

## From the woods to surgery and back again: Deer spaying begins in Fairfax City

By Tom Jackman

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*A female deer recovers from its surgical sterilization early Monday in the Fairfax City police headquarters sallyport. Fairfax City is the first in Virginia to try sterilizing does as a means of reducing its deer population. (Tom Jackman/The Washington Post)*

You have to wonder, What are the deer thinking? One minute, they're standing around in a Fairfax City park with their pals, then they feel something sharp in their hindquarters. Then they wake up 90 minutes later and their bellies are shaved and something feels different inside. They've been spayed.

Fairfax City's program to try to control its deer population by sterilizing the does, rather than killing them, began Friday night and will continue for the rest of this week. Overseen by Anthony J. DeNicola, a wildlife biologist with decades of deer experience who runs White Buffalo Inc., the program was aided by a raft of volunteers, many with Maryland's Wildlife Rescue, who helped DeNicola transport the deer or helped veterinarians Jeffrey Newman of Fairfax Station and Steve Timm of Wisconsin with the ovariectomies, or aided DeNicola in returning the does to the woods. Fairfax City police helped DeNicola track and hunt the deer through the six-square-mile city's various open spaces, staying away from private property and not using spotlights or helicopters.

It's the first time this has been tried in Virginia. By the end of day three, the group had "darted," spayed and returned 11 female deer. DeNicola is hoping to spay and tag at least 20 does by the end of the week, and he's well on the way. He has also placed 20 motion-activated cameras around the woods to get a sense of how many deer are untagged and monitor the population, which he has estimated is about 50 to 75 total deer. He is running similar programs in Baltimore County, Cayuga Heights, N.Y., a small community in San Jose, Calif., and Town and Country, Mo. The cost of the Fairfax City program is estimated to be about \$50,000, and is being paid entirely, for the first two years, by donors to Wildlife Rescue.

In addition to being very funny, DeNicola is quite knowledgeable about deer and concerned about their welfare, and also a very good tracker and darter. He is agnostic on the whole issue of killing vs. sterilization, he just wants the research to judge which one might be more effective, and he's willing to do both. This program was approved by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries as a research project. DeNicola also said he has a friend with a fixed-wing aircraft and an infrared camera who was going to fly over 27 Fairfax County parks and try to get a sense of the deer population there. Fairfax County has been "culling" (or "killing") deer for years, and some still think that's the way to go. Kevin Rose, a certified ecologist with the state game department, said that, "Sterilization does not immediately reduce the population, whereas hunting does have an immediate impact. With sterilization, the current population will remain high until natural mortality may decrease the population over time. This means that individuals complaining of damage will not receive immediate relief of damage caused by deer, but will have to live with inflated populations until the deer begin to die off. This assumes that the project is a success and this experimental method does reduce the population."

Rose added, "At this time, the use of sterilization to manage deer in open populations is not a proven method. The program in the City of Fairfax is a research project to examine the use of these techniques. It is important to recognize that distinction between research into experimental methods such as sterilization and management using proven methods such as hunting and sharpshooting. The Department of Game and Inland Fisheries would not have issued a permit to allow an unproven technique to be implemented as management." DeNicola said that, for the government, "It's mostly a political game of 'Who Squawks the Loudest?' Whether it's the farmers, or the hunters, or the homeowners, the government just collects the data and responds who the loudest squawkers." For now, Fairfax City is simply trying to find out what works, and is trying this approach before its deer population gets out of control, rather than after.



*Anthony DeNicola returns Deer 10 to Van Dyck Park early Monday, after it has been sterilized and tagged. (Tom Jackman/The Washington Post)*

Original story can be found at:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/local/wp/2014/02/03/from-the-woods-to-surgery-and-back-again-deer-spaying-begins-in-fairfax-city/>