

HIKING IN DEER HUNTING SEASON 2024

Cayuga Trails Club

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DEER IN THE ECOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE

White-tailed deer are an important component of our northeastern landscape, browsing on grasses, wildflowers, shrubs, saplings and low-hanging branches of trees. Prior to European colonization of North America, deer were important food for humans, wolves, mountain lions and bears, and their carcasses fed foxes, raccoons, other small mammals, and carrion-feeding birds.

Fast forward to today: wolves and mountain lions were extirpated from eastern North America and the range of bears reduced. Currently, the only common predators of deer in our area are humans (and our vehicles) and coyotes, which have expanded their historical western range across the continent.

With human-wrought changes in the landscape, habitat for deer has improved and – with greatly reduced natural predator numbers – population sizes have exploded. Our plant communities are now severely overgrazed: few tree saplings survive; understory shrubs and our beloved wildflowers are greatly reduced. Hunting plays an important role in controlling deer populations and allowing plants to flourish. However, our current hunting regulations still do not bring deer numbers down to an ecologically healthy number.

In addition to deer overpopulation having negative effects on the local ecology, more deer also means more ticks (and associated Lyme and other tick-borne diseases) and more deer-vehicle collisions. For all these reasons, I support reduction of deer populations through hunting and other means.

As a hiker, fall is a time to know when, where and what type of deer hunting is going on and to choose trails accordingly.

WHEN IS DEER HUNTING SEASON?

Deer are hunted with various weapons: bow & arrow (bowhunting); crossbows; “regular firearms” (rifles, shotguns); muzzleloaders. The NY Department of Conservation (DEC) provides different dates for these different hunting methods:

2024 Deer Hunting Season in New York’s Southern Region

	Oct 1 - Nov 1	Nov 2-15	Nov 16 - Dec 8	Dec 9-17		Dec 26-Jan 1	Jan 11-31
Bowhunting							
Crossbow							
Regular Firearms							
Muzzleloaders							
Youth Firearms*							
Tompkins Co. DMFA**							

***Oct 12-14:** Special firearms hunting dates for youth 14-15 yrs old.

**Due to high deer populations in central Tompkins County, the DEC has established a special "[Deer Management Focus Area](#)" (DMFA) that has an extra hunting season in January. It excludes the City of Ithaca and Villages of Cayuga Hts and Lansing, as well as the State Forests and Wildlife Management Areas. Bow- and crossbow hunting are allowed in RH Treman and Buttermilk State Parks, and private landowners in the DMFA

can choose whether to allow hunting (of any type) on their lands. Some Cornell Botanic Gardens Natural Areas and Finger Lakes Land Trust preserves allow gun hunting and are closed to hikers during these dates.

Deer Damage Permits: If recreational hunting is insufficient to limit deer populations, landowners can apply for a Deer Damage Permit that allows for special conditions and dates for taking deer. Some Cornell lands have these permits, and can be closed to the public - notices will be posted at trailheads.

HUNTING SEASONS FOR OTHER GAME

Are you hearing gunshots outside of the Regular Firearms and Muzzleloaders deer-hunting season? There are hunting seasons for smaller game: see the [DEC Summary of Hunting Seasons](#).

IS IT SAFE TO HIKE IN DEER HUNTING SEASON?

Hiking always has risks: during hunting season there is the added risk of being shot by a hunter. Though rare, it does happen and the chances vary depending on the type of hunting weapon being used. Additionally, there are things we hikers can do to lower the risk of being mistaken for a game animal (see below). Every hiker will have a different sense and tolerance of this risk. What I discuss here is solely my comfort level with hiking during hunting season. Each hiker must make their own decision – neither I nor the Cayuga Trails Club are responsible for the decisions you make about when and where to hike.

BOWHUNTING AND CROSSBOW HUNTING SEASONS

Hunting with these generally require that the hunter be much closer to the deer than when shooting with a gun. With a much closer look, it is far less likely the hunter will mistake a hiker for a deer. Thus, I feel pretty safe hiking during this part of the hunting season.

REGULAR FIREARMS AND MUZZLELOADERS HUNTING SEASONS

I don't hike in areas/times when gun hunting is permitted. I've researched the places that don't allow gun hunting during the Regular Firearms, Muzzleloaders and Tompkins County DMFA hunting dates – check out my list below.

OUT ON THE TRAILS IN HUNTING SEASON – WHAT EVERY HIKER SHOULD DO

Wear Fluorescent Orange or Pink hat, vest and/or jacket: To reduce the likelihood of hunting accidents, the DEC requires that hunters wear fluorescent orange or pink hat or vest. Hikers should wear them too! And dog companions should have a Blaze Orange vest, and kept leashed so they're not bounding through the woods like a fawn.

Hike with others: people talking, laughing, moving together are less likely to be mistaken for a game animal.

Respect hunting trail closures: Some private landowners who allow the Finger Lakes Trail to cross their properties have hunting closures during deer season. Closures are posted at trailheads, and trail notices are available on the Finger Lakes Trail Conference website. Please show your appreciation to these FLT hosts by respecting the hunt-season closures on their land.

WHERE TO HIKE (AND NOT HIKE!) DURING DEER GUN-HUNTING SEASON

Regardless of season, a great resource for finding local places to hike is the website IthacaTrails.org. Under "Find Trails", click "More Options" and then choose "No Hunting" to identify trails where hunting is not allowed. Go to the trail owner's website to double-check, since hunting restrictions can change from year to year.

For both local and wider afield destinations, the wonderful website GoFingerLakes.org provides lots of information about outdoor recreation locations throughout our region. They have a special [webpage](#) with great places to explore that don't allow hunting.

Below is a list of local public lands and accessible-to-public places Cayuga Trails Club members love to hike, divided into those that don't or do allow gun-hunting. When choosing your hiking route, please be aware that private landowners may or may not allow gun hunting on their property. When road- or rail-trail walking, consider whether gun hunting may be allowed on the adjoining public and private lands.

DON'T ALLOW GUN HUNTING

NY State Parks

Our local state parks allow bow, but not gun hunting.

Cornell Botanic Gardens Arboretum, Park Park, Beebe Lake

Monkey Run & Fall Creek Natural Areas

Includes the Cayuga Trail and other trails in these areas. Bowhunting allowed.

Campbell Meadows

Cornell Lab of Ornithology trails

Palmer Woods Natural Area

Ithaca College Natural Lands

South Hill Recreation Way

Six Mile Creek Natural Area (including Mulholland Wildflower Preserve)

Cayuga Waterfront Trail; Lighthouse Point; Renwick Wild Woods

City of Ithaca Cemetery Walk

Some Finger Lakes Land Trust Preserves

Steege Hill (near Big Flats), Thayer, and Roy H. Park Preserves; see complete list [here](#)

Jim Schug Trail & CBG Pervis Road Wetlands Natural Area

Black Diamond Trail

Cayuga Nature Center

Cascadilla Gorge & Cascadilla Meadows Natural Areas

Ellis Hollow Nature Preserve

Durland Preserve/CBG Hirshfeld Memorial Natural Area

East Ithaca Recreation Way (including Cascadilla Natural Area)

Eldridge Wilderness Preserve

Dotson Park (Danby)

Greensprings Natural Cemetery (Newfield)

Lime Hollow

ALLOW GUN HUNTING

NY State Forests; NY Wildlife Management Areas; Finger Lakes National Forest

All of these are open to all forms of hunting, including guns, subject to the dates shown above.

Most Off-Campus Cornell Botanic Gardens' Natural Areas

If gun hunting is allowed, trails are closed during those dates. More information on the types of hunting allowed and whether trails are closed can be found at this [link](#).

Many Finger Lakes Land Trust Preserves

Information on individual preserves and closures due to gun hunting can be found at the FLLT [website](#).

Dryden Rail Trail

Much of the trail crosses private land where hunting is controlled by the landowner. Thus, during the Regular Firearms and Muzzleloaders seasons, gun-hunting may be taking place along the Rail Trail.