

Back in the day



STABER W. REESE

Conservation Warden Emil Kramer was part of a crew who harvested 250 deer from Chambers Island in October 1945.



WILLIAM S. FEENEY

A herd of 500 deer on the island had eaten all vegetation up to 6 feet above ground level, creating a browse line throughout the island, like this one in cedar along the southwestern beach of Chambers Island.

A controlled hunt from 70 years ago provides a lesson for modern wildlife managers.

Kathryn A. Kahler

A photo and caption from our August 2011 issue showing the DNR law enforcement boat *Barney Devine* laden with dead deer seemed oddly out of place for its time. The deer were taken from Chambers Island during a deer reduction effort in 1945. That was in the midst of the “deer wars” when early wildlife managers debated the effects of too many deer with a public so enamored with whitetails that they were willing to pay to feed them through the winter. What had happened on the island to make residents agree to a controlled reduction of their treasured deer?

Chambers Island is a 3,000-acre island five miles off the Door County mainland. Nowadays, it is mostly privately owned and the little public traffic it sees is from charter boats and visitors to the lighthouse on its northern shore. There is a private air strip, about 40 summer cottages, a solar generator and one cell phone tower.

According to a historical account from 1917, the island was settled in the mid-1800s by shipbuilders and furniture makers who cut tens of millions of board feet of pine, oak and hemlock. By the early 1900s, the island was purchased by furniture company executive F.A. Dennett, who made it his summer retreat and private game reserve “where deer by the hundreds roam in peace.”

Peace, that is, until half a century later when island residents determined something must be done to prevent widespread starvation of the deer herd that had grown to nearly 500. A 1945 *Wisconsin Conservation Bulletin* story reported that despite the logging operations over the years, the island was still well forested, but went on to describe an “odd forest condition” that was evident across the entire island.

“Here were trees that annually scattered their billions of seeds over the entire area, including oaks, maples and beeches, but in the last decade not one new tree had succeeded in taking its place in the community of trees,” the article stated. “The youngest tree on the island is estimated to be 10 years old or older.

“There is the island floor, mostly sparsely covered with grass. There is not a leaf of any kind from the grass to 5 or 6 feet above. The lower foliage line of the trees ends abruptly with a ruler-like exactness.”

That precise line is what wildlife managers call a browse line made by a burgeoning deer herd surviving on summer grass and fall acorns. Managers determined that the deer suffered from both summer and winter starvation. Door County residents, presented with the option of allowing nature to take its course with starvation to reduce the herd, chose the more humane option of a controlled hunt.

“Conservation Department field men were assigned to remove deer and turn them over to the state Department of Public Welfare for distribution as food to various public institutions,” the article stated.

Between Oct. 17 and 25, 1945, some 250 deer were shot and transported off the island, amounting to a total dressed weight of 21,216 pounds of venison. The project continued for several more years.

“Today, there are no deer on Chambers Island, haven’t been for decades,” according to DNR’s Aaron Buchholz, the Door County wildlife biologist in 2010 when a request was made to reintroduce them to the island. “My take on the request was to not approve it based on the history, which provides the likely outcome for deer and deer impacts on the island. As far back as 1919 there are indications that the deer had to be fed to survive winter and the overall recurring theme is one of high populations leading to decimation of food resources, then starvation, followed by population crashes.”

For now, while Chambers Island may not have a deer herd to speak of, it is said to have a flourishing forest and understory. Emmet Judziewicz, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point professor of biology and curator of the Robert W. Freckmann Herbarium, surveyed the island in 2004 and found 209 vascular plant specimens, increasing the number known on the island to 358 specimens.

Judziewicz said in the May 2004 issue of *Wisconsin Flora*, “The island forests are unusual in a number of ways. Deer had a devastating effect on plant survival and regeneration on the island from the 1940s through the 1980s; local residents said that you could see a half-mile through the woods because the understory was so open. But they have now been absent for many years, resulting in fine regeneration of sugar maples and some conifers.”

The list of species Judziewicz found included junipers, beachgrass, white and red pine, big and little bluestem, Indian-grass, needle-and-thread grass, Muhlenberg’s sedge, New Jersey tea, butterfly-weed, blazing-star, hoary puccoon and smooth aster. “Many,” he said, “grow nowhere else in the Door Peninsula or the Grand Traverse Islands.”

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