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COUNTING OUR DEER

By Jim Gambino and Dr. Michael Van Clef, members, Hopewell Valley Deer Management Task Force

Last month, we introduced you to our Task Force and the various issues relating to white-tailed deer that exist in our community. One of our recent tasks was to carefully count deer throughout Hopewell Valley to get an idea of what the current deer population actually is.

What we already knew, was that on average over the past three years, there was a combined total of 567 reported deer-vehicle collisions and struck deer calls filed by the Township police department (many are seen marked with an orange "X" on the side of the road). During the same period, NJ Division of Fish & Wildlife reports on average, 1,079 deer harvested during the recreational hunting season (September – mid February) here in Hopewell Valley. That's over 1,600 total non-living deer per year. They're the easy ones to count.

But what about the living, breathing ones? We know how many people live in the Valley, but can we realistically count the deer in our sixty square mile territory?

Actually, yes we can. There are two major counting methods that are accepted by wildlife biologists that do just that. The first is "Forward-Looking Infrared Radar" that uses an infrared camera mounted on an aircraft to count deer on winter nights. This method is costly (estimated at over $100,000 for the entire Valley!). Fortunately, there is a less expensive method called "Distance Sampling" that is considered just as reliable by wildlife professionals. Members of the Task Force and other interested private citizens drove over 70 miles along Valley roadways over four nights in late March/early April using spotlights and an electronic rangefinder. They collected information on the number of deer observed and their distance from the roadway. This data was input into a computer program, which provided a statistically reliable population estimate.

The Hopewell Valley estimate was 37 deer per square mile (or nearly 2,300 total deer). This number represents the lowest point of the year for the deer population because it followed hunting season and a very snowy winter. Because deer are very prolific, the summer density is expected to grow to over 3,400 deer after birthing occurs this spring (equivalent to 54 deer per square mile). For reference, wildlife researchers have estimated that deer densities of 10 per square mile were typical prior to colonization of the United States. Modern research on forest health suggests that 10-20 deer per square mile represents a balance that is compatible with healthy ecosystems.

A second deer count is being planned for August when male deer begin to grow their antlers. This count will gives us a better idea of the ratio between male and female deer for the population living in our area.

Our next Task Force meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, May 26 at 7:00 p.m., and will be held at the Hopewell Township Municipal Building. Residents are welcome to attend our monthly meetings, and can also access meeting notes and other pertinent information on our web site: http://www.hopewelltwp.org/current-topics.html.