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Deer Hunting at ESVNWR

There are very high deer populations in certain parts of the country, including Virginia. Extensive browsing by a large population of white-tailed deer on the Eastern Shore of Virginia National Wildlife Refuge (ESVNWR) damages the forest understory. This directly affects some of the habitat used by migratory songbirds.

The refuge is an important stopover for fall and spring migrants and the focus of management efforts is to protect, restore, and enhance habitat for forest and shrub-dependent migratory birds. Thus, management of the deer population is a necessity and hunting is one of the methods by which this is accomplished.

The deer hunt program on ESVNWR began in 1993 to reduce the density of white-tailed deer and their impact on the forest understory. The first two years of the deer hunt resulted in 113 deer harvested. Since then, the harvest has been producing an average of 30 deer per season. However, within the past four years the ratio of does to bucks harvested has decreased. This trend could potentially increase deer population. Strategies are being developed by the staff to modify the hunt program in an attempt to alleviate this problem.

Currently, there are two weeks of archery hunting and seven days of shotgun hunting on the refuge. Five zones are open for hunting and a maximum of 23 hunters per day are issued permits. Each hunter is allowed to harvest two deer per day.

While refuges exist for the protection and conservation of fish and wildlife, they are also used extensively for biological research for the benefit of wildlife and an improved understanding of our environment. Moreover, refuges also provide opportunities for public use such as hunting, fishing, nature photography wildlife observation, environmental education and interpretation. The 1997 Refuge Improvement Act designated these activities as priority public uses for the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Hunting is not only a recreational activity but also an important tool for wildlife management. It is also a valuable tool for resource managers to control populations of species that might otherwise exceed the carrying capacity of their habitat, threaten the well-being of other wildlife species or, in some cases, threaten human health and safety.

Nationally, nearly \$200 million in hunters' federal excise taxes are distributed each year to State agencies to support wildlife management programs, the purchase of lands open to hunters, and hunter education and safety classes. Proceeds from the Federal Duck Stamp, a required purchase for migratory waterfowl hunters, have funded the purchase of more than five million acres of habitat for the refuge system.



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