

Let's protect deer habitat

RYAN YOUNG, The Gazette October 25, 2007

Last weekend, I went for a hike along l'Anse à l'Orme Rd. in Ste. Anne de Bellevue. As I walked along what is in essence a country road, bordered as it is by woods and meadows, I noticed the fresh tracks of white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*).

Many people from Montreal or even the West Island don't realize that deer still exist on Montreal Island. The area I was in is actually one of the last places where you can consistently find them. There are a number of reasons why they remain.

The woods and meadows on either side of l'Anse à l'Orme are connected to other green areas through what are remaining wildlife corridors. The area is connected to the northwest by Bois de la Roche agricultural park (which then connects to the Morgan Arboretum and other wooded areas in Senneville) and then, to the northeast, it is connected to Cap St. Jacques nature park and the fields and meadows in Pierrefonds further east.

Deer need a large area such as this to inhabit because they are large animals - their summer home range is an average of five square kilometres. They use different spots within their territory at different times of the year to take advantage of a diversity of food options. Their favourite habitat is a mix of field and forest.

I learned a lot about deer when I was a park naturalist back in 2000 at Pinery Provincial Park in Ontario. I found out that deer are amazing creatures, able to launch themselves more than 25 feet in a single bound, and reaching 70 kilometres an hour at their top running speed.

They are neither nocturnal nor diurnal, but what is known as crepuscular, which means they are most active at dawn and dusk. At these times they eat quickly so that they can retreat back to cover, where they regurgitate the food and chew it a second time like a cow chewing its cud.

At this time of year, males are preparing for the rut, which will begin in November - the velvety coating that covers their antlers has been shed and their necks have swelled out to handle the head-to-head duels that will decide who gets to mate with who.

However the majority of contests are apparently settled by threatening displays rather than actual combat, the latter happening only rarely.

According to the Ste. Anne Plan particulier d'urbanisme (PPU) the land along the west side of l'Anse à l'Orme in Ste. Anne de Bellevue is slated for a massive residential development. A development that cannot and will not accommodate the needs of white-tailed deer and many other forms of increasingly rare wildlife on Montreal Island.

Most of the land, however, is owned by the Société générale de financement du Québec, a Quebec crown corporation, which in effect makes it public land.

This week, I wrote a letter to the environment minister and the economic development minister, urging them to donate the land to conservation and ensure the survival of one of our largest mammals and the many other species that depend upon this natural area for survival.

If this area is developed it will sever this key connection, or corridor, between the other natural spaces that deer and other animals migrate through. This will mean a net loss to biodiversity in all of the different areas.

Deer are hunted mostly in November when they are most robust and healthy; however, it is also when they are engaged in procreative acts. I've often thought it must be odd for deer to have to be constantly on the lookout for hunters while trying to mate as much as possible.

However, hunting is not allowed on Montreal Island, so we have the opportunity to observe a deer population without that type of human interference.

Here's hoping that in the future, our local deer will still have a place in which to procreate.