

Daily Local News Posted on Mon, Jun 2, 2008

# Partnership focuses on deer management

AUDUBON PENNSYLVANIA, WILLISTOWN CONSERVATION TRUST AIM TO BALANCE ECOSYSTEM

By ANNE PICKERING, Staff Writer



*Photo by Larry McDevitt*

WILLISTOWN — A decline in the populations of migratory songbirds has led to a unique partnership between Audubon Pennsylvania and the Willistown Conservation Trust.

Its goal? To reduce the deer population.

“It’s clear to us the balance between current deer populations and ecosystems is off-balance,” said William Hartman, director of stewardship at the trust. “There are so many deer the woodland understory has been severely degraded and forests are not regenerating.”

The woodland understory is a critical nesting habitat for migratory songbirds like the wood thrush, currently on Audubon’s National Watch List.

The birds spend winter in Central America and migrate in the spring to the Northeast and Canada. There have been significant declines in populations both in the Northeast and tropical areas due to fragmentation and degradation of habitat. Songbirds need a thick understory of shrubs and young trees. The native species preferred by songbirds are also high on the menu for the local deer population.

“The impact of overabundant deer has been a longtime focus of Audubon Pennsylvania,” said Brian Byrnes, Important Bird Area coordinator for Audubon Pennsylvania.

There are six areas in Chester County designated as Important Bird Areas, including

the Upper Ridley/Crum Important Bird Area in Willistown and surrounding municipalities.

An IBA is a site that is part of a global network of places recognized for outstanding value to bird conservation. The IBA program was established by Audubon to reverse declining trends in bird populations.

The overbrowsing on native plant populations by deer also creates opportunities for invasive species to proliferate.

This new partnership will address the problem on 7,000 acres in the Upper Ridley/Crum Important Bird Area.

With the help of a \$165,000 grant from the William Penn Foundation, the trust started conceptualizing the program about 2½ years ago, said Betsy Block, director of development and public relations at the trust.

The long-range goals of the program are to restore currently degraded native plant communities, improve bird habitats, reduce the incidence of Lyme disease and reduce the number of deer/vehicle collisions.

An aerial survey done in January on 4,000 acres in the core of the Willistown Conservation Trust's program area found a density of 44 deer per square mile. An ideal deer population is 10 to 15 deer per square mile.

In developing the deer management plan, the trust identified 125 properties on which to focus its efforts. Three preserves are included in the target area, including Okehocking, Kirkwood and Ashbridge, but the vast majority of it is private land.

Block said most of the properties are large, with the smallest being about 5 acres. Many of the landowners already allow hunting on their land.

As part of the deer management plan, the trust set up a seven-member steering committee of landowners and other stakeholders. There is also a hunter subcommittee composed of six hunters.

Last fall, the trust held two educational forums for property owners. It has been in touch with 65 percent of the 125 properties that are part of the deer-management plan.

The area to be hunted has been divided into 13 hunting coops to break it up into a manageable area. Each coop will have a landowner advocate to reach out to other landowners in the coop. There will be a hunter coordinator for every one to two coops.

It is a landowner-driven program, Hartman said. The landowner will have to choose the hunters but the trust is creating a database of hunters and hunting organizations that landowners will be able to access.

Hartman said the program is seeking to solve one problem that hunters say is a stumbling block to harvesting more deer — processing the venison.

Hunters have to arrange to have any deer they shoot butchered. It costs about \$75 to

butcher a deer. Hartman said they plan on getting a centralized cooling area where hunters can store harvested deer. Once butchered, the venison would be donated to food pantries.

The management plan will be rolled out this fall at the start of hunting season.

Audubon Pennsylvania will be doing quarterly monitoring of birds and the trust is hiring a botanist to conduct annual plant surveys.

But both Block and Hartman said they don't expect dramatic results right away.

"It might take 10 years to see any measurable improvement in bird populations and plant surveys," said Block.

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