

Fall 2016/Winter 2017 Field Report

The Clifton deer sterilization project ended its second year of field operations on January 19, 2017 with ten new does sterilized, bringing our total to 51. All ten were returned to the woods, monitored until alert and active, and have been subsequently accounted for. We are pleased to report there were no mortalities this year.

Three nights of operations were originally scheduled for early December but had to be postponed to mid-January because a bumper crop of acorns—deer's favorite food—reduced the draw of the corn baited sites where darters planned to capture remaining untagged does. A fourth night was added when rain twice forced early termination of activities because sedated deer are at higher risk of hypothermia when they get wet. Mother Nature rules!

A two week deer population survey followed. White Buffalo officials analyzed 1,494 pictures from motion sensing cameras at four baited sites using four different scientific methods. Comparing these results with those from last year's survey they were able to offer our first empirical data on migration patterns and population effects. While no large conclusions are possible from a single year sample, the results are encouraging.

White Buffalo reports that the total number of deer in the study area decreased by approximately 16% (from ~99 to ~83 animals). Only two of last years tagged does are known to have died over the last year, both struck by cars, so most of the herd reduction is attributable to the dramatic decrease in new fawns, very low immigration, and the death and/or dispersal of males. Young bucks tend to wander more than does, typically in search of new mating opportunities, and die younger. They still report a higher-than-average percentage of bucks in our area.

All of last year's tagged does have been seen over the last year, mostly within or very close to the study area, contributing to cautious optimism that the premise of the program and the hypothesis of the study—that does tend to stay close to their birthplace, could prove to be true. With fewer field nights and donated housing for our out-of-town crew, we were able to reduce costs of operations this year by more than 40% compared to last year. In addition, new volunteer veterinarian surgeons were trained, as was a capture specialist, providing progress toward the goal of developing local expertise that might one day take over the jobs now performed by professional consultants and greatly reduce ongoing program costs. We are very grateful to the Animal Welfare Institute, The Kenneth A. Scott Charitable Trust, a KeyBank Trust, and to program friends and Clifton neighbors whose donations of time, money, and facilities made this year's work possible.