

Guest Spot: No more dithering over deer

John Rasweiler

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The recent motorcycle accident in Peconic and scheduling of yet another town deer forum on Sept. 26 serve as reminders of our continuing failure to come to grips with a serious deer overpopulation problem.

Although our town government has made admirable efforts to increase culling of our deer population by recreational hunters, the harvest over the past five years has essentially remained flat, according to New York State Department of Environmental Conservation records. In 2012, more deer were taken out by motor vehicle collisions in the Town of Southold than by hunters.

In addition to being a safety menace on our roads, our superabundance of deer is responsible for a massive increase in the local tick population and a high frequency of tick-transmitted diseases in humans that constitutes nothing short of a public health crisis. According to New York State Health Department statistics for 2011 (the last reporting year), Suffolk County ranked No. 1 among counties for babesiosis, No. 1 for ehrlichiosis, tied for No. 2 for Lyme disease and No. 4 for anaplasmosis. Unfortunately, these dry statistics do not adequately convey the seriousness of the misery inflicted; these are not innocuous diseases. Some manifestations of Lyme disease can be difficult for many doctors to recognize and treat. In its chronic forms, Lyme disease can also cause a serious long-term decrease in quality of life.

The second most prevalent tick-borne disease in Suffolk, babesiosis, also provides great reason for concern. The incidence of babesiosis has been steadily increasing in the county over the past five years. Among patients exhibiting clinical symptoms, babesiosis has a significant mortality rate of about 5 percent. Among high risk groups (e.g., the elderly, premature infants, immune-compromised patients, those lacking spleens and patients receiving blood transfusions), the mortality rate is even higher, at 10 to 30 percent. Furthermore, one can contract babesiosis without ever walking through a tick-infested meadow.

Many people with babesiosis exhibit no symptoms, but can still pass it through blood transfusions. There currently is no approved screening test for the disease in blood donors or donated blood. According to the CDC and the FDA, babesiosis has now

become the most frequently reported transfusion-transmitted parasite in the United States, and the number of cases resulting from transfusions has increased steadily since 1985.

Finally, it has been widely recognized by naturalists that the presence of too many deer is ruining our natural environment. In many parts of our town, overbrowsing by deer has stopped or severely compromised forest regeneration, wiped out valuable native plants, promoted the proliferation of noxious and invasive plants and destroyed critical habitat for other desirable animals.

What can be done about our overabundance of deer? First, it is important for more of the public to become aware of the scope of the problems that have been created. One way to do this is to attend one of the town's periodic deer forums. Second, we as a community must press for meaningful change in deer management practices. Recent history does not suggest that further tweaking of our recreational hunting regulations will have the desired effect.

Limiting the reproductive capabilities of the animals is technically feasible, but unaffordable and prohibited by state law. Furthermore, that approach would not ameliorate the public health, safety and environmental problems that are currently at crisis levels. Any viable program must involve skilled, professional sharpshooters along with a continued recreational hunting program. It is scientifically indefensible to permit the unrestrained proliferation of large, wild herbivores in the absence of any natural predators. This is not the way nature is supposed to work.

Dr. John Rasweiler, a resident of Nassau Point, is a retired medical school professor. He is a Cornell-trained reproductive physiologist, who has spent most of his scientific career working with wildlife, including management issues. He serves on the Town of Southold deer management committee and the board of the North Fork Deer Management Alliance.