



## Fact Sheet 5

# How have deer affected the open space forest understory?

One of the outstanding issues regarding data needed to evaluate the future of the deer hunt is the condition of the vegetative understory in the town's open spaces. To this end, the RCC undertook the task of reviewing the 2010 Natural Resource Inventory data, focusing on seedling counts performed on specified plots of town open space land nearly a decade ago. The RCC gathered new data (May – July 2018) at the Bennett's Pond and Hemlock Hills open spaces to compare to the 2010 numbers.

Based on the results of this limited study, the condition of tree seedlings in Ridgefield open space appears good. There appear to be more ferns, skunk cabbage, and bare spots on the forest floor and fewer bushes, but this observation was not quantified. Thus, there seems to be no strong rationale to either continue or stop the hunt based on this study alone.

However, the understory will need to be regularly monitored going forward because deer density will likely change and a myriad of other factors also impact forest health (e.g., tree diseases, insects, climate change, etc.). Studies of the impact of deer have shown other forest impacts like higher levels of invasive plants like barberry and stilt grass, but lower levels of multi-flora rose, bittersweet, honeysuckle and burning bush.

Deer browsing contributes to a more diverse herb layer (e.g., grasses, ferns, wildflowers, and other ground cover). Shrub and mid-canopy bird diversity is often reduced by heavy deer browsing, but these birds are generally replaced by canopy feeders, bark feeders, and species that like open ground, which maintains total bird diversity.

Foliage insect diversity may also decline with browsing, but ground-dwelling predators such as

wolf spiders and ants, and in some cases salamanders and snakes, may increase with a more open forest floor from deer browsing. Ironically, deer like to browse oak seedlings (among others) but they are dependent on acorns for a part of their food supply.



Just because more tree seedlings were observed in a forest that has been hunted doesn't necessarily mean that the forest should then continue to be hunted or that the unhunted forest should be opened for hunting. That decision is outside of the realm of science, and rather a question of

values that the people of Ridgefield should decide upon.

The RCC takes its responsibility of maintaining and protecting Ridgefield's open spaces and trails seriously. We understand that Ordinance Section 4-75 allows for a controlled hunt of deer on open space. However, because open space land is under the jurisdiction of the RCC, we want to make certain that if we are to close open space (and trails) to allow for hunting (essentially banning the public from enjoying open space and trails for a period of time), then there must be continued assessment of the efficacy of the hunt and also whether the focus of the hunt should be changed in light of the current reduction in the deer population toward maintenance rather than reduction of the numbers.

### **The Bottom Line**

The results of the understory study were not conclusive in that the data could be interpreted to support or to discontinue the controlled hunt.