

Written Testimony – SB 879  
Michel Pierson

This testimony relates to SB 879<sup>1</sup>, which would amend Md. Code, Natural Resources Article § 10-410 (Game bird or mammal hunting restrictions). There are two amendments proposed:

(1) Subsection (g) of the statute establishes a “safety zone” for hunting. The subsection provides generally that a person hunting for a wild bird or mammal may not discharge a firearm or other deadly weapon within 150 yards of a dwelling without the permission of the owner or occupant. However, for specified counties the safety zone is 50 yards (13 counties)<sup>2</sup> or 100 yards (1 county) for archery hunters. The amendment would add Baltimore City to the list of jurisdictions in which the safety zone for archery hunting is 50 yards rather than 150 yards.

(2) The proposed amendment also would add Baltimore City to the list of jurisdictions in which Sunday deer hunting may be authorized by the State Department of Natural Resources.

These amendments would permit action to address the serious damage to the environment that has resulted from the overpopulation of deer in the northwest section of Baltimore City. That environmental damage mirrors similar effects in other forested areas that are well documented in numerous sources. Those effects led the Baltimore City Department of Recreation and Parks to initiate a program to address the problem. The City deer program website discusses the effects of overpopulation and contains links to other resources that detail the phenomenon.<sup>3</sup>

Over-browsing by deer strips the forest understory. One result is a lack of saplings to replace mature trees. Another is the destruction of habitat for smaller species. A third is erosion resulting from the barren forest floor. In addition to the degradation of woodlands, overpopulation has other effects such as proliferation of deer ticks and traffic accidents.

The City’s Deer Management Program is led by Wildlife Conservation Analyst Shane Boehne. Mr. Boehne has detailed the extent of the deer overpopulation based on ongoing deer counts in City parks. Experts agree that 20 deer per square mile is the highest population density that can exist without significant environmental damage. However, deer counts in many City parks reveal populations several times this density. (See Attachment 1)

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<sup>1</sup> The bill is cross-filed with HB 1324.

<sup>2</sup> In three counties, additional restrictions apply.

<sup>3</sup> Details concerning the program can be found at <https://bcrcp.baltimorecity.gov/forestry-tree-services/deer-program>.

My personal observations support the conclusions reached by these experts. I reside in Mt. Washington in a wooded area. While there is no official count in Mt. Washington, my counts in this wooded area suggest that at least the same density exists here. The deer population has been steadily increasing over the years and will undoubtedly continue to do so in the absence of any measures to check it. The wooded area to which I refer shows all of the signs of environmental degradation described above. Other Mt. Washington residents have shared similar accounts with me.

The Baltimore City program was launched in January 2025, and began with the gathering of data concerning public views on the deer population problem. Recently, the program has progressed to active measures for deer removal in certain City parks using trained sharpshooters employing precision shooting methods. (See Attachment 2).

As it is currently fashioned, the City's program will not have any effect on the deer population in areas not within these parks, and the information I have received from Mr. Boehne indicates that there is no likely prospect of assistance for such other areas in the foreseeable future. His suggestion to me is that landowners in other areas need to find a way to deal with the problem without City assistance.

Reduction of excess deer populations through limited archery hunting could help to address the problem in areas that are not within the ambit of the City program. There are sections of privately owned woods in our neighborhood, for example, that could be suitable locations for careful hunting by cross bow. However, the 150 yard safety zone has the effect of foreclosing this option in mixed areas, which fact has led to the reduction of the zone in jurisdictions such as Montgomery County and Howard County.

Of course, an important concern in considering such legislation is the issue of public safety. I offer the following observations on this issue:

First, bow hunting by its nature poses fewer dangers to people and animals than hunting with firearms. The effective range of crossbows for hunting is less than 50 yards. According to available data, the statistical record evidences the relative safety of archery hunting. Per the attached letter from the Maryland Bowhunters Society, there has been only one incident reported to DNR within the last 10 years that involved archery. (See Attachment 3) Similarly, the public page of the Montgomery County Department of Parks, where archery hunting is conducted, which reports that "similar archery programs occur throughout Maryland, including within Montgomery County, and no personal injury to non-hunting participants have been reported." (See Attachment 4).

Second, safeguards established by State statutes and regulations, which apply to archery hunting as well as to hunting with firearms, serve to promote safety. They include the

requirement of a hunting license, which requires presentation of a certificate of competence in hunting safety; the requirement of written permission from the owner to hunt on private land; restrictions on hunting hours; the requirement of photo identification; and the prohibition of consumption of alcohol or narcotic drugs while hunting. These and other provisions help to guard against uncontrolled and unsafe activities.

In conclusion, the presence of open space and forested areas is important to the health of City residents, and it is urgent to preserve these assets. The proposed amendments would help to achieve this objective.

I am submitting this testimony as a private citizen and not on behalf of any public agency.

Respectfully submitted,

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# ATT 1

<https://news.maryland.gov/dnr/2026/01/28/baltimore-city-explores-deer-management-options-to-protect-urban-forest/>

## Baltimore City Explores Deer Management Options to Protect Urban Forests

January 28, 2026

*Gwynns Falls-Leakin Park and other city parklands implement plans to enhance green space access for city residents*

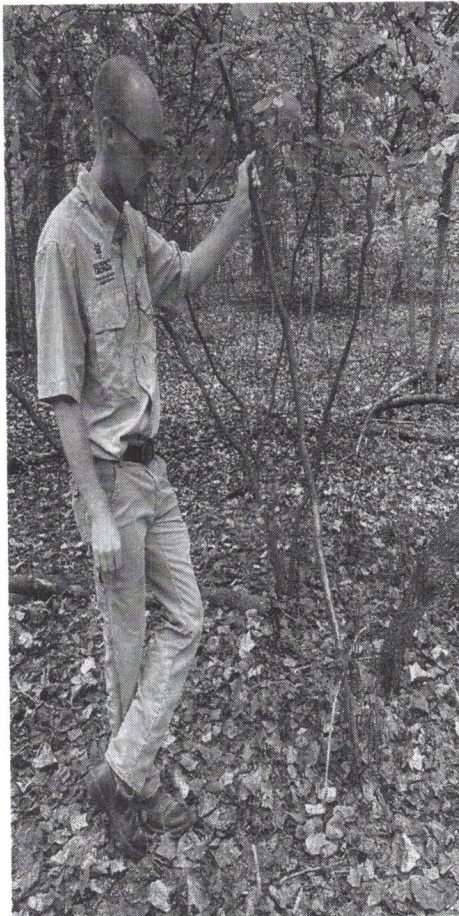


*White-tailed deer populations have risen in recent decades without hunting or management practices in place in Baltimore's urban forests. Photo by Ingrid Brown/2023 DNR Photo Contest.*

For the first time, Baltimore City is examining white-tailed deer overpopulation and the issues that deer cause within its parklands and across several ecologically significant natural areas. Using a Maryland [Department of Natural Resources](#) Community Forestry Catalyst Fund grant, the city has laid the foundation to manage deer populations and spur forest regeneration within city limits to reduce the harm caused on forested land and private properties.

In October, [Baltimore City Recreation and Parks](#) deer program leader Shane Boehne led a walking tour near Winans Meadow at [Gwynns Falls-Leakin Park](#) in West Baltimore, revealing why better deer management within Baltimore City's parks could improve the city's overall ecosystem. The Maryland Department of Natural Resources is working with the City of Baltimore to establish a partnership park model for Gwynns Falls-Leakin Park to share resources and work together to improve the park.

"Community deer management can be challenging, but it's a worthwhile endeavor to address our growing deer-related problems in Baltimore City," said Boehne. "As the city's first Deer Management Program, our aim is to balance the needs of residents, deer, and the environment. To reach this goal, we are pairing science with community input to develop management prescriptions which has yielded the best, long-term success for other programs across the United States."



*Boehne examines evidence of a recent “buck rub” in the Gwynns Falls-Leakin Park forest area. Antlered deer use these trees as scratching posts to aid in shedding the velvet from their antlers, while also leaving scent behind to alert other deer of their presence in the area. Maryland DNR photo.*

While it may go unnoticed to the untrained eye, forested land within Gwynns Fall-Leakin Park has suffered long-term ecological decline in part due to the overabundance of deer and their feeding habits. Other contributing factors, such as dense overhead cover, inhibit forest regeneration due to the lack of sunlight penetrating the canopy and limiting understory growth.

Roughly 1,200 acres of forested land directly meet the boundaries of 25 Baltimore City neighborhoods – the largest urban natural area east of the Mississippi River. It provides fertile ground for old-growth tulip poplars, black walnut trees, oaks, and various other towering hardwoods. It also acts as a sanctuary for a robust herd of white-tailed deer, whose population has gone unchecked in recent decades without hunting pressure or other management practices.

The city’s deer program has taken measured steps throughout 2025 to lay the groundwork necessary to manage the City’s deer population. Through surveys, public information sessions, research, and community engagement, Boehne has gauged community buy-in on several management strategies. These techniques include precision sharpshooting, controlled hunting, traditional hunting, deer exclusion areas, and repellents, which have all proven to work well in nearby jurisdictions. These options are being evaluated for use in Gwynns Falls-Leakin Park and six other City parks.

One option – deer exclusion fences – are showing what a Baltimore City forest could look like without extensive deer browsing pressure. Atop a wooded ridge several hundred feet above Dead Run, a tributary of Gwynns Falls, researchers have installed a fenced-in deer exclusion area and kept deer away for more than a year. Surrounded by plastic fencing six feet high, the understory of the Gwynns Falls-Leakin Park forest has made a remarkable rebound within the quarter-acre enclosure. Here, oak saplings, new-growth American Beech, shrubs, wildflowers, and other native plants flourish without the effects of deer browse.

It's a tale of two places, though, as outside the fence there is a stark contrast, where barren forest floor and the absence of understory characterizes the majority of the woodland. The forest's understory has been stripped bare by deer over-browsing, leaving few saplings to replace mature trees. The same vegetation being devoured by deer is one of the keys to the long-term regeneration of Gwynns Falls-Leakin Park forest.



*This drone photo shows a birds-eye view of the Gwynns Falls-Leakin Park quarter-acre deer exclusion area which is enclosed with plastic fencing roughly six feet high. The red line marks the location of the fencing, showing how undergrowth vegetation can bounce back when deer can't freely browse the area. Photo by AJ Metcalf/DNR.*

In the future, the city plans to construct a 15-acre enclosure with galvanized woven wire 10-feet high, tall enough to keep deer isolated and strong enough to protect from falling trees and branches. It's being done in hopes of showing city residents and the general public how vegetation can rebound when deer are kept out.

New growth – natural forest regeneration – is struggling to take root due to the overbrowsing. While native plants fall into decline, invasive and non-native plants such as wineberries and Japanese stiltgrass exploit the void left behind by the remnants of deer overbrowsing. The invasive species spread rapidly and choke out and overwhelm native forest strongholds. Deer often avoid eating these invasive species and tend to search for native plants unless the native species are not available.

A long-sought solution to the degradation of the forest are publicly-acceptable ways of reducing the overall population of the herd. A density of 20 deer per square mile or lower is the city's benchmark. This density provides a healthy, sustainable deer population that can coexist with a natural area without significant environmental damage.

Currently, Gwynns Falls-Leakin Park is home to approximately 69-86 deer per square mile – more than three to four times what's considered healthy. In other parks, the numbers are even more staggering. Druid Hill Park in northwest Baltimore has seen a 64 percent increase in deer density in the last 10 years, to about 120 deer per square mile, while Powder Mill Park in West Baltimore is estimated to hold the densest population of deer that Baltimore City Recreation and Parks has counted as of December 2025.

Damage to parklands and forested areas aren't the sole issues that the city is attempting to address. In a recent survey, Baltimore City residents list landscaping plant damage, garden plant damage, and deer-vehicle collisions as top deer-related problems. While reducing deer density is a top priority to restore native forest structure, Baltimore City's broader goals revolve around public safety and environmental resilience, including reducing deer-vehicle collisions and improving access to healthy green space in nearby neighborhoods.



*A ridge near Winans Meadow shows visual evidence of the deer "browse line" which leaves the forest floor to approximately 4.5 feet high barren. Maryland DNR photo.*

Maintaining wildlife habitat for small mammals, birds, reptiles, and insects, ensuring long-term forest regeneration, managing non-native invasive plants, and replanting native vegetation round out the city's other restoration efforts that are currently underway.

In coming years, Baltimore City is aiming to restore the Gwynns Falls-Leakin Park woodland into the rich, biodiverse setting it was before deer density skyrocketed in the late 1900s. It's a goal that the Department of Natural Resources shares with the city.

Maryland's statewide deer population has grown from an estimated 140,000 deer in the late 1980s to a fairly stable population of about 240,000 deer during the past 20 years. At the same time, overall deer harvests in the state have declined from a high of around 95,000 deer harvested in 2010 to about 75,000 in recent years, according to DNR data.

Licensed hunters in the state are also declining. In the late 1970s, DNR licensed about 180,000 hunters each year. Today, DNR is licensing about 110,000 hunters each year—a nearly 40 percent decline. Research has shown that societal factors such as increasing urbanization, rising costs for access to hunting grounds, and fewer mentors have resulted in fewer new hunters being developed.

However, DNR is pursuing changes to try to reverse this trend. Last year, DNR instituted a new licensing system—MD Outdoors—designed to make it easier for licensed hunters to buy and renew their licenses. DNR is also examining potential changes to laws and regulations that prevent hunting on Sundays throughout the state, some of which have been in place since colonial times. The existing patchwork of Sunday hunting rules can make it difficult for existing hunters to harvest a deer or mentor new hunters when they may have free time on weekends in an increasingly busy world. Last year, Pennsylvania liberalized its Sunday hunting regulations as a way to reduce agricultural crop damage, attract out-of-state hunters that inject money into Pennsylvania's economy, and reduce habitat destruction.

DNR believes changes to Maryland's current Sunday hunting rules—while ensuring safety and general public access to natural areas—may produce similar benefits. In a 2018 DNR survey of the general public, only 29 percent of respondents were opposed to Sunday deer hunting, while 45 percent were in favor and 24 percent had no opinion. In a survey of licensed Maryland hunters, 43 percent of hunters said they would have been more likely to harvest a deer if there were more Sundays available to deer hunt in the state.

# Baltimore to close parks at night as sharpshooters work to thin deer herds

By Racquel Bazos

Baltimore will close multiple parks at night this month as federal sharpshooters move in to thin deer herds that officials say are overwhelming forests and choking off new tree growth.

The city's Recreation and Parks Department held a community meeting Wednesday to go over the details, approved last month by the Baltimore Board of Estimates. The \$110,442 agreement asks the U.S. Department of Agriculture Wildlife Services to remove up to 271 white-tailed deer through April. The effort targets herds in Druid Hill Park, Gwynns Falls-Leakin Park and Herring Run Park — the city's largest forested parks.

Crews will work after hours while parks are closed and secured. Sharpshooters using thermal imaging and bait sites will take deer from 20 to 50 yards away, aiming for quick, humane kills, according to city officials. Police will help clear and secure areas before operations begin, including helicopter flyovers.

"This is the first time Baltimore City has taken a comprehensive approach to managing deer overpopulation," Recreation and Parks Executive Director Reginald Moore said in a statement, calling the program the result of scientific analysis and community input.

## Details of the plan

The city is seeking to reduce deer density to about 20 per square mile — a level the Maryland Department of Natural Resources considers sustainable for forest regeneration. Current estimates far exceed that benchmark: roughly 120 deer per square mile in Druid Hill Park and up to 86 per square mile in Gwynns Falls-Leakin Park. Powder Hill Park in West Baltimore has the city's highest concentration, state officials say.

At Druid Hill Park alone, crews aim to remove 132 deer between March 30 and April 9. The park will close daily at 4 p.m. and reopen at 7 a.m. during that period. Gwynns Falls-Leakin Park and Herring Run Park will see similar overnight closures through April 9.

By night, 11 volunteer-manned stations around the perimeter will intercept anyone trying to get in the park, three gates will be shut to traffic, and park entrances will be blocked by traffic cones or construction barrels, said Shane Boehne, a wildlife conservation analyst for the city's Recreation and Parks Department. The park will be cleared each day starting at 4 p.m., with assistance from the Baltimore Police Department.

"This is going to ensure that any trail runners, anybody who might be walking their dog, or making sure that we can intercept anybody who might in a homeless encampment in these areas, we're making sure that they have all vacated the area before the wildlife biologists come in and start their management strategies," Boehne said.

The concern is that overbrowsing by deer is stripping forests of saplings and native plants. A 150-pound deer can eat up to 36 oak saplings a day, according to Baltimore County

environmental officials. The loss of understory growth can invite invasive species, worsen erosion and limit tree canopy that cools neighborhoods. High deer populations also are linked to increased vehicle collisions and tick-borne illnesses. Deer killed in this operation will be processed and could provide up to 40,000 servings of venison for the food bank, Boehne said, if the city hits its target.

## What about the alternatives?

City leaders say alternatives are either too slow or too costly to curb the herd in the near term. A contraceptive vaccine known as GonaCon — approved in Maryland as a pesticide — can induce multi-year infertility, according to a 2022 USDA report. But city parks officials said it requires capturing or darting does individually and may take years to meaningfully reduce populations

Boehne said Wednesday that using GonaCon could cost over \$80,000 at the low end to over \$412,000, which would exhaust the deer management program's grant funding, in addition to being labor intensive. Relocation would also be too expensive, he said.

Another way to manage the deer population is fencing them out of forested areas. Above a Gwynns Falls tributary, researchers used a 6-foot-tall plastic fence that kept deer out for more than a year, leading to flourishing saplings and native plants within the quarter-acre enclosure, according to DNR.

"The city plans to construct a 15-acre enclosure with galvanized woven wire 10-feet high, tall enough to keep deer isolated and strong enough to protect from falling trees and branches. It's being done in hopes of showing city residents and the general public how vegetation can rebound when deer are kept out," DNR wrote of its exclusion fencing experiment.

That plan is still going forward at Gwynns Falls-Leakin Park, with construction slated for fall, said Alex Silverman, a spokesperson for the city's parks department. "This will primarily serve as a demonstration site to show the outcomes of sustained deer management," she wrote in an email Wednesday.

But that project would cost about \$150,000, Boehne said, for 15 acres. Druid Hill Park is 607 acres, making fencing in the whole park prohibitively expensive at current funding levels.

## What are other areas doing?

Baltimore City is not the first Maryland jurisdiction to find shooting deer a solution to overpopulation. Baltimore County's cooperation with USDA has been in play since 2011, most recently renewed last year.

Howard and Montgomery counties' deer management programs have had zero public safety incidents since the 1990s when they were established, according to Boehne. The USDA team that manages deer herds in Delaware, Maryland and Virginia region also had no such incidents, he said.

The city will conduct annual deer counts and monitor forest recovery to gauge whether culling meets its goals.

*Have a news tip? Contact Racquel Bazos at [rbazos@baltsun.com](mailto:rbazos@baltsun.com), 443-813-0770 or on X as @rzbworks.*

## Maryland Bowhunters Society

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[www.marylandbowhunterssociety.org](http://www.marylandbowhunterssociety.org)



Letter of Support: Archery Safety

February 2026

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Maryland Bowhunters Society has been preserving the history and ensuring the future of archery in Maryland since 1977. As one of the largest and longest running sportsman's groups, MBS promotes safe, ethical hunting practices and provides education and training for those who wish to responsibly enjoy the outdoors. MBS strives to educate the hunting and non-hunting public about the benefits of regulated hunting.

Regular season hunting has been proven to be the most effective and humane way of maintaining a healthy deer herd, especially in a state like Maryland that has very few natural predators. Maintaining a healthy balance is key, for the animals and the land. Unchecked populations of deer lead to damage of the landscape, car accidents, crop damage, disease and starvation.

When a herd exceeds capacity, more extreme means of thinning the herd may be used. These methods include crop damage, which can be utilized at night with special permission, and hiring of sharp shooters. These permits allow for the use of firearms 365 days a year. By allowing regular season hunting you eliminate the need for these drastic measures. Knowing that hunters will be in the woods typically the first and last 2 hours of daylight allows citizens the benefit of knowing when they are out there. Which are only during set seasons and particular times of the day.

Archery is considered the safest form of hunting, this is supported by local and national statistics. In the state of Maryland in the last 10 years there has only been one two-party incident reported to DNR that involved archery. The lack of archery related incident reports are a testament to the standard of safety Maryland archers hold themselves to.

A few reasons archery is considered safer: the distance for taking an ethical shot is greatly decreased. The average, ethical, and recommended distance for a compound bow is 15-30 yards, and for a crossbow 30-40 yards. The shorter distance in archery hunting removes the chance for error in identifying one's target and executing a safe shot.

Part of hunter education training demands that hunters are able to clearly identify their target and know what is beyond their target. Typical archery hunts take place

from an elevated platform, from an elevated angle the arrow will not travel beyond its intended target, it will stick into the ground and easily be retrieved. There are specific amendments that were added into archery safety zone regulations for Harford, Montgomery, and Washington counties that require hunters only deploy their bows from an elevated position. It is also illegal to shoot across property lines, for this reason most will set up their intended hunting area away from any property boundaries to avoid any concern.

Land owners should take their time in choosing who they allow to hunt their property. By choosing an ethical, law abiding, and understanding person to enter their property, they are ensuring the overabundance of deer will be addressed safely and without raising concerns from other land owners or neighbors. As a land owner you can choose the number of deer you would like removed, which locations and shooting directions you would like hunters to consider or avoid, and what days and times you will allow hunting.

Archery requires patience, precision, timing, and practice. It is a responsibility not taken lightly and not entered into without consideration and dedication. The numbers of deer in urban areas are on the rise, and archery hunting is proving to be the safest and most efficient way of addressing this growing problem.

So far Allegany, Calvert, Carroll, Cecil, Frederick, Garret, Harford, Montgomery, St. Mary's, Washington, Wicomico, and Worcester counties have seen the need to decrease their archery safety zone. Howard County also has this decreased zone for specific managed hunts. There has not been an increase in archery related incident reports in these areas.

Granting access to archery hunters benefits all citizens by increasing roadway safety, limiting crop and landscape damage, and providing countless organic meals for families and people in need. But it also helps maintain balance and ensures the future of the land and the animals we share it with.

Maribeth Kulynych  
Maryland Bowhunters Society President

# ATT 4

<https://montgomeryparks.org/deer-management/deer-faqs> [excerpts]

## **Why are archery managed parks not closed to the public?**

Archery managed parks remain open in order to minimize disturbance to public use and enjoyment of our parks, while safely providing flexible opportunity for screened and qualified participants to access select parks to discretely manage deer while hunting under strict guidelines. Given the discreet nature of the activity, a long-standing record of safety and low-impact coexistence of archery hunting with other land uses in Montgomery Parks and across the region, and the desire to minimize disturbance to public use, these parks remain open.

While responsible vigilance by park users is always encouraged, there is no additional cause for concern regarding personal safety to people or pets. Archery hunting is inherently safe, quiet, and discrete. Interactions between hunter participants and the public do occasionally occur, but most typically pertaining to ingress and egress of the parks.

## **Have there been any injuries as a result of Montgomery Parks Managed Deer Hunting Programs?**

No. Since inception, Parks' managed hunting programs have been strictly monitored, and safety has remained paramount throughout. To date there have been no injuries to members of the public, and no serious injuries to hunting participants. M-NCPPC makes it abundantly clear that safety is the #1 priority and that there is a zero tolerance level for any behavior that could result in serious, negligent injury.

## **Should I be concerned about my personal safety and that of my family and pets?**

Montgomery Parks is committed to prioritizing public safety in its deer management efforts. While we always encourage responsible vigilance by residents and park users, there is no additional cause for concern regarding personal safety.

Regarding firearms-based programming, park closures should be noted and followed. These closures are intended to enhance existing safety measures.

Concerning archery-based programming, there is no associated park closure. It is important to note that non-participant injuries resulting from archery managed hunting activities have not occurred within Montgomery Parks. Archery managed hunting practices serve to increase safety measures and accountability. Similar archery programs occur throughout Maryland, including within Montgomery County, and no personal injury to non-hunting participants have been reported.