

Deer and Your Woodland Crop

We've long known that deer browse is a nuisance for homeowners and that browse damage can result in significant economic losses for farmers, but have you considered that deer browse damage is having an economic impact on your woodlot? And what of this year's lack of an acorn crop? What impact will that have on our resource?

Recognition of the economic impact to our woodlands has come to light this past couple of years due to the opening of three 1,000-acre blocks of land to hunting at the Scituate Reservoir. According to Rob MacMillan, forester at Providence Water, the RI DEM Division of Fish and Wildlife have let out a total of 150 permits on those areas, governed by DEM hunting regulations. There were about 300 applicants for those permits, which were let out through a lottery. About 120 deer have been taken in the past two hunting seasons, ending this month.

The reason for opening up the hunting blocks was the heavy browse damage on hardwood regeneration, with oak and maple sprouts and seedlings browsed out from the understory, impacting the success of some of the regeneration cuts being conducted on the reservoir woodlands. This damage was confirmed through an understory study conducted by a US Forest Service biologist over the past few years. The response of the understory will be re-measured in the next couple of years to determine the success of the herd's thinning.

The same impact to understory vegetation is occurring on your woodlot. Forest management includes the manipulation of the forest to promote regeneration of an appropriate tree species, for increased forest health and resilience to natural impacts. If you've created some openings in your woodland with the intent of promoting a new generation of trees and increase the diversity of vegetation, the local deer herd may be working against you. The future productivity and economic value of your woodlot is quietly being destroyed, with only minimal amounts of oak, if any, being allowed to succeed into the canopy of your forest.

As a woodland owner, what options do you have to lessen the impact of deer browse? The RI DEM Division of Agriculture (DAG) grants two types of deer damage permits, according to Chapter 20-15-3 of the RI General Laws, and the DAG's Rules and Regulations Relating to Deer Damage. The daylight damage permits can be issued to any landowner that can demonstrate deer damages, verified by a DAG employee, with up to five people listed on the permit, and a specific number of tags that allows hunting beyond the hunting season.

A jack-lighting permit is available for "listed farms greater than 5 acres and with annual income greater than \$2,500". That permit is for serious damage cases of soft crops, orchards, etc., where daylight hunting isn't effective. It is for specific 14 day periods between September 1 and April 15, and the farm must also be open to hunting during the regular hunting season.

If you've recently conducted a harvest with the intent of regenerating oak, and you can demonstrate that the browse damage from your local deer herd is preventing that oak from successfully sprouting, you should contact the DAG (222-2781) to request the daylight permit. According to Ken Ayars, Chief of the DAG, they have not had requests from woodland owners in the past. RI's oak stands have reached an age where the establishment of a future crop of oak is becoming an issue, with black birch, red maple, and beech becoming more prevalent in our forests. If we want to influence the future composition of our forests, for timber value as well as wildlife habitat benefits, we will need to take actions now to assure plentiful oak regeneration.

What about this year's food supply? The dearth of acorns has led to a lack of protein for wildlife, with deer entering the winter and early spring period with little fat to survive. Hunters are reporting that deer stomachs are full of pine needles, which are a food of last resort, and hungry deer may not survive into the spring. A mild winter, so far at least, will lessen the impact, but a snow pack and a few weeks of cold weather in February should thin out the deer herd by spring. This may mean more deer feeding on your landscape shrubs, but fewer deer browsing oak sprouts this spring. We shall see!