

2022-2025

Okotoks Urban Deer Management Strategy & Action Plan



Photo courtesy of Great West Media

Background

Okotoks has an abundant mule deer population, with most the recent deer count data in February 2022 counting 124 individuals.

With increasing reports of damage to yards and gardens as well as instances of deer aggression in recent years, an Urban Deer Task Force (UDTF) was assembled in 2019. During its 18 month term, the task force reviewed issues, completed inter-municipal research, spoke to wildlife experts, and established recommendations for policy development and best practices to reduce conflict between urban deer and residents.

The key issues identified by the UDTF were:

- deer habituation
- pet injuries
- deer/vehicle conflict
- deliberate deer feeding
- deer accessing private property
- foraging on private property
- foraging on public property
- bedding down within Town boundaries
- breeding, giving birth and living within Town boundaries

This Action Plan and Implementation Strategy report provides a summary of short, mid, and long term options for management from the UDTF, along with potential success identified, and associated progress comments.

The Task Force's key recommendation is the development of an Urban Deer Management Strategy to minimize or solve the issues identified in the UDTF Final Report. The Urban Deer Management Strategy creates the framework for planning and implementation to address the UDTF recommended options for:

- i. Fencing
- ii. Prohibiting intentional/unintentional feeding
- iii. Education
- iv. Hazing
- v. Speed zone changes
- vi. Scientific investigations
- vii. Wildlife Act changes

Short Term Strategies

Implementation progress of all of the following short term strategies has been completed with in-house resources and absorbed through current operating budgets.

Refer to UDTF Report	Strategies	Description	Potential Success	Progress Comments	Time frame
Pg20	Maintain current local municipal deer management mechanisms (page 20 of the UDTF report)	Retain current bylaws, educational information, wildlife incident reporting program, and problem wildlife warning system	Unlikely	-educational information regularly reviewed and updated -aggressive and problem wildlife warning system implemented when Town is notified	Ongoing
Pg21	Minimize Deer Foraging on Private and Public Property	Allow installation of temporary and/or permanent fencing so deer cannot access food sources.	Likely	-fencing pilot -exclusion fencing utilized on community gardens on public lands	2021-2023
Pg22	Deer Resistant Flora	Encourage use of deer resistant plantings flora in private and public outdoor spaces.	Somewhat Likely	-Require developers not plant fruit bearing trees (2010) -Created deer-resistant landscaping on public lands (2010-current) -Updated drought and deer resistant plants brochure (2022)	2010-2025
Pg24	Deer aversion techniques	Use of a variety of tools such as motion activated sprinklers, noise and chemical deterrents	Somewhat Likely	Recommend various options to residents through public education materials and verbal discussions	Ongoing
Pg29	Expanded Public Education Program	Create new content to better educate residents on deer behaviours, dangers of feeding, fencing pilot, deer resistant flora, and deer aversion techniques.	Very Likely	Created new brochures and door hangers to deter deer feeding, inform of fencing pilot, and how to navigate aggressive deer encounters	2022

Pg31	Reduce habituation	Ban feeding of deer through bylaw and enforcement, voluntary use of exclusion fencing and deer resistant flora, removal of attractants, implement a hazing program	Likely	-Wildlife Feeding and Attractants Bylaw (2021) -LUB fencing pilot (2021-2023) -Pilot private property consultation (2022)	2021-2023
------	--------------------	--	--------	---	-----------

Mid to Long Term Strategies

The following strategies may have significant hurdles to implementation including support through public participation, high ongoing cost, and/or provincial support (through permits/regulations).

Refer to UDTF Report	Strategies	Description	Potential Success	Progress Comments	Time frame
Pg23	Hazing (aversion conditioning)	A number of different techniques and time frames could be considered	Mixed	-external consultant engaged to develop potential hazing program for Council consideration	TBD
Pg25	Relocation	Involves live trapping or darting, immobilizing, and relocation of animals	Mixed	Not yet considered due to: -transfer of problem to another jurisdiction(s)	Not planned
Pg26	Cull	Lethal method involving trapping/immobilizing and humane euthanization	Limited, short-term	Not considered due to: -short term reduction only	Not planned
Pg27	Limited Hunt (on public lands)	Advocate to Alberta Environment and Parks for special mule deer licensed hunt	Unlikely	Not yet considered due to: -unsuitable hunting locations	Not planned
Pg28	Sterilization (Immuno-contraception)	Injectable method	Likely	Will revisit this strategy after 5 years implementation of above short term strategies.	Revisit after 2026

Pg32	Scientific investigations	To improve data: population, carrying capacity, resurvey Okotoks citizens	Very likely	-In house annual deer counts ongoing and providing reasonable data (2015, 2019-2022) -social carrying capacity already reached as human/deer conflict is commonplace -citizen surveys (2016, 2018, and next planned for 2023)	2021-2025
Pg33	Changes to Provincial Wildlife Act	To increase decision-making ability at the municipal level	Likely	Quarterly meetings with the Province ongoing. No current barriers have been presented against the options utilized in Okotoks.	2021-current

Conclusion and Next Steps

Resident feedback is the key measure in determining whether the initiatives and actions to date have made positive impacts to improving citizen interactions with urban deer. Administration has made significant progress in the implementation of all of the short term strategies recommended by the Urban Deer Task Force (UDTF). By 2023, two key initiatives, the Wildlife Feeding and Attractants Bylaw and the fencing pilot will have been in place for two years and this will be an appropriate time to re-survey residents on their awareness of Town initiatives, implementation of recommendations, experiences and attitudes towards urban deer.

At the same time as this report is brought forward, Council will be presented a report on what a deer hazing program could look like in Okotoks and its associated costs for consideration.

Other mid and long term strategies are not yet recommended for consideration until short term measures have more time to influence citizen and deer behaviours.

A follow up report to Council is recommended upon completion of the 2023 citizen survey on regarding urban deer.