

Fall 2020/Winter 2021 Field Report

We close out our sixth field season with gratitude for and good news to share with our supporters and volunteers.

Permit Renewal

Last Spring the principal stakeholders in the Clifton Deer program—Cincinnati Parks, Ohio Division of Wildlife, White Buffalo, Inc., and the Clifton Deer leadership team—conducted a detailed review of the Program’s operations, research practices, and progress. Thereafter, the Ohio Department of Natural Resources renewed the Program’s research permit through Spring 2023. We are delighted with Ohio’s recognition of the value of this research, and attribute the renewal at least in part to a growing interest around the State and country in alternative methods for managing overabundant deer herds. This is particularly true in urban areas like Clifton where lethal culling may be impractical or socially unacceptable.

Year 6 (Fall 2020/Winter 2021) Field Operations

We conducted our Year 6 field operations over several long weekends from November through early February. Despite the challenges of COVID safety protocols, Mother Nature, and wily deer, Clifton Deer’s volunteer capture specialist Garrett Parsons and veterinary surgeon Dr. Randy Junge led operations with skill and good humor.

This season, six new does were sterilized and tagged, bringing the total of deer sterilized since the program began to 85. Additionally, two does were retreated after re-growing ovaries (see discussion of Ovarian Remnant Syndrome in our Year 3 Field Operations Report), and one button buck was given yellow tags and released after being mistaken for a doe and darted.

We are pleased to report that we had no capture or surgical mortalities this season.

Of the six newly sterilized does, two were our most maddeningly elusive resident deer (ones living primarily in the study area bounded by Clifton and Ludlow Avenues and I-75) from Season 5 field operations, and a third was a doe who immigrated into the study area during 2020. The remaining three are “border deer” who live primarily outside the study area but who were incidentally captured during their brief forays into the study area.

Results

Following field operations, an annual population survey was conducted from February 12th to the 28th using five baited motion camera sites that collected 1400 deer photos. Applying 3 different scientific counting methods, the survey concluded that:

- ~98% of the adult females in the study area are sterilized.
- The total number of resident deer in the study area has fallen 4.2% since last year, and by 30% over five years from ~99 (Winter 2016) to ~69 (Winter 2021).

- The fawn recruitment rate (# of fawns per doe) dropped from .65 in 2016 to .04 in 2021. Stated in concrete terms, we've gone from 16 fawns per 25 adult does to 1 fawn per 25 adult does!

Absent a substantial increase in immigration, we anticipate that the size of our aging herd will begin declining more rapidly through natural causes in the coming years.

With local assumption of key operations, costs this year fell significantly, and if no expansion of territory is undertaken, they should remain low from now on. Our now trained and experienced volunteer darter led the capture operations this year very ably and with minimal reliance on our outside experts; our veterinarian has been increasingly generous with this time and skills; and UCAN in nearby Camp Washington continues to donate the use of their surgical facility as well as a remarkably talented veterinary technician. As a result, not counting the (significant) time of our all-volunteer Cincinnati crew and some one-time equipment purchases, the operations costs this year came in at about \$7,400. At less than a third of last year's costs, and about 23% of the average annual costs of our first two years, we believe we are approaching a manageable, cost-effective annual expense to achieve and maintain an eco-sustainable population level.

Acknowledgements

As always, we thank our many volunteers, including our neighbors who offer their yards as bait sites and report sightings that enable us to track our herd's condition and movement; the Cincinnati Police for their cooperation; the Cincinnati Parks for their strong endorsement of our permit renewal; the folks at UCAN for our use of their staff and facilities; and the many donors without whose financial support we could not do what we do.