

by Lauren Koshere

## On Wanting to Eat the City Deer



I walked home from work one afternoon not long after moving to Washington, D.C. It had been a long day. Partway home, I stopped at the Kahlil Gibran Memorial on Massachusetts Avenue, NW, about a half mile from Rock Creek Park. I studied the motion of water in the fountain, savored the cool air and green smell rising from the adjacent woods, and listened over traffic sounds to the rustle of wind through leaves shifting above me.

After a few minutes, I looked up. I was surrounded by white-tailed deer: five six-point bucks, one doe, and one fawn. Not one flinched when I stood to walk away, passing within fifteen feet of them.

This was my first encounter with city deer. As for non-city deer, I couldn't say whether my first exposure was a sighting in the woods or a morsel on my fork.

In the hardwoods-and-lakes country of the Upper Midwest where I grew up, hunting and fishing is a part of the culture. Wild fish and game are a regular part of many families' diets.

My initial thought that day on Massachusetts Avenue was to call my dad, home in Wisconsin: "Seven deer, five six-pointers—all within feet of me! You can tell city deer aren't used to being hunted." My next thought was that I wished I had some venison in my freezer.

"I cannot imagine going to the woods to shoot an innocent animal," said an intern from New York when I mentioned the hunting traditions of my background one day at work. Across her brow came a twisted arc, shock that I would even admit to being such a redneck.

Seen through one lens, sure, I can understand how, to many urban dwellers, hunting and eating game sounds downright redneckey.

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Seen through another lens, I could also make a case that my siblings and I were raised on protein that was all-natural; local; organic, sustainable; free-range; vegetarian-diet; low-input; biodynamic; soy-, hormone-, cage-, and antibiotic-free—not to mention compatible with the Paleo Diet—long before any of those qualifiers were righteous among savvy urbanites.

What's more, we knew the story of our meat. The hunters in our family—my dad, my mom, my uncle, my brother—could tell me how, when, and where the hunt had occurred. They took me to walk through our forty-acre woods on trails established by the deer. They demonstrated how to properly and respectfully handle meat to avoid waste. And I learned from them, year-round, as they practiced meaningful skills—tool and bow and rifle maintenance, target practice, scouting the woods, interpreting deer sign and habitat types—all in preparation for hunting season.

The morality of hunting was never questioned. But the seriousness of the act was implicitly honored. My dad taught me what he said after he took an animal's life when hunting or trapping: *Megwitch*. An Ojibwe word. "Thank you."

It's a lot easier to take for granted the meat that slides into your pan from butcher paper than the meat you or someone you know hauled from the woods, cut from the bone, and wrapped in freezer paper.

This is all to say—I wish I could hunt the deer I see along Massachusetts Avenue.

I wish it for my sake. I wish I could skip the throng of people lined at the meat counter. I wish I could know more about my meat, trust more about my meat, respect more about my meat, than I can from what the index cards at Whole Foods tell me.

And I wish it for the deers' sake.

It's certainly not their fault that their best habitat for miles is in the heart of Washington, D.C., bereft of natural predators, crisscrossed with busy streets, and abutted by yards abundant with the temptation of juicy vegetation, houses inhabited by frustrated gardeners.

Nor is it their fault that, unless the deer population falls, their grazing of native vegetation in and around D.C.'s Rock Creek Park will continue to contribute to all sorts of mounting problems—for the health of their population, for local ecosystems, and for people.

Regardless of whose fault it is, there is consensus that the local deer population must be reduced. In May of 2012, a Rock Creek Park deer management plan was adopted that would reduce the Park's population through lethal and non-lethal means. The lethal means—culling the population by sharp shooters—however, will not happen yet, pending a lawsuit by an animal rights group and local residents.

I appreciate that managing wildlife anywhere, especially in a populous urban environment, is a complicated one. I respect that different personal backgrounds give way to a myriad of value judgments on the topic.

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But that still doesn't change the fact that, every time this particular urban dweller passes a docile deer on the edge of woods and lawn somewhere along Massachusetts Avenue, NW, she wishes she could eat it.

*Lauren Koshere's writing has appeared in High Country News, ISLE, and others. She is a graduate of St. Catherine University and the University of Montana. Find more at <https://laurenkoshere.com/>. This essay first appeared as a contribution to the Center for Humans and Nature's City Creatures Blog and is reproduced here with permission.*