



Monmouth County Park System
Deer Management Program
Annual Report

2025-2026

Prepared by the Monmouth County Park System's Deer Management Committee
April 30, 2026

Monmouth County Park System
DEER MANAGEMENT PROGRAM ANNUAL REPORT
to the Board of Recreation Commissioners
2025-2026

The Board approved the 2025-2026 Deer Management Program on June 23, 2025. This annual report has been prepared to advise the Board regarding the administration of this program, its effectiveness, and the need for adjustments to the program as designed.

Twenty-two park areas were hunted; a total of 6763 hunter days and 586 deer were reported as harvested.

Twenty of the twenty-two park areas were classified as Category 1 areas, defined as those areas that, within the portions designated for hunting, are largely undeveloped with limited public use. Thompson Park and Hartshorne Woods Park were classified as Category 2 areas, defined as those areas with regular public visitation that are closed to outdoor public use during the time they are available to hunting.

Program Purpose

The purpose of the program is to reduce the population of white-tail deer in order to improve forest health and wildlife diversity. As a conservation and recreation agency, the Park System acquires and manages land both for resource protection and recreation opportunities. Responsible land stewardship and resource protection require that wildlife and its habitat be managed for the benefit of all animals and plants. Deer, one species, can have a significant negative impact on the abundance, growth, regeneration, and diversity of 700-800 native plant and animal species. In areas of overabundant deer population, deer consume ground cover and shrubs, affecting birds and other animals that rely on this vegetation, and browse young saplings, precluding the natural regeneration of forests. Changes in the forest composition from deer damage are clearly visible at many county park sites, threatening natural resources that were intended to be preserved by the County's acquisition of the land. Staff have previously prepared and distributed a detailed background report on the need for deer management and all options examined; hunting continues to be the most efficient and effective management option to reduce the overabundant deer population.

Program Administration

The Monmouth County Park System issued a total of 696 2025-2026 hunting access permits to hunters licensed by New Jersey to deer hunt. Of those 696 hunters, 58% were Monmouth County residents. Permits were issued in person at three park areas. All permitted hunters received a copy of the Park System's Rules and Regulations, Supplemental Rules and Regulations governing deer hunting (R-10-7-19=231), administrative procedures for deer hunting, and maps of the areas open for hunting. A Harvest Incentive Program was implemented in 2019, in which those hunters harvesting three or more deer and providing the appropriate state confirmation numbers on their End-of-Season report were eligible for a 50% reduction in the fee for a 2025-2026 permit. The \$40 application processing fee (or \$20 reduced fee for those 81 hunters eligible) yielded \$26,140 collected between September 2025 and February 2026 that was deposited in the Park System Trust Account to offset program expenses.

Hunting within the Park System is subject to the rules and regulations of both NJ Fish and Wildlife and the Park System. State rules do not allow hunting in public parks on Sunday and prohibit hunting within 150 feet of a building or structure with a bow from an elevated tree stand and 450 feet of a building or structure with a bow from the ground and with a shotgun or muzzleloader. Additional rules imposed by the Park System require that only licensed hunters age 18 and older be issued permits, require that all hunting be from elevated tree stands, and apply a 450-foot safety zone to all primary and secondary school property. The Park System may refuse or revoke permits as determined to be necessary.

State regulations were changed in 2010 to reduce the minimum distance from an occupied building where a bow hunter may have a nocked arrow from 450 feet to 150 feet. The Park System's Administrative Procedures for Deer Hunting were amended in 2016 to match the 150' state regulation in all archery areas; the Park System maintained the 450' buffer at all school properties and to all shotgun/muzzleloader hunting in the Category 2 areas. The Administrative Procedures for Deer Hunting were also amended in 2016 to establish a 'carry-in/carry-out' designation. In small tracts of land, relatively few hunters could preclude others by placing stands that may infrequently be occupied. To avoid this, and promote as much opportunity and harvest as possible, a carry-in/carry-out policy was implemented at Hominy Hill Golf Course and Wickatunk Recreation Area, requiring daily removal of all stands. Bel-Aire Golf Course was included in the program for the first time in 2019, with a carry-in/carry-out designation.

An earn-a-buck requirement was implemented in all Category 1 areas in 2019 with the intended purpose of increasing the harvest of does, specifically in those areas where it was apparent many hunters were passing on antlerless deer while waiting for bucks. This requirement continued in the 2025-2026 season. Hunters were required to submit a report online or via phone of their antlerless harvest with their state confirmation number prior to being eligible to harvest a buck; 275 hunters reported a qualifying harvest.

Park managers met with local enforcement authorities in advance of the hunting season to review the program. Staff are also responsible for administration of the registration system, periodic spot-checks of parking areas and hunting activity, and addressing any issues that arose. All field staff in the affected areas are issued orange hats and vests to wear while working within hunting areas and received training related to the hunting program, enforcement of the program rules, and posting of hunting area signage. As the regulated hunting seasons run from ½ hour before sunrise to ½ hour after sunset, shift hours at affected park areas are adjusted.

A record of all occurrences and incidents related to the Deer Management Program was maintained and made available to staff on the Park System's internal network. Occurrences included rule infractions such as tree stands and access devices after the season not removed, tree stands must NOT be located within 50 feet of maintained Park System service or access roads and marked trails, antlerless deer must be harvested first, and Vehicle Identification Card not displayed. A total of 44 occurrences were recorded beginning May 1, 2025, through May 1, 2026. Incidents include major rule infractions; two were reported. One involved use of a trail camera and not observing the State Game Codes. They were revoked of their hunting privileges.

Written notice of the Deer Management Program was mailed in advance of the scheduled hunting season to 2462 neighbors, defined as those within 200 feet of a park with area open for hunting.

Throughout this hunting season, representatives of several municipalities inquired about deer management guidance and assistance in their municipalities.

Comments on the program were solicited from staff and were received from permitted hunters via the End-of-Season Harvest Reports. Frequently repeated suggestions include increased enforcement of off-leash dogs, increased huntable acreage, removing the doe first rule, permitting trail cameras, and extending the hunting season. One of the most common hunter responses was to open the parks to Sunday bow hunting, as has been done on State Wildlife Management Areas. To be clear, the legislative change enacted in 2009 legalized Sunday bow hunting on state Wildlife Management Areas and private property only. This privilege does NOT extend to other public lands, such as municipal or county parks, state parks or forests, or to any Federal lands. New legislation has been introduced that may further open these areas for Sunday hunting, but at this time the Monmouth County Park System is NOT included in ANY Sunday hunting. Of the 165 comments, approximately 76 of them thanked the Park System for the opportunity to hunt, participate in stewardship activities, and for running a great program. Several responses acknowledged the kindness and professionalism of the rangers.

This season, the Park System re-introduced a Staff Questionnaire which was distributed to all Park Rangers in areas where hunting is permitted. 18 responses were submitted. Frequent recommendations addressed concerns with off-leash dogs, adding or subtracting specific areas in various parks, and improvements to parking access and signage.

Program Effectiveness

Hunters who were issued Park System hunting access permits for the 2025-2026 deer-hunting season were required to submit an end-of-season report as a condition of the permit. The purpose of the end-of-season report is to gather harvest data for the Park System's Deer Management Program. The penalty for failing to submit an end-of-season report by the established deadline is ineligibility for a 2026-2027 permit.

Hunters were notified at the time they received their permit that online reporting would once again be available, as had been introduced for the first time in 2020. For the seventh year, an online form was posted on or about January 31st, and an email sent to those hunters who had provided an email address on their permit application (98%). A reminder email was sent February 3rd, a second email reminder was sent on March 2nd. A third email reminder was sent March 10th. 588 hunters, or 84% of those permitted, had submitted a report. This was the lowest reporting number to date; upgrades are going to be made to the reporting system in an effort to increase reporting in the 2026-2027 season.

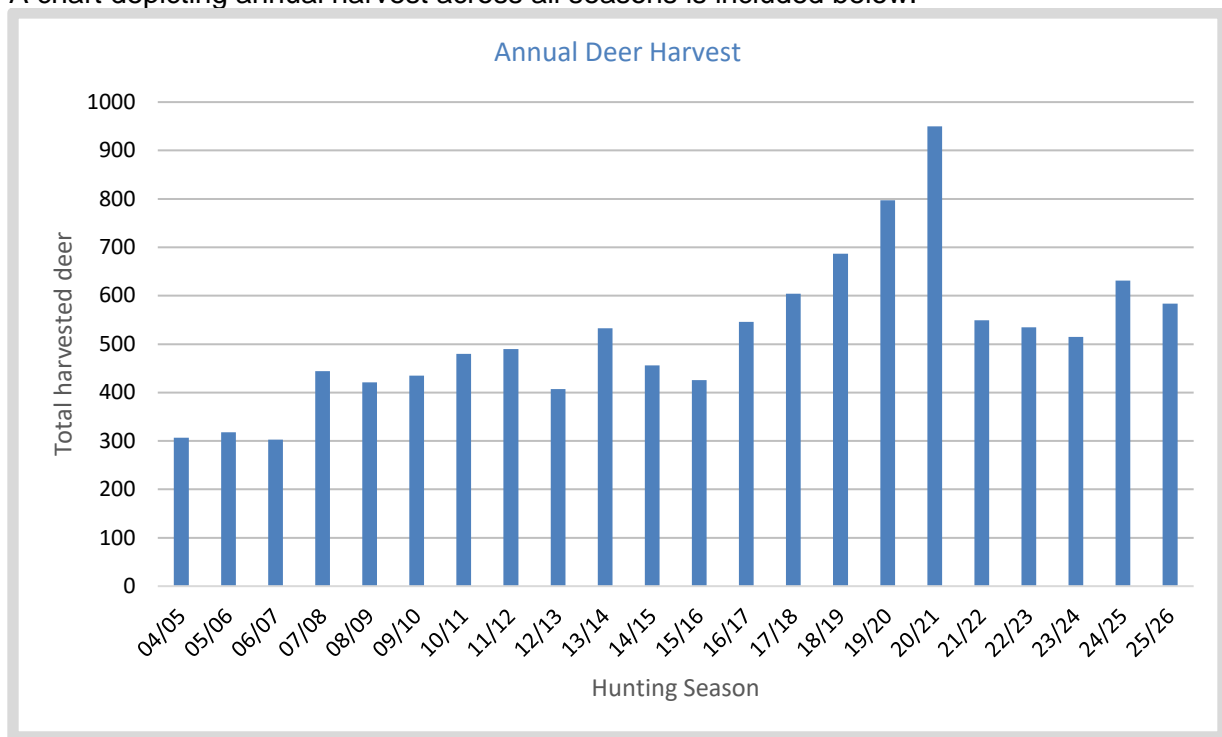
Key information contained in the 588 responses included the following:

- 86% of permitted hunters actually hunted in a Monmouth County Park during the 2025-2026 deer hunting season
- 49% of the reporting permitted hunters harvested at least one deer
- 14% harvested 3 or more deer, and provided state confirmation numbers, qualifying them for a reduced permit fee in 2026-2027
- A total of 586 deer were harvested at the 22 park areas open during the 2025-2026 season.
 - 386 or 66% of the deer harvested were female
 - 92% were harvested by archery
 - 8% were harvested by shotgun or muzzleloader (Category 2 parks only)

The recorded harvest data for the 2025-2026 deer hunting season is summarized in the attached table (Table 1). The 2025-2026 season had a consistent harvest to the last few seasons. Notably, expanding huntable acreage at Huber Woods Park by 127 acres in response to neighbor complaints about high deer populations resulted in an increase from 11 deer harvested in the 2023-2024 season to 23 deer harvested in the 2024-2025 season, and an even bigger jump to 34 deer in 2025-2026.

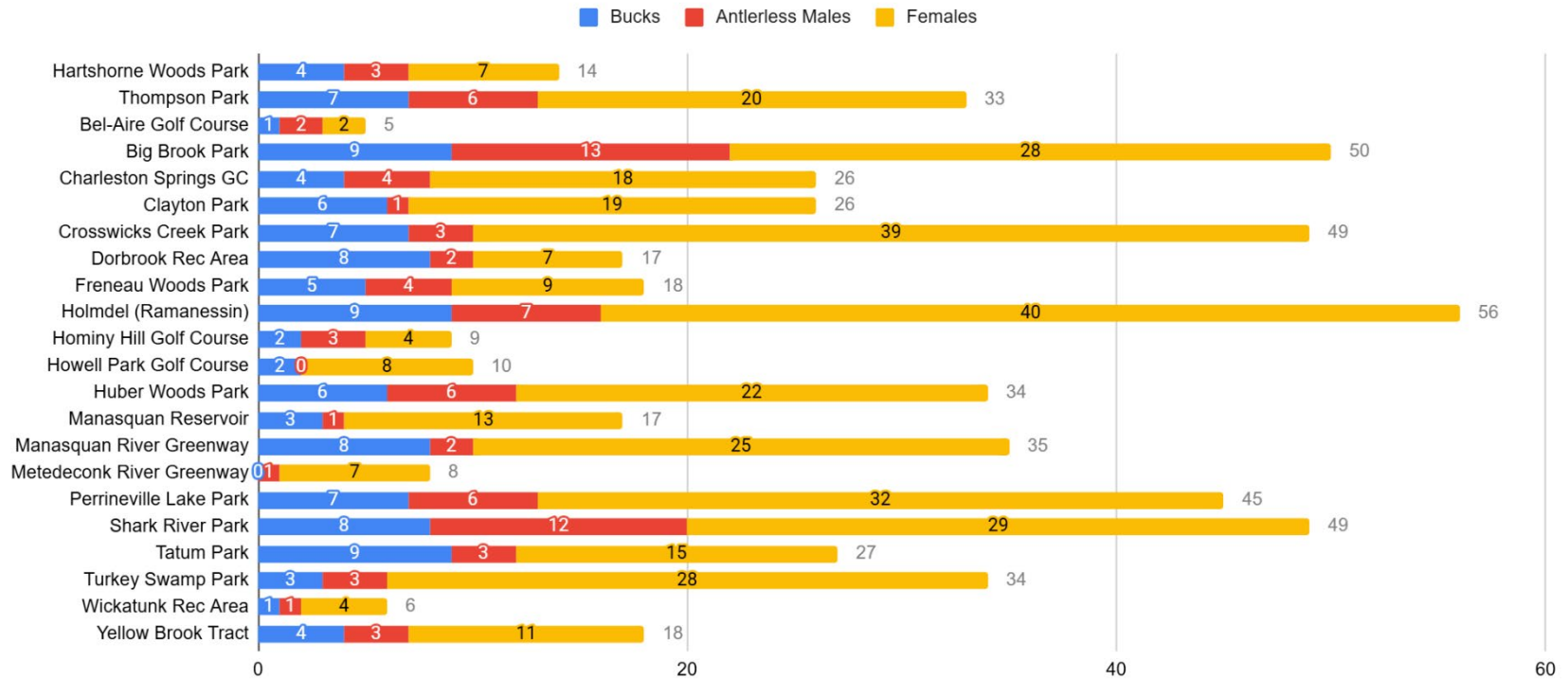
This year, Category 2 parks (Thompson Park and Hartshorne Woods Park) continued to serve as sampling sites for Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD), a fatal neurological disorder that has not yet been recorded in New Jersey. Biologists from NJ Fish & Wildlife set up stations during the hunting days and offered optional testing to hunters as a part of their active surveillance program. Several hunters participated, providing the state valuable sampling data from zone 50. All sampled deer tested negative.

A chart depicting annual harvest across all seasons is included below.



The total population reduction achieved by the hunt exceeds the number of deer harvested because of the lost reproductive capacity of each female deer harvested. Assuming, conservatively, that 50% of the females harvested would have produced 1 to 3 fawns this season, the harvest of 386 does would be indicative of a total single season population reduction ranging from approximately 777 to 1,163.

2025-2026 Deer Harvest by Park



The objective of the Park System's Deer Management Program is to retain a healthy native forest community by reducing deer populations to a maximum of 10 per square mile and maintaining populations at that level. This is a long-term management goal, not something that can be achieved in a few years. Several indicators are monitored to evaluate progress towards this goal:

Deer Population Counts - Counting deer is made difficult by their mobility and the fact that they spend a good deal of time under cover and cannot be reliably seen or counted. Regardless, the Park System staff has initiated efforts to establish estimates of deer density within select park areas. Counts have not been performed in every park open for hunting for two principal reasons: 1) aerial counts are ineffective in parks where forest cover and the presence of many evergreens obscure visibility, and 2) spotlight counts can only be performed within areas of a park with a drivable route adjacent to edge habitat.

Annual spring spotlight counts were conducted at six park areas in April and May each year since 2007, with the exception of 2013 when post-Sandy operations limited counts to just two park areas and 2018 when excessively wet conditions allowed counts in only three parks. Counts were NOT conducted during 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The 2025 counts yielded an estimate from 53-112 deer per square mile. Again, as the routes do not include the parks' entire edge habitat and as only deer visible from the route at the time of the inspection are counted, the spotlight surveys always yield an estimate lower than actual deer densities. Research by others suggests that as many as 50 percent of the deer present may not be observed by a spotlight count.

Information about and data from the Park System aerial surveys and spotlight surveys is available in a separate report, the Deer Management Program Background Information, available on the website or by request.

Multiple consecutive years of consistently lower count numbers in conjunction with improved forest health must be seen to conclude that the program is achieving its objective.

Forest Health Conditions – The health of the forest is the best measure of the effectiveness of the program. Two related studies initiated by the Park System provide for a reliable and consistent assessment of vegetative health, enabling the impact of deer on forest composition and structure to be assessed in a quantifiable way over time. The studies also provide insight on how well the many components of the forest can recover. The end goal is to restore the conditions that prevailed in the recent past, where forest structure, diversity of species, ecological processes and functions provide for the greatest overall benefit.

Park System staff have constructed 9 deer enclosure sites at 7 park areas since 2003 as part of an on-going Deer Enclosure Study (Clayton Park, Hartshorne Woods Park, Holmdel Park, Shark River Park, Tatum Park, Thompson Park and Turkey Swamp Park). The enclosures provide a physical barrier to access by deer while allowing access by small mammals, insects, and birds. The plant species in plots within the 30-foot by 30-foot enclosures are compared to those in plots outside the enclosures. In 2025 all nine enclosures were evaluated for percent cover and species composition. Although

percent cover and diversity indexes change from year to year, the overall trends have shown improvement in at least one measure in seven of the nine exclosures, indicating that in the absence of deer the forest is able to begin regeneration. For example, throughout the study, Thompson Park interior plots tended to have a higher quality plant community, greater species richness, and more native species when compared to the exterior exclosures, which were subject to deer browse.

The second study, the Forest Health and Composition Study, was initiated in 2006 and expanded each year. Species of trees, saplings, shrubs, vines and herbaceous plants as well as height and percent of vegetative cover have been sampled in 547 plots in 23 parks. These plots are evaluated for the condition of the herb and shrub layers and measure the establishment of tree saplings and seedlings to replace forest canopy in comparison to the mature trees present. The extent and nature of any degradation can be indexed and mapped and it can be determined whether deer browsing pressure may be limiting forest regeneration. Over time, this information will enable the Park System to evaluate whether conditions are improving or deteriorating.

In most park areas, it is too early in both the Park System's efforts to manage deer populations and to formally monitor forest health, to judge the impact of the program on forest health. While the Thompson Park exclosure has consistently shown the potential for a natural restorative process to occur, the data collected to date supports the conclusion that browsing pressure is still too high at the current level of deer population. Full recovery may require greater intervention and decades to achieve.

Harvest Numbers – Over time, if the program is in fact reducing the number of deer in the areas open for hunting, the year-to-year harvest numbers should begin to flatten and/or require an increased level of effort. Because we continue to refine the program from season to season, adding areas, modifying boundaries, adjusting hunting types and schedules, it is not possible to make direct comparisons for many areas. Harvest numbers within the parks are also greatly influenced by external factors, such as weather conditions and the presence or absence of hunting on the property surrounding each park. The increasing use of crossbows (first allowed in 2009-2010) may also affect the hunter day/harvest ratio. More years of data are needed to reasonably determine whether changes in harvests and level of effort are indicative of changes in population or are the result of other factors. It is known that over the twenty-two year life of the Deer Management Program, a total of 11,417 deer have been harvested of which 7,119 were does. Had these deer and their cumulative annual reproductive capacity not been removed, today's deer population within the County Parks and surrounding properties would be exponentially higher.

There is continued concern that the current program does not adequately reach prime areas of quality forest at Holmdel Park and Tatum Park where only small portions of the forested area have been hunted in order to minimize the impact on park visitors and neighbors. Limited hunting at Thompson Park may be keeping the deer population from escalating, but not significantly reducing the population. Other parks with areas of quality forest and sizeable deer herds, such as Weltz Conservation Area, have not been included in the program to date. Changes to the program may be needed in the future to address this issue.

In August of 2022 Park System representatives met with a NJ DEP deer biologist to review the MCPS deer management program, receive updates on alternative controls such as contraceptives, and discuss deer disease prevention. It was concluded by both parties during this meeting that there is still a regional need for deer management. Conversations with NJ DEP deer biologists about the Park System program continue annually.

During the course of the 2022-2023 season, the Park System was contacted by representatives from several local municipalities including Sea Girt and Ocean Township requesting deer management guidance and/or collaboration regarding deer management in their municipalities.

During the 2024-2025 season, the Park System was contacted by representatives from several local municipalities including Ocean Township, Long Branch, Tinton Falls, and Eatontown requesting deer management guidance and/or collaboration regarding deer management in their municipalities.

The Park System launched a pilot project for a hunter donation program in which 8 deer were donated, totaling 155lbs of venison that went to local food banks. Park System staff will spend the off season evaluating the potential to continue and even expand the program.

Although reasons for herd reduction vary amongst partners from forest protection to public safety and property damage, all stakeholders are in agreement that overpopulation must be managed. Clearly, the burgeoning white-tail deer population is a regional problem as deer populations are not confined to individual properties, municipalities, or public lands. Any localized management actions are quickly minimized by population imbalances elsewhere; an ongoing cooperative management effort at multiple levels and amongst private and public lands will be necessary to restore a sustainable population.

**Table 1: Monmouth County Park System
2025-2026 End-of-Season Deer Harvest Report**

	Location	# Hunters	Total # Days Hunted	Harvest			Sum
				Antlered Males	Antlerless Males	Females	
Category 2	Hartshorne Woods Park, Middletown	28	73	4	3	7	14
	Thompson Park, Middletown/Holmdel	29	117	7	6	20	33
Category 1	Bel-Aire Golf Course, Wall Township	13	167	1	2	2	5
	Big Brook Park, Marlboro	40	447	9	13	28	50
	Charleston Springs Golf Course, Millstone	23	214	4	4	18	26
	Clayton Park, Upper Freehold	22	227	6	1	19	26
	Crosswicks Creek Park, Upper Freehold	67	683	7	3	39	49
	Dorbrook Recreation Area, Colts Neck	14	97	8	2	7	17
	Freneau Woods Park, Marlboro/Aberdeen	26	302	5	4	9	18
	Holmdel (Ramanessin), Holmdel	42	728	9	7	40	56
	Hominy Hill Golf Course, Colts Neck	18	113	2	3	4	9
	Howell Park Golf Course, Howell	15	82	2	0	8	10
	Huber Woods Park, Middletown	43	366	6	6	22	34
	Manasquan Reservoir, Howell	21	242	3	1	13	17
	Manasquan River Greenway, Freehold/Howell	33	281	8	2	25	35
	Metedeconk River Greenway, Freehold	16	127	0	1	7	8
	Perrineville Lake Park, Millstone/Roosevelt	53	559	7	6	32	45
	Shark River Park, Wall/Neptune/Tinton Falls	57	734	8	12	29	49
	Tatum Park, Middletown	34	304	9	3	15	27
	Turkey Swamp Park, Freehold	49	606	3	3	28	34
	Wickatunk Recreation Area	10	57	1	1	4	6
	Yellow Brook Tract, Howell	21	237	4	3	11	18
TOTALS			6763	113	86	387	586