

# **Sunnyside Deer Management Plan**

## **Ardentown, Delaware**

August 2025

The deer population in the Ardens has been growing over the years, as evidenced by increased damage to the forests, damage to plantings on our leaseholds, and increased visibility throughout the villages and roadways. To be responsible stewards of our land, and to preserve the health of the deer herd itself, hard decisions have to be made.

### **Background**

Recently the Ardentown Public Works and Safety Committee formed an Ad-Hoc Ardens Deer Management Committee with representatives from all three Ardens, who have been meeting to address deer management in the Ardens. Those members are:

- Ardentown: Elaine Schmerling, Bethany Rees, Will Ryan, Cindy Cohen, Marc Morfei, Hillary Daye, David Girolami, Jessica Riggleman, Shelley Robyn
- Arden: Carol Larson, Beverly Clendening
- Ardencroft: Scott Bowers, Lisa Surbrook

The Committee's mission is to balance the deer population with habitat capacity, addressing issues like forest damage/conservation, deer-vehicle collisions, and to preserve deer health. The objective is to be responsible stewards of natural lands in The Ardens and offer an opportunity for sustainable management of our deer within the Sunnyside Tract and continue to develop tree undergrowth and restore/maintain its canopy. No one wants to see harm come to our deer, but the negative effects of overpopulation, such as starvation due to lack of food sources, chronic-wasting disease, vehicular collisions, and social stress among the deer, are harmful in themselves. Our goal is to prevent suffering among the deer, not to punish them.

### **Research & Review**

In 2008, DNREC developed a Sunnyside Management Plan for the Village of Ardentown since we accepted their request to become a nature preserve (The Sunnyside Nature Preserve). At the time of this plan the deer population was much lower and the DNREC Plan states: *"Although present in small numbers, white-tailed deer can have a detrimental effect on the preserve. Deer impacts should be monitored by observing browse intensity on understory vegetation."* The Plan suggests *"occasional archery hunting every two to three years"* to try to *"keep numbers stable."* Note that we have not followed this plan to date, to the point where the numbers are much higher than the Sunnyside Preserve can tolerate.

This past winter of 2024/2025, a concerted effort was undertaken by members of the committee to monitor deer population and movement in the Sunnyside Tract. Scott Bowers put up three wildlife cameras in Sunnyside and identified more than 25 deer. The DNREC wildlife biologist who specializes in deer believes that number is higher, at least 30. Also, it has been observed by residents that more walk in from the railroad tracks, from Bellevue State Park, and other overpopulated areas. These results were reported back to the committee for review and further discussion.

## **Recommendations**

In consultation with DNREC, the committee feels it is time to take action and make difficult decisions for the long-term health of our deer population and forests.

The Committee has developed plans for a pilot demonstration project to remove 12-15 deer from the Sunnyside Preserve. The 35 acres of the Sunnyside tract is greatly overpopulated from what DNREC thinks it can handle, and reducing the herd will allow for a healthier ecosystem to best support the deer.

The Committee's recommendation is to hold an archery hunt over a two-day period in late November or early December 2025 in the Sunnyside Tract. The event will use ethical, humane practices, utilizing only approved, local hunters, with some donations of venison going to the program Delaware Hunters Against Hunger. Timing was chosen to avoid impacting fawns, with winter being outside of fawn season.

Key details of the plan include:

- This is a pilot project. The success and impact of this project will be evaluated and will inform recommendations for whether it is necessary and warranted to do it again in the future.
- The timing of the event falls within deer hunting season and will follow all state regulations. All hunters will have a valid state hunting license.
- Individual hunters will be selected and supervised by qualified and licensed Arden hunters.
- Residents will be notified of the event in advance. The Sunnyside Tract will be closed to visitors during the event. Entrances to the tract will be well-marked with signs and yellow caution tape.