

## Unfriendly Neighbors

As geese, deer population grow, residents look to alternative methods of animal control.

By Amber Healy

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As the townhomes, condominiums and single family homes pop up throughout the southern part of Fairfax County, the deer, raccoons and bears come out of the woods and into the neighborhood.

That's right — bears.

Karen Ray said her seven-year-old son alerted her and her husband to a bear in the backyard of their Fairfax Station home about a year ago.

"We were having breakfast and he said 'Mom, there's a bear in the backyard,'" she said. Dismissing it as the combination of an overactive imagination and a large black dog, she decided to look for herself.

"Sure enough, there was a bear in our yard," she said with a laugh.

While the bear only mangled some wrought iron poles to eat the contents of a few bird feeders, and Ray said she and her family weren't scared of the incident, some wild animals that visit homes in Fairfax County more frequently than black bears are becoming nuisances.

"We do have a problem with geese, but we take care of it the best we can," said Jim McCormick, community manager for the Crosspointe neighborhood in Fairfax Station.

With two ponds located within the single family home community, McCormick said the geese tend to come and go as they please, leaving behind patches of bare earth where grass has been eaten and the unsightly remnants of their feasts.

"Their droppings are all over the place to the point where you can't walk on the trails," he said. "There's not much you can do to get rid of them, other than to shoo them away."

For the most part, Crosspointe residents learn to "deal with" their feathered neighbors.

"It hasn't changed much," he said of the presence of deer and geese in Crosspointe. "The more you build, the happier the geese are. They like the cultivated areas more than the open space and tall grass."

ACROSS ROUTE 123 from Crosspointe, in the Roseland community, the concern is with the deer population. "People have spent a lot of money on landscaping that the deer usually end up eating," said resident Josie Z. Caldwell.

In her backyard, she's also seen a small menagerie of animals, ranging from skunks and copperhead snakes to fox and raccoons, who have climbed up her solarium to eat from bird feeders.

"We even had a turkey knocking on our back door once," she said. "He saw the reflection and tried to get the other bird."

Residents of Roseland have decided to take a more aggressive approach to handling their deer problem, however.

"We have expert hunters come in to do controlled hunting of deer," Caldwell said.

A little over a year ago, Mike Whalen got frustrated with the overpopulation on his property, one of many five acre lots along the Occoquan Watershed.

"We've done a lot of landscaping and they eat everything, including poisonous plants," said Cindy Whalen, Mike Whalen's wife.

When Mike Whalen contacted Fairfax County to see what could be done about the population, which seemed to "double or triple every year," he was directed to the deer management program, she said.

He contacted Suburban Whitetail Management of Northern Virginia, Inc., an organization that comes in to communities to do controlled bow hunting of deer to control the population and reduce the risk of disease within herds, said founder and president Eric Huppert.

"The idea was that the deer population was already out of hand when we started this in 1997," Huppert said.

After a year and a half spent compiling regulations and specifications, he organized a group that currently has



Photo by Karen Ray/The Connection

This black bear wandered into the Ray family's backyard in the Roseland community of Fairfax Station. Bears are not a common visitor to Fairfax County, and this one did little damage, other than to some iron poles.

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between 75 and 80 members, who are trained to go into residential areas and "harvest" deer as discreetly as possible.

"There's a lot of people who don't care for what we do," Huppert said. "We go in and leave the properties we are allowed to be on in regular clothes so we're as inconspicuous as possible."

The hunters will sit in stands, located between 15 and 20 feet off the ground in trees, Huppert said, which allows them to shoot down to the ground, reducing the risk of injuring anyone.

"We've been extremely successful," he said of the group's work in the county. "We've harvested close to 400 deer. It's might not seem like a lot, but bow hunting is a long term management tool. It takes about a week's worth of time to get each deer."

Hunters are instructed to try to "harvest" as many does as possible, because "that's the only real way we'll control the population," Huppert said.

THERE ARE CURRENTLY 125 communities across Fairfax and Loudoun counties that have requested his organization's services, including Roseland, which had to change its bylaws before hunting could be allowed. Once the deer are removed from the property, wrapped up for the consideration of the residents, they are processed and the venison is donated to soup kitchens and homeless shelters, he said.

As the populations come under control, the hunters will reduce the amount of time they spend in any given community until the population "becomes a problem again," Huppert said.

"When you think about how humanely they do this, people who were initially on the fence about letting them in were OK with it," Whalen said.

It took a year's worth of talking to neighbors, getting a majority approval and signatures before the hunters could begin their work, which started in November, she said.

The best advice for people who have a wild animal in their backyard is to stay away from it, said Charles Smith, a natural resource specialist with the Fairfax County Park Authority. But for the most part, the animals and their human neighbors have to try to live in harmony.

"There are some plants that can be planted that aren't attractive to deer, but for the most part, we try to tell people to just leave any animal alone unless it creates a safety hazard," Smith said.

In the case of Ray's bear, Smith said it's a rare occurrence.

"They come either from the western part of the county or down a river corridor," he said. "It's an uncommon thing to find. The last one I remember hearing about was out near Dulles airport a few years ago."