

**2018 Deer Census and Mammal Count**  
**Rouge River Valley – Central Woodland Complex to Steeles Avenue**  
**March 3, 2018**  
*Paul Harpley*

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The Annual Rouge Valley Deer Census took place on March 3<sup>rd</sup> beginning with the pre-census strategy meeting at the Rouge Valley Conservation Centre respecting current weather, snow and related tracking conditions, schedule for the day, and health & safety considerations. The tracker participants (23) included naturalists from the local Rouge area and other communities in and around the City of Toronto, York and Durham Regions. Most participants were experienced trackers (group leaders) while others were naturalists of varying expertise. The Rouge Valley Deer Census has become well known over the years for its unique naturalist experience, consistent records and valuable deer and deer signs observations. The area of the survey is generally bounded in the south by Twyn Rivers Road, on the east by the Toronto-Pickering Townline, north by Steeles Avenue, and west by Meadowvale Road, Old Finch Avenue and Sewells Road. This is a large, relatively continuous wilderness-like near urban representative deer range habitat area, with rural/human cultural affinities in the Rouge River watershed.

The day started out mostly overcast at 9:00 a.m. with temperature -2 degrees Celcius and moderate wind conditions increasing slightly throughout the day. The temperature had risen to +2 degrees Celsius by midday. The sun appeared intermittently in the afternoon after 1:00 p.m. and overall the sky remained 70% cloudy for the day. Participants started the count with a walking surface of light skiff of soft snow, and characteristically with about 3-5 cm. of hard packed snow below for the walking surface. No snowshoes or skies were used. In a few sheltered and shaded areas of the forests some old hard-packed drifts persisted (about 60% of the census ground surface. This year was typical, the snow cover was mostly present enough to exhibit deer tracks well, unlike three years in the last 11 years (except 2015, 2014, and 2017) where most areas had absence of snow on the ground). The reasonable coverage of snow was thought to be good for deer sign, so that deer tracks showed consistently and well for the Count. This winter had been generally typical with moderate warm and very cold at times, and regular moderate snow storm events throughout, making it very variable and relatively predictable with regard to weather prediction. Optical conditions were good on Census day.

As in past years, deer were surveyed by signs (and estimated as to number) and by actual observation of individual deer seen. Signs observed and recorded ranged from tracks, trails, scat (pellet groups), beds, buck rubs, browse evidence, urine spots, kills (dead deer or parts – coyote, car or railway caused), corn and other agricultural browse evidence, to pseudo winter yarding areas (not full yards like in central/northern Ontario). Final Census day data was reviewed by tracker participants and evaluated by each major geographic survey zone in the study area. A final mediated estimate of overall deer numbers for the census study area was determined by those in the field that day. The past established wildlife management count methodology was followed and informed by current field knowledge of contemporary local conditions, previous other seasonal observations, and experience of the organizers and seasoned tracker participants.

The Census ended by 4:30 p.m. Some key management comments can be made. As in 2013 to 2017 there was little evidence of deer hunting (poaching) in the area (within the boundaries of the City of Toronto) in contrast to some past years. No recent existing hunter/deer stands were observed or documented though a couple of old locations still apparent were noted as in recent years. Coyote (Brush wolf) tracks were seen on survey day, and a couple of individual animals observed. A couple of areas were noted as hot spots for coyote (sign and observed animals) at the time of the count, similar in location to past years. Consistent with historical recent data, much of the deer activity was observed in the north-central zones of the census area of the survey in 2014-2017. Moderate deer browse of a few recent planting sites was noted in the survey area as in past surveys. Corn fields, Staghorn sumac and Eastern white cedar were preferred deer browse, as has been typical over the many years of the Count. However, it was specifically noted that upland areas in the large open field and forest edges dogwood and Canadian hemlock were particularly heavily browsed compared to earlier previous years.

There were a number of buck rubs reported higher than the consistent number with past surveys. This led to conversation and discussion following the survey considering that more buck groups may be using the Rouge Park area than in past years as autumn/winter refuge than in past years. No definitive statement can be made but future years' surveys will investigate this, though it is noted the 2018 overall deer number is roughly 10% higher than in 2017. Observed and documented pellet group scats, major deer congregation areas, and established deer trails north/south were higher in most survey areas than in 2016 and 2017. As in as is typical in the last half decade some traditional deer areas in winter were being used as walking trails regularly by people (and dogs not on leashes), and in some of these, deer have started to move out of those areas (for example old Woodland Park, the Meadowvale east yard, and the Beare Road Landfill) similar to observations in 2012 through 2017. As previously reported in other years some future refinement to human use trails (especially with dogs) in these areas may lessen human impact on deer in the study area. Dog-walkers were perceived as the most probable cause of the documented movements of deer out of southern, more accessible trail areas. Concern continues to be noted about deer being pushed out of high use areas over future years by continued trail development and homogenized human-centric habitat of established trail areas over time. Generally, all deer observed looked to be in good health. No deer antlers were reported found by tracker surveyors.

In total, 95 - 105 White-tailed deer were estimated to be in the count area on the survey day (observed and inferred by signs) about 10 percent higher than numbers 2017, and with sixteen (16) individual deer actually seen by all participants (mainly adult does and yearlings) during the census representing a lower than typical observation incidence than typical (much lower than in 2017), within the last eleven years. A group of 6 deer were seen in one location. One dead deer location was found, including a skull observed and documented.

The area deer estimate was considered relatively accurate and consistent with numbers for most of the past years, and the persistent snow made the estimate less speculative than in some of the past years. The general habitat observation in the study area having fewer recently planted restoration trees (susceptible to deer browse) is considered by some regular surveyors as a possible reason for continuing lower overall deer numbers since 2000, and in the late 1990's, as planting trees are maturing above easy deer browse height. In general, the harshness of the

winter weather and consistent deep snow in some winters, are limiting factors for W.T. deer in Ontario, undoubtedly keeping deer winter numbers down here as anywhere and the observed typical winter in 2017 may have positively affected survivorship slightly into 2018, as is anecdotally apparent in the current survey. Due to the persistent snow this year evidence of deer night beds documented on the count this year were potentially higher from the 2017 count, but the fact that a high number were found is consistent with feeling that deer numbers were slightly higher this year than in recent past years.

As in past recent years, other mammals were observed and documented, as were birds and other fauna. In total there were 12 mammal species signs or animal observed including Coyote, Red fox, Gray squirrel, Red squirrel, Cottontail rabbit, Raccoon, Short-tailed shrew, White-footed mouse, Star-nosed mole, Muskrat, American mink and River otter signs. Avian animals seen this winter included 12 expected species documented being Mallard, Black-capped chickadee, Tree sparrow, Northern Cardinal, Rock dove, Red-breasted nuthatch, White-breasted nuthatch, Wild turkey, Raven, Red-tailed hawk, Sharp-shinned hawk, Pileated woodpecker. Notable 6 avian species documented included American bluebird (1), Swamp sparrow (1), Song sparrow, Red-winged blackbird (50) and Horned lark and a group of Tundra swans (unexpected) flying overhead around seen by a survey group in Sector B in the afternoon.

Many thanks to those who contributed to the census.

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