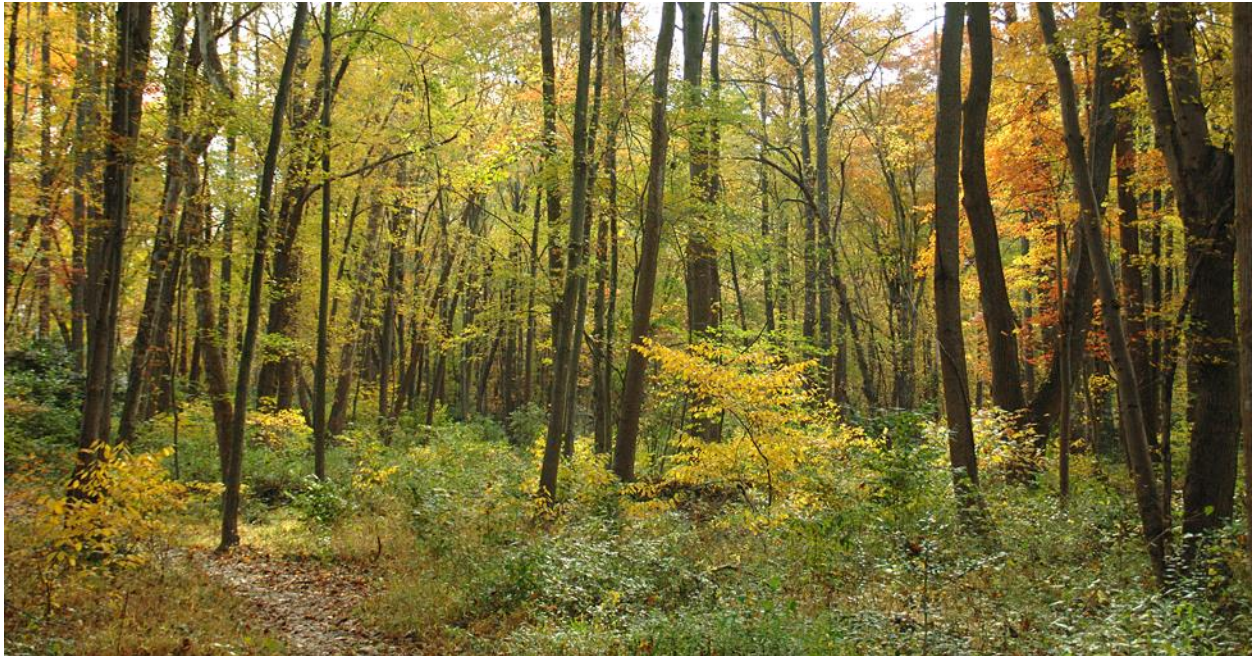


## Deer Browsing Impacts at a Glance

By Greg Sykes ([greg@grsykes.com](mailto:greg@grsykes.com))



Aside from eating garden plants, some people wondered what kind of impact large deer populations have on the environment. Take a moment to look at the above photograph of Pohick Stream Valley Park (part of the Royal Lake watershed) near the Dundalk Street entrance. One might see a natural forest displaying beautiful autumn colors. However, the turning leaf hues help to illustrate this woodland's maladies. Starting with the understory, all of the yellow shrubs are common spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*)—a good native but in far greater abundance than expected. The green bushes consist of American holly (*Ilex opaca*)—another over-represented regional native, hobblebush (*Viburnum lantanoides*)—native to western Virginia but introduced to Fairfax County, and [multiflora rose \(\*Rosa multiflora\*\)](#)—a non-native invasive species from Asia. Invasive Management Area (IMA) volunteers eradicated two other alien shrubs from here several years earlier: [winged burning bush \(\*Euonymus alatus\*\)](#) and [Amur honeysuckle \(\*Lonicera maackii\*\)](#). The yellowing grass along the trail on the left is [Japanese stiltgrass \(\*Microstegium vimineum\*\)](#). Red maples (*Acer rubrum*) dominate the upper canopy, supplemented by tulip poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*). These native trees are [early succession](#) species as this area was farmland 50 years ago or so.

All of these plants share one commonality: white-tailed deer do not like eating them! Heavy deer activity reduces plant biodiversity and often favors non-native invasive weeds. While oak trees—one of the climax trees in old growth Northern Virginia forests—are near this site, they are either mature trees or seedlings. Deer soon eat and kill these seedlings, resulting in an insufficient number of young oaks ready to replace the old ones when they die.

What started off looking like a pretty landscape picture now looks pretty sad. There it is—deer over-browsing spotted at a glance!

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