

Federal marksmen will shoot deer to cull herd at LI state parks, officials say



Up to 40 deer will be taken at several state parks on Long Island, including at Connetquot preserve in Oakdale, seen here. Credit: Newsday/Steve Pfost

By Nicholas Spangler

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Updated February 22, 2022 7:39 PM

Three federal marksmen using shotguns and night vision scopes will kill up to 180 deer at New York State parks and other Long Island locations this year, authorities said, a measure intended to reduce damage to habitats and avoid risks of collisions with the wildlife.

Up to 40 deer will be taken at each of Sunken Meadow and Nissequogue River state parks, both in Kings Park, and Caleb Smith preserve in Smithtown; **up to 10 deer will be taken at Planting Fields in Oyster Bay** and up to 50 at Connetquot preserve in Oakdale, according to Department of Environmental Conservation permits.

Authorities have not said when the culling will occur, but wildlife advocates plan a protest Wednesday outside Caleb Smith.

Culling has been practiced for about 20 years at various sites across Long Island and 49 deer were culled here in 2021. But staffers have seen "increased damage" to park habitats, Brian Nearing, a spokesman for the state's Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, which applied for the permits and chose the locations, wrote in an email.

"Given the wide variety of native plants and grasses present, State Parks present a constant food source for deer," he wrote, and fencing hundreds or thousands of acres of parkland "is not an effective mediation measure."

Visitors have complained to staffers about "deer on roadways in and adjacent to its Parks," Nearing said, adding they are vectors for black-legged ticks, which can carry a variety of illnesses, including Lyme disease. He did not share collision statistics.

U.S. Department of Agriculture spokeswoman Tanya Espinosa said in an email that the marksmen are wildlife biologists or wildlife specialists. Their tools range from bait corn to thermal imagery equipment for target identification. They fire from stationary ground blinds and generally work in winter because there is less foliage to obstruct views.

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Parks paid USDA \$46,231 for the service last year, and authorities donated 1,299 pounds of the resulting venison to local food banks.

Anthrozoologist and wildlife rehabilitator John Di Leonardo, who leads the advocacy group Long Island Orchestrating for Nature and is planning the protest, called officials' plans "not only cruel but not effective."

Surviving deer will multiply rapidly, taking advantage of the new food and territory opened by the cull, he said. "If you're just killing deer year after year, you're treating the symptom of the problem, not the problem."

Deer sterilization or immunocontraception are the only long-term solutions, he said. Sterilization has proved successful on Staten Island and the contraceptive vaccine PZP has shown promise, he said.

But Bernd Blossey, Cornell University professor of natural resources, said those strategies do not work in areas where deer migrate. Short of introducing predators like wolves, regular culling is the only way to reduce a deer population so abundant that it's "having all kinds of negative impacts on animals and plants that also call Long Island home," he said.

The state's deer management plan, released last year, calls hunting a "critically important deer-management tool" and notes that decades of research on fertility control methods have not

"produced the solution people have been hoping for."

John McQuaid, Nissequogue River State Park Foundation president, said his group would follow state officials' lead. "We're not the experts," he said. "They tell us that starvation and potential disease is the result of these herds' population growth."

McQuaid, who lives near Sunken Meadow State Park, said he and his neighbors have had "many more deer sightings than we've seen in past years...They eat all our plants and vegetation and we've seen the same thing at the parks."

Deer appear to have eaten most of the plantings outside a recently refurbished administration building at Nissequogue River State Park, he said. "We've seen those plants just disappear from deer eating them," he said.

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