

Urban sprawl, disappearing species hinder small-game hunters

BOBBY KERLIK (MAILTO:TRIBCITY@TRIBWEB.COM?SUBJECT=RE: URBAN SPRAWL, DISAPPEARING SPECIES HINDER SMALL-GAME HUNTERS STORY ON TRIBLIVE.COM) | Thursday, Nov. 6, 2008

Donny Zarra considers himself an endangered species.

He and his dog, Duke, hunt for small game several times a week. But according to the state Game Commission, the number of small -game hunters has declined for the past 25 years, reaching a new low each year.

"Small game, in general, is just hurting. There's not an abundance of game like there used to be," said Zarra, 36, of Carrick. "If you take a kid out hunting and there's nothing to shoot at, the kid's not going to gain an interest in hunting. There's just not as many places for the animals to live."

In 1983, 739,000 rabbit hunters registered with the state and shot 2.16 million rabbits, Game Commission statistics show. By 2007, that number had fallen to 136,000 hunters and 418,000 kills. For squirrels, the numbers are similar. In 1983, 614,000 hunters harvested 2.26 million squirrels while last year, 155,000 hunters shot 675,000 squirrels.

Gary Fujak, one of Allegheny County's three state Game Commission wildlife conservation officers, said part of the decline in small-game hunters rests with suburban sprawl eating up natural woodlands habitat.

"The questions are: Is there a desire for municipalities to stop (sprawl), and do they place any value on wildlife?" Fujak said. "I think they see woodlands as an outlet for development to occur and increase their tax funding. I see it every day on my job -- more and more woodlands are disappearing. Small game is connected to that.

"People look at undeveloped land and see dollar signs, but is anyone building more woodlands?" Fujak said. "We have a finite amount of green space, and it keeps getting whittled down every year. Where do you draw the line?"

Cranberry is one growing area that says it has turned the corner on sprawl. Township Manager Jerry Andree said the comprehensive plan pushes developers to cluster homes while keeping a part of the development as green space or woodlands -- key to preserving small game animals.

"People are moving here, but we have very stringent rules for development," Andree said.

Hunters say that sprawl and lack of game aren't the only reasons for the decline of small game hunters. Numbers for general license sales, which includes deer hunting, also have declined.

In 1998, the state sold 1.07 million general hunting licenses. By last year, that had dipped to 924,000.

"The kids have so many other things to do these days and not as many are hunting small game or big game," said Ed Soyke, 83, of Irwin, who gives shooting lessons at the White Oak Rod & Gun Club. "Think of all the sports they're into now - soccer, for one. It's a shame because hunting is a sport for a lifetime.

"Another thing is, where are the kids going to hunt? When I was a kid there were all kinds of places. Now there are houses everywhere."

Fujak said a decline in hunting is significant because the amount of hunting dollars received from licensing fees declines at the same rate.

"Those dollars go into the game fund, which supports game and nongame species," Fujak said. "And the most important reason why a decline in hunting is significant is because hunters contribute more to wildlife conservation than any other group. Hunters basically foot the bill for wildlife management."

Hunters like Steve Bach, 28, of Shaler said that while it's hard to find, rabbits, squirrels, pheasants and grouse are still out there.

"If you hunt hard enough, it's there," Bach said. "I think people don't want to small-game hunt because it's hard work -- you're high-stepping through weeds and you get ripped up."

Conversely, while the small game population has dipped, the deer population has surged. Fox Chapel, Mt. Lebanon and Upper St. Clair have deer culling programs. Upper St. Clair's program netted 201 deer with the meat going to local food banks, said Manager Mark Mansfield.

Fujak said the Game Commission has taken steps to get more young people interested in hunting. He said the commission has encouraged a mentoring program, where children younger than 12 can hunt with a licensed adult.

While only one gun is allowed for the pair, the child can shoot the gun, Fujak said.

"We're trying to get young people involved, but they have to have someone in the family to mentor them," Fujak said. "With soccer and electronic games, by the time kids are 12 (the age they can get a license), they've gone in another direction."

Zarra is among those parents who plan to teach their children to hunt. His son and daughter, too young to hunt now, will be in the woods soon, he said. Zarra, who is a manager at his parents' Oakland restaurant, Zarra's, breeds Deutsch Drahthaar hunting dogs and runs a guided hunt business.

"I just love it," Zarra said. "I'd be out here every day if I could."