT
October 11	• Harrisonburg • 8:00 - 4:30 • $45*/person • $80*/couple	**Rockingham County Fall Forestry & Wildlife Field Tour** Rockingham County has a reputation for big agriculture, and that it has! Stretching from the mountains flanking West Virginia to the Blue Ridge escarpment, it encompasses some of the Commonwealth's best soils and water. This third-largest Virginia county also boasts productive forestlands, healthy wildlife populations, and innovative resource management.	Adam Downing adowning@vt.edu 540-948-6881
October 16	• Raphine • 9:00 - 3:00 • Free for Woodland Options Students • $25*/person all others	**Online Woodland Options for Landowners Field Trip** In this hands-on field trip we will practice tree identification, tree measurements, and visit active forest management practices.	Jennifer Gagnon jgagnon@vt.edu 540-231-6391
October 24	• Bedford • 8:00 - 5:00 • $45*/person • $80*/couple	**Bedford County Fall Forestry & Wildlife Field Tours** Bedford County is full of attractions, including the National D-Day Memorial, the stunning Peaks of Otter, Jefferson's Poplar Forest, and Smith Mountain Lake. Agriculture and forestry account for tens of millions of dollars in economic impact in this county. This tour will explore these land uses.	Jason Fisher jasonf@vt.edu 434-476-2147
October 25	• Dinwiddie • 8:00 - 5:00 • $45*/person • $80*/couple	**Dinwiddie County Fall Forestry & Wildlife Field Tour** Dinwiddie County is home to the Pamplin Historical Park, site of the National Museum of the Civil War Soldier, and the site of the Civil War's Battle of Lewis's Farm. It has over 244,000 acres of forests, making forestry one of the county's leading industries. This tour will explore sustainable forestry practices in this historic area.	Neil Clark neclark@vt.edu 757-653-2572
October 26	• Lynchburg • $80*/2 people; • $40*/additional family members	**Generation NEXT Legacy Planning Workshop** Learn how to pass your land, and your legacy, on to the next generation while keeping it intact, in forest, and in family ownership.	Karen Snape ksnape@vt.edu 540-231-6494
October 29 - November 19 (Tuesdays)	• Sperryville • 9 - 10:30 • $24.99	**Land Management Practices for Biodiversity: Fields and Forests** This class will help landowners better understand and appreciate the ecological functioning of their property, learn science-based land management techniques, and engage experts in Rappahannock County.	Adam Downing adowning@vt.edu 540-948-6881
February 22	• Culpeper • Blacksburg	**Landowner Woods & Wildlife Conferences** These conferences provide information, tools, and personal contacts to help private woodland owners keep their woods, and the wildlife that live in them, healthy and productive. A variety of topics are offered.	Jennifer Gagnon jgagnon@vt.edu 540-231-6391

***fee includes meal(s)**

ONGOING EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

Virginia Master Naturalist Volunteer Basic Training

Available statewide. Dates, times, and fees vary.

People who are curious about nature, enjoy the outdoors, and want to be a part of natural resource management and conservation in Virginia are perfect candidates to become Virginia Master Naturalists. Visit www.virginiamasternaturalist.org to find a chapter near you. Michelle Prysby, Statewide Coordinator, 434-872-4580.

Fifteen Minutes in the Forest

Online video series. Every other Friday at 12:15 pm.

Join Virginia Cooperative Extension's Forestry Team for videos about natural resource-related topics. Connect/find past videos:

- **YouTube:** https://www.youtube.com/c/VirginiaForestLandownerEducationProgram
- **Facebook live:** www.facebook.com/VFLEP

You ARE From Around Here! What Happens When a Large, Charismatic, Native Herbivore Becomes an Ecological Nuisance?

by Jennifer Gagnon, Virginia Tech

The other day I looked out my dining room window and quietly watched a large buck, not more than ten feet away, graze on our almost-ripe nectarines. After a few minutes I yelled "SCRAM – GET." He paused mid-chew, gave me a blank stare, then continued with his meal. Turns out, there was no need to be quiet. He is one of three large bucks roaming around our place this summer.

Despite having an extended 2023-24 hunting season in Montgomery County (thanks to chronic wasting disease), three people hunting on our land, and eight deer harvested, we have more deer than ever. Every doe we see has two, if not three, fawns with her. And while the little spotty ones are adorable, I grow weary of slamming on the brakes multiple times on the way to work.

In 2024, it is almost impossible to picture a Virginia without white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*). Virginia is in their scientific name! However, while white-tailed deer were plentiful when Europeans arrived in the 1600s, by 1900 they were nearly eradicated from the commonwealth because of over hunting.

Recognizing the importance of this species, wildlife biologists spent the next 60 years working to reestablish white-tailed deer populations. They implemented protective game laws, restocked animals, and restored habitat. These efforts were wildly successful. In fact, wildlife biologists have spent the last 30 years trying to control and stabilize the reestablished white-tailed deer populations in Virginia. According to the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources (VDWR), there may be twice as many deer in Virginia today (estimated at one million) as there were when Jamestown was settled. And of course, less forested habitat and far more people.

The white-tailed deer story is one of successful species reestablishment with unintended consequences. Those unintended consequences include dangers to both humans and the environment.

Anyone who drives anywhere in Virginia is aware of the danger of having a deer unexpectedly jump in front of their car. In the fall, carcasses line the roads. In 2022, there were 6,135 deer-related crashes, resulting in four human deaths, and 568 injuries in Virginia. This was a 7% increase in crashes and an 11% increase in injuries compared to 2021.

Homeowners and gardeners must cage or fence any vegetation they want to protect. I drove past a garden in Kilmarnock surrounded by a 6-foot fence with razor wire on the top. A landowner in Giles County called his yard full of caged plants a "plant zoo." Cages and fences can be difficult to install AND cost time and money.

Last, but most certainly not least, large deer populations have negative impacts on Virginia's forests and on other wildlife species. In fact, the idea for this article came to mind on a recent visit to a forested mountain property. Hay-scented fern dominated the understory, a sure sign of a large deer population. Deer eat the woody understory and mid-story vegetation, but not the ferns. White-tailed deer particularly enjoy browsing oak seedlings and oak stump sprouts. This heavy browse decimates the shrubby understory and prevents seedlings from growing into larger trees, threatening the future of the forest.

Large deer populations also change the species composition of forests. By preferentially browsing desirable oaks, deer unintentionally encourage the growth of less desirable overstory species such as red and striped maples. They also unintentionally encourage nonnative invasives in the understory, since they preferentially eat the native plants they evolved with, while leaving the unfamiliar nonnative species alone. This gives the nonnative invasives resources to grow and spread, and to outcompete the natives.

And the problem goes beyond the plants. Wildlife that depend on native plants suffer as well. A Pennsylvania study found that when deer populations are high, the abundance and diversity of bird species that use midstory vegetation decreased by 37% and 27%, respectively. Five species disappeared from the study site entirely.

Left unchecked, large deer populations hinder regeneration of desired tree species, such as oaks, assist the invasion of nonnatives, and reduce the quality of wildlife habitat.

The Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources

–Deer, continued on page 4.

Deer, ***continued from page 3.***

(VDWR) oversees the management of Virginia's deer population. Their current statewide deer management plan is to reduce or maintain populations across most of the state, with exceptions in some southwest Virginia counties. VDWR's population targets are based on data from a 2013 survey of residents in urban, rural, and in-between areas. The plan will be revised in 2026.

While the VDWR says there isn't a problem with deer overabundance in Virginia as a whole, they acknowledge that certain counties are not meeting their deer management objectives (i.e., populations are too high).

Why is hunting no longer working?

Historically, hunting was sufficient to keep deer herd numbers in check. Over the past several decades, however, the number of hunters has sharply declined from its peak of over 300,000 in the early 1970's to approximately 185,000 in 2021. The decline in the number of hunters can be attributed to several factors. First, the US is urbanizing. According to 2020 census data, the nation's urban population increased by 6.4% between 2010 and 2020. Urban populations are less likely to be interested in hunting. Second, according to the American Farmland Trust, between 2001 and 2016, the US lost or compromised 2,000 acres of farmland and ranchland every day, reducing the acreage available for hunting. And finally, baby boomers, often avid hunters, are getting too old to hunt. Related to these changes, since 2020 there has been a significant drop in the number of businesses that process game meat.

A continued decline in the number of hunters will negatively impact the VDWR's ability to manage deer populations through recreational deer hunting across much of Virginia.

Which brings me to yet another reason hunting is no longer effective. Deer can thrive in urban and suburban environments, places where recreational hunting opportunities are few or nonexistent. Deer are edge species and thrive in subdivisions with small woodlots interspersed with tasty yard plants. Humans have unintentionally created excellent deer habitat in unhunted areas where deer have no fear of humans.

What are Our Options?

More Hunting

In the 2023-24 deer hunting season, 12% more deer were harvested than in the previous year (206,586 deer total). There are several potential reasons for this increase, including a mild 2022-23 winter (allowing the herds to be more productive), a scarcity of white oak acorns in the fall of 2023 (causing deer to move around more to find food), and an increase in harvesting opportunities, such as extended hunting seasons. But 206,586 deer harvested is still a sharp decline from the peak harvest of over 250,000 a year in 2009.

And these increased harvest numbers may just be a blip, the result of many favorable conditions converging. To effectively reduce deer populations over the long-term, we need to engage younger generations of hunters. The first step in this engagement is to have children spend time in the woods where they can learn to appreciate nature and build their confidence in being outdoors.

Additionally, many urban and suburban areas could be hunted using archery equipment, but it takes community understanding and cooperation for this to happen.

Professional Removal

Some towns attempt to manage deer by hiring professional sharpshooters. This method of control is relatively inexpensive, costing about $200 to $400 per deer. But, while considered to be a humane form of lethal control by the American Veterinary Medical Association, many communities oppose these efforts, citing concerns over animal welfare and public safety. Additionally, these efforts must be sustained over an extended period to be effective. That means communities need consistent sources of funding.

Fertility Control

Of course, there are many localities where sharpshooting is unfeasible. Some of these locations are trying fertility control. In Cincinnati, Ohio, a neighborhood sterilization program has reduced the deer population 30 percent in 5 years. But fertility control, while more acceptable than hunting to animal lovers, is expensive: more than $1,000 per deer on average. In Virginia, fertility control is only allowed through a VDWR research permit.

Predator Reintroduction

–Deer, continued on page 5.

Riparian Buffers, *continued from page 1.*

The water feature may be any of the following bodies of water, including:

- Streams
- Rivers
- Lakes, ponds, and reservoirs/municipal water supplies
- Seeps and springs
- Karst features
- Sloughs
- Wetlands
- Water features within wetlands
- Fresh and saltwater marshes
- Irrigation ditches, canals, and other built water features

For more information, visit the DOF website: www.dof.virginia.gov.

The Virginia Department of Forestry (DOF) protects and develops healthy, sustainable forest resources for Virginians. With 16 million acres of forestland and more than 108,000 Virginians employed in forestry, forest products and related industries, Virginia forests provide an overall economic output of more than $23 billion annually. Headquartered in Charlottesville, the agency has forestry staff members assigned to every county to provide citizen service and public safety protection across the Commonwealth, which it's been doing now for more than 100 years. DOF is an equal opportunity provider.

Depsite an extended hunting season in Montgomery County, Virginia, white-tailed deer are still plentiful on some private lands. This buck was eating nectarines less than 20 feet from the author's house. Photo by: Jennifer Gagnon, Virginia Tech.

Deer, *continued from page 4.*

Another reason for soaring deer populations is the removal of predators, such as wolves, mountain lions, and bears. Reintroducing these predators could provide effective population control. However, this is not an appropriate option for urban and suburban areas. And the effectiveness of predator reintroduction is still up for debate.

Stop Feeding Deer

Feeding leads to unnaturally increasing population numbers which can damage natural habitats, promote disease transmission, and increase human-deer conflicts. Even unintentional feeding, such as putting out large piles of seed for birds, can become an issue. People may think they are helping, but in reality, they are hurting deer and the landscape and creating a problem for their neighbors.

Summary

In many areas of Virginia, the deer populations have exceeded the social carrying capacity (the maximum number of deer communities are willing to tolerate). While large deer populations can ensure a successful hunting season, they have negative impacts both to human and ecological health. The large populations also exacerbate the spread of wildlife illnesses, such as chronic wasting disease. Without more hunters, or dependable financial support, effectively controlling these populations where they are a problem is perhaps impossible.

I bought a crossbow eight years ago, with the intention of hunting deer. After some target practice, I started thinking about using it and what it would feel like to kill a deer. Which resulted in a minor panic attack. I'm the kind of person who puts bugs outside. I was raised with Bambi. I just don't think I have it in me to kill a large charismatic mammal. I do have it in me to eat venison though, and feel I contribute to population control in that small way.

Jennifer Gagnon is a Senior Extension Specialist in the Department of Forest Resources and Environmental Conservation; jgagnon@vt.edu; 540-231-6391.

VIRGINIA FOREST LANDOWNER UPDATE
FALL 2024

Virginia Cooperative Extension
Department of Forest Resources &
Environmental Conservation (0324)
Virginia Tech
Blacksburg, VA 24061

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
RICHMOND, VA
PERMIT #320

Return Service Requested

Connect with Virginia's Natural Resource Agencies and Sponsors of the Virginia Forest Landowner Education Program:

Virginia Department of Forestry
900 Natural Resources Drive, Ste 300
Charlottesville, VA 22903
434-977-6555
www.dof.virginia.gov

Virginia Tech Department of Forest Resources & Environmental Conservation and Virginia Cooperative Extension
228 Cheatham Hall 0324
Blacksburg, VA 24061
540-231-6391
https://frec.vt.edu

USDA Forest Service
Forest Stewardship Program
1400Independence Ave SW
Washington, D.C. 20250
212-205-0929
www.fs.usda.gov/managing-land/private-land/forest-stewardship

Virginia Forestry Association
3808 Augusta Ave.
Richmond, VA 23230
804-278-8733
www.vaforestry.org

Virginia Sustainable Forestry Initiative SIC
3808 Augusta Ave.
Richmond, VA 23230
804-278-8733
virginiasfi.org

Virginia Tree Farm Foundation
757-354-6721
www.vtff.org

This publication is supported by matching grant funds from the Virginia Forest Stewardship Program administered by the Virginia Department of Forestry in cooperation with the USDA Forest Service.

VT/000800/10-01-24/3000/24WH4