

The Appalachian VOICE

A publication of  Appalachian Voices

[Home](#) [Archives](#) [Columns](#) [Subscribe](#) [About The Voice](#) [Support The Voice](#) [Appalachian Voices](#) □

White-tailed Deer

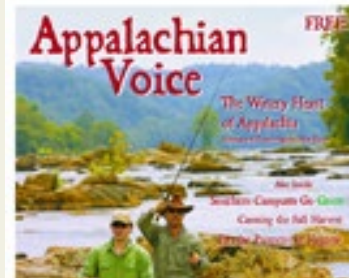
| September 1, 2004 | [No Comments](#)

By R. Kelley Coffey

Anyone with a farm, garden, or landscaped lawn is probably aware of the exploding population of white-tailed deer. Their browsing eating habits result in millions of dollars worth of damage to crops, vegetables, and ornamental plants. In one state, the Farm Bureau has threatened to sue wildlife officials for allegedly allowing deer numbers to get out of control. The problem is not limited to the domestic landscape. In some areas, large herds of deer are voraciously consuming every plant and tree branch within reach, resulting in forests without an understory. This situation reverberates throughout the forest ecosystem, affecting other animals who depend on the understory habitat for shelter and food.

This burgeoning deer population is actually a contemporary phenomenon. From the time of the first European settlers in the Appalachians through the 20th century, farmers were able to raise crops with little competition from deer. As recently as twenty years ago, the sight of a deer herd was a photo opportunity for many folks, rather than a menacing problem.

VIEW THIS ISSUE



2004 - Issue 4
(September)

Related Stories

[White House releases report on transitioning coal communities](#)



 [Energy Storage and Electrification Project Manager](#)

[New Virginia law sets up stakeholder process to diversify coal region's economy](#)



 [Director of Finance and Operations](#)

[Last Tree-sitters Removed from Path of Mountain Valley Pipeline](#)



International trade

The low deer population since colonial times can be attributed to several causes including the presence of predators (wolves and panthers), and pioneers hunting deer for food and clothing. The greatest impacts on the deer population, however, were colonial economic forces that reached far into the Appalachians. By the late 1600s, deerskin was an international commodity. The European market was demanding hides for various types of clothing, as well as coverings for books, boxes, and trunks. The increasing demand coupled with an abundant resource offered colonists a convenient economic opportunity. Coastal Virginia and South Carolina became focal points for deerskin trade. From there, early traders made their way inland to the mountains, and came back describing “infinite herds” of deer. These traders negotiated with Indians to supply them with deerskins, which they in turn sold at the coastal ports.


The deerskin trade blossomed and eventually developed into a commercial system involving coastal merchants, white traders who often lived among the Indians, and the Indians who did most of the actual hunting. Although deer were hunted all over the Southeast, the mountain-based Cherokee dominated the trade, with most merchants and traders headquartered in Charleston, South Carolina. Shipments of deerskins from Charleston rose steadily for many years. Historian Wilma Dunaway describes deerhide as “the most stable economic product of the southern colonies before the Revolutionary War.” So great was the economic impact of the trade that deerskins were often used like currency, resulting in the term “buck” (i.e. buckskin) for “dollar.” The scale of deerskin trade in the South was comparable to the more familiar beaver fur trade in Canada.

The deerskin economy had political implications as well. The generally steadfast economic relationship between white traders and Indians helped stabilize the overall political relationship

Regular Columns

 [The New River](#)


 [Across Appalachia](#)

 [Energy Report](#)

Inside Appalachian Voices

 [Member Spotlight: Russ Moxley](#)

 [Volunteer monitors coal mine data and maintains Appalachian Trail](#)

 [Creating Positive Change: A Note from Our Executive Director](#)

 [Solar, Environmental Justice and Utility Reform in Virginia](#)



[From the Appalachian Voices Front Porch Blog](#)

[FERC setting up an "Office of Public Participation." After 40 years.](#)

[Tighter silica rules needed to protect miners from black lung disease](#)

between Indian groups and the colonial governments, with the traders often acting as diplomats and translators for governments.

Despite the vast numbers of deer in the Southeast, constant hunting for an international market eventually reduced herds to levels proportional to the loss of buffalo in the trans-Mississippi West a few years later. Even though the demand for deerhide dropped and the market eventually became unprofitable, deer numbers continued to decline in the 1800s as their habitat decreased. The ideal environment for deer is the forest edge, where they can graze in cleared areas, yet quickly disappear into the woods if threatened. As white settlement progressed across the Appalachians, large forested tracts were converted to farmland, leaving few “edges” for deer to inhabit. By the end of the century, less than a million deer were left in North America, down from an estimated high of about 30 million when Europeans arrived.

Back to the past

The eradication of animal predators such as wolves and panthers by the late 1800s created an ecological imbalance, i.e. no natural check on the deer population. Over the past century, farmland in many areas has reverted back to forest. In spite of the massive amount of logging in the Appalachians in the early 1900s, these forests have grown back over the decades as well. The result has been a considerable increase in edge habitat that deer favor. These trends, coupled with deliberate efforts to increase deer numbers for hunting, has allowed the species to bounce back from near extinction. Even our society’s sprawling suburban development encourages the multiplication of deer. The vast mowed lawns and patches of woods that we love around our homes mimic that edge habitat deer thrive in. We are, in a sense, back where we started.

Biden’s jobs plan holds
promise for Appalachia

Wildlife experts estimate that the number of white-tailed deer in North America is already over 30 million- the same number encountered by the first white traders. Many modern farmers and gardeners would agree that the traders' description of "infinite herds" is applicable today as well.

▶ Like this content? [Sign up for our Voice emails](#)

Categories: [2004 - Issue 4 \(September\)](#) | [The Appalachian Voice](#)



Sorry, the browser you are using is not currently supported. Disqus actively supports the following browsers:

- [Firefox](#)
- [Chrome](#)
- [Internet Explorer 11+](#)
- [Safari](#)



[fpichel](#) • 1 year ago

Thanks for the informative article. I was wondering what the predator density was before Columbus. Have you seen any estimates of how many wolves and panthers existed before 1492?



[Meet the Voice team](#) | [Archives](#) | [Subscribe](#)



The Appalachian Voice is a publication of [Appalachian Voices](#)

589 West King Street, Boone, N.C.

© 2021 Appalachian Voices

[About Appalachian Voices](#)

[Program Work](#)

[Front Porch Blog](#)

[Press room](#)

[Contact](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)