

MASSACHUSETTS WILDLIFE

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**The Space Around Us,
Hunters Share the Harvest,
Hornpout Revival**

Northern Red-bellied Cooter Program Celebrates 40th Anniversary



In honor of Endangered Species Day in May, MassWildlife was joined by over 100 students, researchers, and other partners to celebrate an important milestone for endangered turtle conservation in Massachusetts. This year marks the 40th anniversary of MassWildlife's Red-bellied Cooter Headstart Program—one of the longest and most intensive freshwater turtle headstart conservation programs in existence. When MassWildlife began headstarting in 1984, the estimated population of northern red-bellied cooters (*Pseudemys rubriventris*) in Massachusetts was only 300. Now, the population is over 2,000 adults.

The northern red-bellied cooter is listed as endangered under the federal and state endangered species acts. Like most Massachusetts turtles, cooter hatchlings have many predators and few make it to adulthood and reproductive age. Habitat loss and poaching for the illegal pet trade further threaten native turtles. Through the headstart program, turtle hatchlings are removed from the wild in early fall and paired with educational and scientific facilities across the state. For 8–9 months, the turtles live in a warm aquarium environment with unlimited food. This greatly accelerates the growth of the turtles and reduces the likelihood of death from predators during a turtle's first year of life when they are most vulnerable, giving each turtle a "head start" at life before release back into the wild.

The Headstart Program is part of MassWildlife's overall turtle conservation effort, in addition to habitat protection, raising awareness of threats to native turtle populations, and empowering people to help turtles in their communities. For a recovery project to be successful, it takes many partners working together. The future of the northern red-bellied cooter is looking bright, and the 5,000th headstarted turtle was released back into the wild this spring.



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MASSACHUSETTS WILDLIFE

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THE SPACE AROUND US

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— Troy Gipps

The stunning beauty and unimaginable isolation of Earth, the reality of our impact on atmospheric chemistry, the emotional experience of a space tourist, and the hope of technology converge to remind us of our collective need and responsibility to properly steward our world.

FRESHWATER SPORTFISHING AWARDS 2023 COMPETITION RESULTS

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— Steven Mattocks

The year 2023 saw 10 new state-record fish, 99 gold pins, and the highly successful addition of the new Youth Catch-and-release angling category, which represented 39% of all pin submissions.

SHARING THE HARVEST

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— Martin Feehan

Following successful pilot and inaugural years, MassWildlife's Hunters Share the Harvest program sets its sights on future expansion, rallying deer hunters, processors, and partners to help fight food insecurity in the Commonwealth while strengthening relationships that will lead to improved forest health.

POND TO PO' BOY: A HORNPOUT REVIVAL

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— Ian Sypek

Dreams of a delicious sandwich, tales of old whiskers, and a desire to spend time with family led the author down a tradition-lined path to a hornpout revival.

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On the Cover: Raccoons are one of many species that can come into conflict with people. To better manage relationships with your wild neighbors, review MassWildlife's Living with Wildlife fact sheets at mass.gov/dfw/wildlife-factsheets. Photo © Josh Gahagan

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SHARING THE HARVEST

BY MARTIN FEEHAN



Photo by Troy Gipps/MassWildlife

The author (left) delivers venison donated by Massachusetts hunters to Daniel's Table in Framingham where it was distributed to families in need.

Thanksgiving Day 2022 marked the culmination of an endeavor that has become the most personally fulfilling project of my professional career. MassWildlife launched the Hunters Share the Harvest venison donation program to coincide with the holiday and the beginning of the shotgun deer season that year in Massachusetts. The challenges of establishing a venison donation program in the Commonwealth seemed almost insurmountable a year earlier. For years, MassWildlife attempted to launch such a program, but each time it was blocked due to regulatory and logistical hurdles. After Director Mark Tisa identified the creation of a wild game donation program as a top agency priority, another push was made, but with a very different outcome.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated food insecurity challenges nationwide for many families who did not have access to enough food or to food of adequate quality. Food insecurity peaked in Massachusetts during the pandemic, impacting 20% of households, and was even higher in households with children, at 26%. The importance of food pantries; distribution networks; and, most crucially, the availability of food for distribution had become clear to all. Throughout this period, deer densities continued to climb in most of Massachusetts, to the point where there are significant negative ecological impacts. When there are too many deer on the landscape, they over-browse tree seedlings and saplings, degrading forest health and negatively impacting many other kinds of wildlife and plants. An overabundance of deer also leads to agricultural crop damage and an increase in deer-vehicle collisions. With a declining number of hunters and an increasing deer population in Massachusetts, it is

essential to find solutions for reducing the population through regulated hunting. This can be done by increasing access for hunters or by creating opportunities for hunters to harvest additional deer. Typically, successful hunters will stop hunting once they have harvested enough venison to fill their freezers, but many who want to continue to hunt will do so if there are positive outlets for sharing their surplus harvested deer. Venison donation programs are also a uniquely powerful tool to raise broad public support for hunting because hunters and non-hunters alike can see the value in providing food to those in need.



I had helped launch venison donation programs for agencies in other states, including in New York at Fort Drum as part of my doctoral work at Cornell University. These programs are essential tools for urban and overabundant deer management and as a core tenet of the Community Based Deer Management model developed at Cornell. However, the regulatory hurdles in Massachusetts were uniquely difficult to overcome. Small programs had been implemented on Nantucket

and Martha's Vineyard that had navigated some of the hurdles, and, in doing so, had formed some of the elements that could be integrated into a statewide venison donation program.

At the time of my arrival at MassWildlife in May 2021, a new working group, developed and led by Southeast Wildlife District Manager Jason Zimmer, was focused on finding common ground between hunters and non-hunters through wild game donation. We worked together closely on breaking down the barriers that had stalled previous efforts. I focused on the regulatory challenges with the Mas-

sachusetts Department of Public Health (DPH) and local boards of health, drawing on my regulatory experience working in other states, while Jason focused on finding a processor and a distribution partner for the program launch. After more than a year of effort, we were able to put the final pieces of the program together to launch the pilot of Hunters Share the Harvest.

In order to donate during the pilot year, hunters had to 1) recover and field-dress the deer within 4 hours of the shot, unless the ambient air temperature remained below 37 degrees Fahrenheit; 2) legally report and tag the deer with a confirmation number; and 3) drop off the whole, field-dressed deer at a participating processor within 24 hours. The full cost of processing donated deer was paid by the Hunters Share the Harvest program and all venison was ground and packaged into 2-pound packages, accounting for the protein component of eight meals for recipient families.

A Call to Serve

As we worked through all the details necessary to launch the program in 2022, we gained our first distribution partner, the Massachusetts Military Support Foundation's Food4Vets program. Food4Vets was a natural fit with our Hunters Share the Harvest program and their mission "to assist veterans and military families who may be faced with food insecurity" aligned perfectly. Their existing distribution network of Empowerment Centers, drop-off locations, and refrigeration trucks con-

Haskins Custom Butchering in Hanover is one of three meat processors currently processing donated deer for the Hunters Share the Harvest program.



Photo by Martin Feehan/MassWildlife

tributed greatly to the pilot's success. The Food4Vets program also included many families of veterans who had experience cooking wild game or were familiar with eating venison.

The partnership with Food4Vets was a driving force in securing the program's first processor, Haskins Custom Butchering in Hanover. For Jon Haskins, the owner and father of three children who had served in the military, it was an opportunity to help others who had defended our country. Jon also saw the program as a "great way to keep the good hunters hunting after they've filled their own freezers and serve vets." As a longtime resident of southeastern Massachusetts, Jon has watched the deer population grow to the overabundant densities found today across the eastern part of the state. Processing deer at Haskins is a family affair, with Jon, all six of his kids, and other local

vets helping to process deer. More than 75 donated deer have been processed at Haskins since the program's launch and Jon is excited to continue building capacity at his facility for the upcoming seasons. Beyond deer processing, Jon also supports MassWildlife's deer management efforts and recently hosted our biologists to practice tissue collection of retropharyngeal lymph nodes during biological deer check, which was invaluable for expanding chronic wasting disease surveillance efforts statewide last December.

Early Success and Growth for a New Year

The pilot in 2022 was intentionally a soft launch, with a partial season and little fanfare to ensure there was capacity and to allow for time to correct any issues that might have arisen. By the time the page turned from the 2022 deer season, 14 deer had been donated, providing the four-ounce protein component of more than 3,000 meals to 378 families through the Food4Vets program. The Hunters

Share the Harvest program had launched successfully and without any hiccups, and, almost immediately, it started to improve MassWildlife's conversations with communities and partners regarding deer management.

Our focus going into year two was to carefully grow the program as it left the official pilot phase by adding two more processors in eastern Massachusetts, the Country Butcher in Groton and Ventura's Meat Market in Fall River. Additional reporting and tracking requirements were then added to align the program with standard food production processes. We also wanted to make donating deer more accessible for hunters, so we created a donation option whereby a portion of a deer being fully processed at participating processor could be donated, rather than requiring the full deer to be donated. If at least 15 pounds of venison were donated, then \$50 of the cost of processing would be covered by Hunters Share the Harvest. If hunters chose to donate less than 15 pounds, then they would cover the full processing cost.



Photo by Troy Gipps/MassWildlife

The author (right) and Mass Audubon's Elissa Landre (center left) help staff from Daniel's Table load donated Hunters Share the Harvest venison into a walk-in freezer. This food pantry distributes over 400,000 full meals annually to the Framingham community.

Strengthening Partnerships

As we headed into the second season, interest in the program grew amongst our existing deer management partners. There was a particularly strong interest shown by Mass Audubon to partner with Hunters Share the Harvest. Mass Audubon acknowledges the importance of deer management from an ecosystem health and wildlife habitat perspective as part of their mission to “protect the nature of Massachusetts for people and wildlife.” They have a formal hunting program on many of their properties in the eastern part of the state to address overabundant deer “through a carefully planned management program.” As part of their local program, Mass Audubon educators have provided nature-based programming in Framingham in collaboration with a local food pantry, Daniel’s Table, for decades. This is part of Mass Audubon’s belief, “that all people have a right to access green spaces and benefit from ecosystem services provided by natural and working lands, including locally produced food.”

Daniel’s Table is an incredible community resource for Framingham. They provide almost 400,000 full meals annually to the Framingham community through their weekly farmers market, onsite food services, 20+ community freezers, grocery delivery, and more. Their farmers market is a unique program where approved families choose what produce and proteins they would like based on their allotment. Daniel’s Table creates a community atmosphere with live music and provides live translation services in multiple languages.

It quickly became clear that Daniel’s Table provided the perfect opportunity to expand the Hunters Share the Harvest program, and they were added as the second distribution partner in 2023, in collaboration with Mass Audubon. Of particular interest are live cooking demonstrations held during their farmers markets by professional cooks who teach recipient families how to cook the different products available. This is essen-

tial, particularly for immigrant families to whom the food products might be unknown. This is always a concern for wild game donation programs, but after Daniel’s Table conducted a demonstration with the first batch of donated venison, it became one of the first items to run out each week due to high demand.

As part of our partnership with Mass Audubon for Hunters Share the Harvest, they have worked to reduce barriers for their hunting program participants who want to donate deer by providing a refrigeration truck to collect harvested deer. We are continuing to expand this partnership as we head into the 2024 season.

A Hunt to Remember

Each fall, MassWildlife holds a 3-day deer hunt for paraplegic hunters. MassWildlife and Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) staff, along with volunteers and private landowners, help participating paraplegic hunters travel to hunting locations and assist with the retrieval, field-dressing, transporting, and reporting of harvested deer. There were 18 participating paraplegic hunters in 2023 who all had an amazing time hunting through this program, but for one participant, Gary Dupuis, it was extra special.

Gary is a long-time participant in the paraplegic hunt and it has allowed him to get out each fall to hunt deer and to provide venison for him and his family, when successful. On November 3, 2023, luck was with Gary, and he had a hunt to remember, harvesting three deer on that day, including tagging out with two bucks. When his third successful harvest came that day, Gary knew immediately that he wanted to donate that deer to Hunters Share the Harvest, “because,” he said, “it was the right thing to do.” Gary wanted me to clearly state that his success wouldn’t have been possible without the “super MassWildlife staff that made the day,” including John Sheedy and Derek McDermott, and volunteers Joe Berera and Dick Malloy.



Photo by Derek McDermott/MassWildlife

Gary Dupuis, a long-time participant in MassWildlife's paraplegic deer hunt, donated one of three deer he harvested on the same day during last year's hunt. His gift of venison was processed and distributed to Massachusetts families in need.

Maintaining Traditional Practices

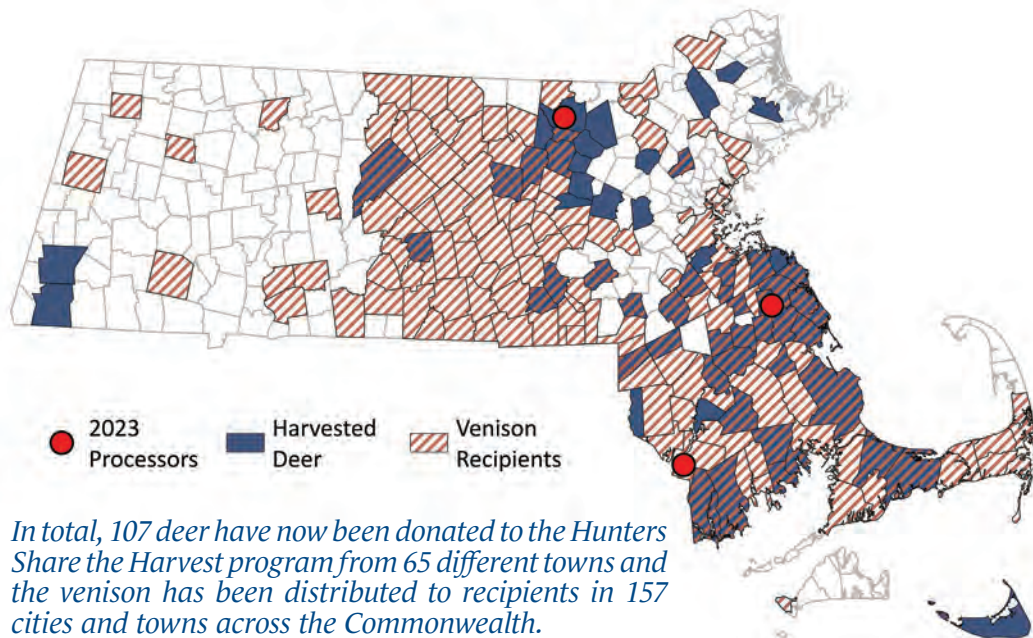
The harvest of deer by indigenous peoples across the Americas was vital for their survival for many millennia. Tribes have passed down their practices for utilizing all parts of game animals from generation to generation. These practices continue to play an important role today in maintaining cultural identity for many tribes.

Last December, we began collaborating with Jackie Saltalamacchia, Chair of the Herring Pond Wampanoag Cultural Council, in a relationship that began with Hunters Share the Harvest but has grown

into much more. According to Jackie, the Herring Pond Wampanoag Tribe places “great emphasis on traditional, locally-sourced food” and our program shares these values. The tribe has been focused on food sovereignty initiatives and venison holds cultural importance for their community. Jackie shared with me that accessing venison through Hunters Share the Harvest held very significant meaning for their members. December is also a time of sharing for tribes throughout Massachusetts and the Herring Pond Wampanoag made the venison from Hunters Share the Harvest a central part of their sharing with other tribes at gatherings.

As Jackie and I continued to build our program partnership, we found there were many areas where we could help one another. Instilling traditional practices is an important mission of the tribe. We are working to expand our partnership by developing educational programming to share bowhunting techniques and methods for using all parts of harvested animals. Tribal members have also expressed an interest in learning to process their own deer, so the program will be donating whole deer during the upcoming deer season to allow their members to share in the traditions of deer processing. One of the issues we encountered as we expanded the Hunters Share the Harvest Program was finding a use for excess deer hides. For the Herring Pond Wampanoag, the opportunity to receive these hides and to teach traditional tanning practices to their youth would be an important benefit. To meet this need, we will be establishing a hide donation process for the 2024 deer season.

HUNTERS SHARE THE HARVEST — PROGRAM IMPACT



In total, 107 deer have now been donated to the Hunters Share the Harvest program from 65 different towns and the venison has been distributed to recipients in 157 cities and towns across the Commonwealth.

The Impact of Sharing

The 2023 deer season was a year of tremendous growth for MassWildlife's Hunters Share the Harvest program. It grew from about 3,000 meals distributed in 2022 to 17,800 in 2023. There have now been over 5,200 families that have received venison from the program through its distribution partners, including Food4Vets, Daniel's Table, the Worcester County Food Bank, the Herring Pond Wampanoag, and the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah).

This program has already been immensely useful at facilitating conversations about the importance of deer hunting for both ecosystem conservation as well as being a vital resource for the food system in Massachusetts. It has helped draw attention to these efforts, including when Governor Healey honored MassWildlife's Hunters Share the Harvest team with the Manuel Carballo Governor's Award for Excellence in Public Service last November.



Photo by Jason Zimmer/MassWildlife



Photo by Josh Qualls/Governor's Press Office

(Left to right) MassWildlife's Jason Zimmer, EEA Undersecretary for Environment Stephanie Cooper, Governor Maura Healey, Lt. Governor Kim Driscoll, MassWildlife's Emily Stolarski, and the author at the Carballo Governor's Award event last November.

In total, 107 deer have now been donated to the program, harvested from 65 different towns across the state. Thanks to the broad reach of our distribution partners, venison has been distributed to recipients in 157 towns. In Wildlife Management Zone 11 covering the region south of Boston through to the Cape Cod Canal, where both Ventura's and Haskins operate, about 2% of all harvested deer were donated to the program. As we look toward the next deer hunting season, we continue to focus on increasing the program's impact by adding new processors and distribution partners, which we are preparing to announce in September.

For those of us who have worked on this program, it has been immensely impactful on a deeply personal level. Wildlife conservation can often be an endless struggle with few tangible results. While I have helped establish similar programs elsewhere, being able to lead this program in Massachusetts, making new partners, distributing vital meals, seeing how thankful folks are, and finding common ground through venison donation

has been the most fulfilling experience of my professional career. I can't wait to see where we take the program over the next five years and how its impact grows.

This program would not be possible if not for the participating processors and the incredible donation of harvested deer by hunters. Essential monetary, equipment, and logistical support has been provided by the Massachusetts Outdoor Heritage Foundation, the Berkshire County League of Sportsmen, the Massachusetts Conservation Alliance, Mass Audubon, the Middleboro Sportsmen's Club, the Plymouth County League of Sportsmen, Safari Club International's New England Chapter, the Schwab Charitable Foundation, the Somerset Sportsman's Club Inc., and individual donors like you!

If you are interested in donating or would like to know more about the program, please visit mass.gov/sharetheharvest.

About the Author



Martin Feehan has been MassWildlife's Deer and Moose Project Leader since 2021.

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For those who watch butterflies, nothing says 'Summer is here!' like a beautiful great spangled fritillary (*Speyeria cybele*) nectaring—often on milkweed, as shown here—in a remote meadow or a local butterfly garden. Photo © Troy Gipps

