

Meat Is Hard for Hungry Families to Come By. Enter These Deer Hunters.

Hunters in New Jersey have shared 2.2 million meals since 1997. “This provides a source of protein that we wouldn’t otherwise have,” a food bank manager says.



By Tracey Tully

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4 MIN READ

Mike Aversa, a semiretired accountant, goes hunting as often as possible.

He uses the first six or seven deer he shoots each season to stock his family’s freezer and table. Venison chili, venison meatballs and venison sausage are staples in his house in Annandale, a community in western New Jersey.

In 1997, a desire to do what he could to share the much-needed source of protein with food-insecure families — while indulging a hobby and addressing the state’s severe overpopulation of deer — motivated Mr. Aversa to join with two friends and found Hunters Helping the Hungry.

A quarter century later, the program is considered one of the top three game-meat donation programs in the country, according to a study by a firearms trade association. Since its start, the all-volunteer nonprofit has arranged for the donation of 14,731 deer — about 2.2 million quarter-pound servings of fresh, lean protein — to New Jersey residents in need.

Two recent grants from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, through the New Jersey Farm Bureau, enabled the program to expand and to waive the \$20 cost of donating a deer for participating hunters.

“The idea is, ‘Take what you need for yourself. But don’t stop,’ ” said Mr. Aversa, a former partner at a large accounting firm in New Jersey. He has been hunting since he was 10.

The concept is as simple as it is effective: Hunters bring their excess harvest to one of seven participating butcher shops, where the deer are dressed and frozen into roasts, steaks, tenderloins and ground meat.

The venison then goes to regional food banks to be distributed to soup kitchens and food pantries, where meats and sources of protein are often in short supply and where demand surged during the early phase of the pandemic.

“The agencies — they start asking at the beginning of September: ‘Do you have venison yet?’” said Shannon Williams, assistant director of a food bank in northwestern New Jersey, Norwescap.

“Meat is very hard to come by,” she added. “This provides a source of protein that we wouldn’t otherwise have.”



Deer meat at Game Butchers in Lebanon, N.J. Butchering each deer costs \$90, which the charity that donates the meat covers using federal grants. *Bryan Anselm for The New York Times*

The overpopulation of deer in New Jersey is a well-known hazard that contributes to crop damage and car accidents, particularly during mating season.

In 2019, between October and December, there were 4,753 collisions between cars and animals, primarily deer, in New Jersey, according to an analysis by AAA Northeast, the most recent data of such collisions available.

In New York, where deer have also proliferated, the number of animal crashes in 2020 — 33,956 — included six fatalities, the travel group found. Suffolk County, where a deer was filmed in 2019 bursting through the glass front door of a beauty salon on a main street in Lake Ronkonkoma, had the state's second-highest number of animal collisions, 1,311, trailing Orange County by just 116.

To address the problem in New Jersey, the state has expanded hunting onto county parkland at specified times of year and offered special licenses to farmers to shoot deer on their property during regulated depredation hunts.

Two years of federal grants have enabled the New Jersey hunters' program to purchase a refrigerated truck that, upon request, is transported to farmland to collect deer shot during the hunts — meat that in prior years had mainly gone to waste.



John Person runs Game Butchers and said deer meat is “very lean. It’s not fatty. But you can only eat so much, can only take home so much.” Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

Until last year, the program relied primarily on monetary donations to cover the roughly \$90 cost of butchering each deer, and required hunters to make a tax-deductible contribution to offset the butchering expense. The federal grants have enabled the hunger program to waive that fee as well.

“There were years when we actually had so many deers donated that we ran out of money,” said Bud Thomas, the group’s longtime treasurer.

Similar game-meat donation programs operate in other parts of the country, with Virginia, Iowa and Missouri providing some of the highest volumes of donated venison. Unlike groups in other states, New Jersey's program accepts only deer, and each participating butcher must operate from facilities that pass state health inspections.

"I've been offered geese, bear, caribou," said Mr. Thomas, referring mainly to game shot outside of New Jersey. "I think I was offered a moose at one point."

Bob Wilson, an avid hunter, fisherman and marathon runner, helped found the Cranford Rod and Gun Club in 1968.

He enjoys bowhunting. But he does not have a taste for venison.

"I'm not a big fan of it," said Mr. Wilson, 74. "I just love hunting, being outside in the woods."

Every year, his first three or four deer go to family and friends. After that, anything he shoots goes to the hunger program.

He said he typically donated about two deer during the roughly six-month bow season that runs from September into February. This year, he is waiting for his first kill.

"It's a long season. I know my luck's going to change," he said. "If I'm not hunting, I'm fishing. It's never a wasted day."

Seeing dead deer on the roadside frustrates him, forcing him to think about the unused meat and the suffering the animal and the driver likely endured.



Since Hunters Helping the Hungry was founded it has arranged for the donation of 14,731 deer — about 2.2 million quarter-pound servings of fresh, lean protein. Bryan Anselm for The New York Times

“Instead of going to waste, it’s going to food banks,” Mr. Wilson said of the reason he makes the effort to transport deer about 45 minutes from where he lives to a participating butcher in Whitehouse Station, N.J., V. Roche and Sons. “It’s healthy, healthy food.”

The main hurdle keeping the program from expanding is the need for additional butchers willing to help coordinate with food banks and who can manage the state health inspections, according to board members of Hunters Helping the Hungry.

John (J.B.) Person runs a family-owned butcher shop, Game Butchers, in Lebanon, N.J., and participates in the feeding program.

He likened venison to grass-fed beef.

“It’s very lean. It’s not fatty,” he said. “But you can only eat so much, can only take home so much.”

After butchering the donated deer, he flash freezes it and stores it until it can be picked up by food banks.

“Let me tell you: It’s a wanted and very much needed protein,” he said. “It’s gone in days.”