

PESTS, PREY

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DEER CULL: IS IT 'DIRTY WORK'?

Story by MARK CARDWELL Special to The Gazette

STE. FAMILLE, ÎLE D'ORLÉANS – François Turcotte says that, if he were a deer, he'd want to live on this scenic island in the middle of the St. Lawrence River, just east of Quebec City. "This is a paradise for them," said Turcotte, a chicken farmer and apple grower whose ancestors were among the first European settlers to cultivate the fertile land in this tiny parish – one of a half-dozen on the island – some 350 years ago. "They have no natural predators, there's a wide variety of food available and, because 30 per cent of the island is forested, there are lots of places for them to live." But Turcotte doesn't want deer here.

As president of the local agricultural union that represents the island's 250 farmers, he is a leading proponent of a pending change in provincial hunting regulations that will result, some conservationists and hunters fear, in the annihilation of the island's small population of whitetail deer this fall.

"Sure we're being seen as the bad guys in this," Turcotte said this week. "But we've got vandals – the deer – coming into our fields every day and night and destroying and dirtying our crops. What are we supposed to do?"

That's a question that many farmers across southern Quebec have been asking themselves in recent years. As populations of whitetail deer have continued to increase since the early 1990s – the result, wildlife experts say, of increasingly mild winters – so, too, has the damage they cause to agricultural crops.

Mostly, those problems have been restricted to lands south of the St. Lawrence, particularly in the farm-laden regions of Montérégie, Estrie and the Eastern Townships. Since 2000, however, when whitetails were spotted on Île d'Orléans for the first time in living memory, farmers on the historic island, known for its production of high-quality fruits and vegetables, have been grappling with a serious and growing four-footed problem.

According to Turcotte, several dozen farmers – especially those on the eastern end of the 34-kilometre-long isle – have sustained significant damage to both their crops and their irrigation systems from the estimated 160 to 200 whitetail deer that now call Île d'Orléans home. Many of the island's 48 apple producers, in particular, have been hit hard.

Although he hasn't suffered any damage to his 3,000 trees, Turcotte, 44, said the deer have a predilection for the soft, sugary branches of apple trees on which they feed during the winter and spring. In addition to consuming the buds on mature trees, he said, they destroy many of the roughly 2,000 new trees that are planted annually on the island.

"That's the big problem," added Turcotte, who is rethinking plans to open a new 500-tree orchard in 2008. "We can't renew our trees."

The apple growers aren't alone.

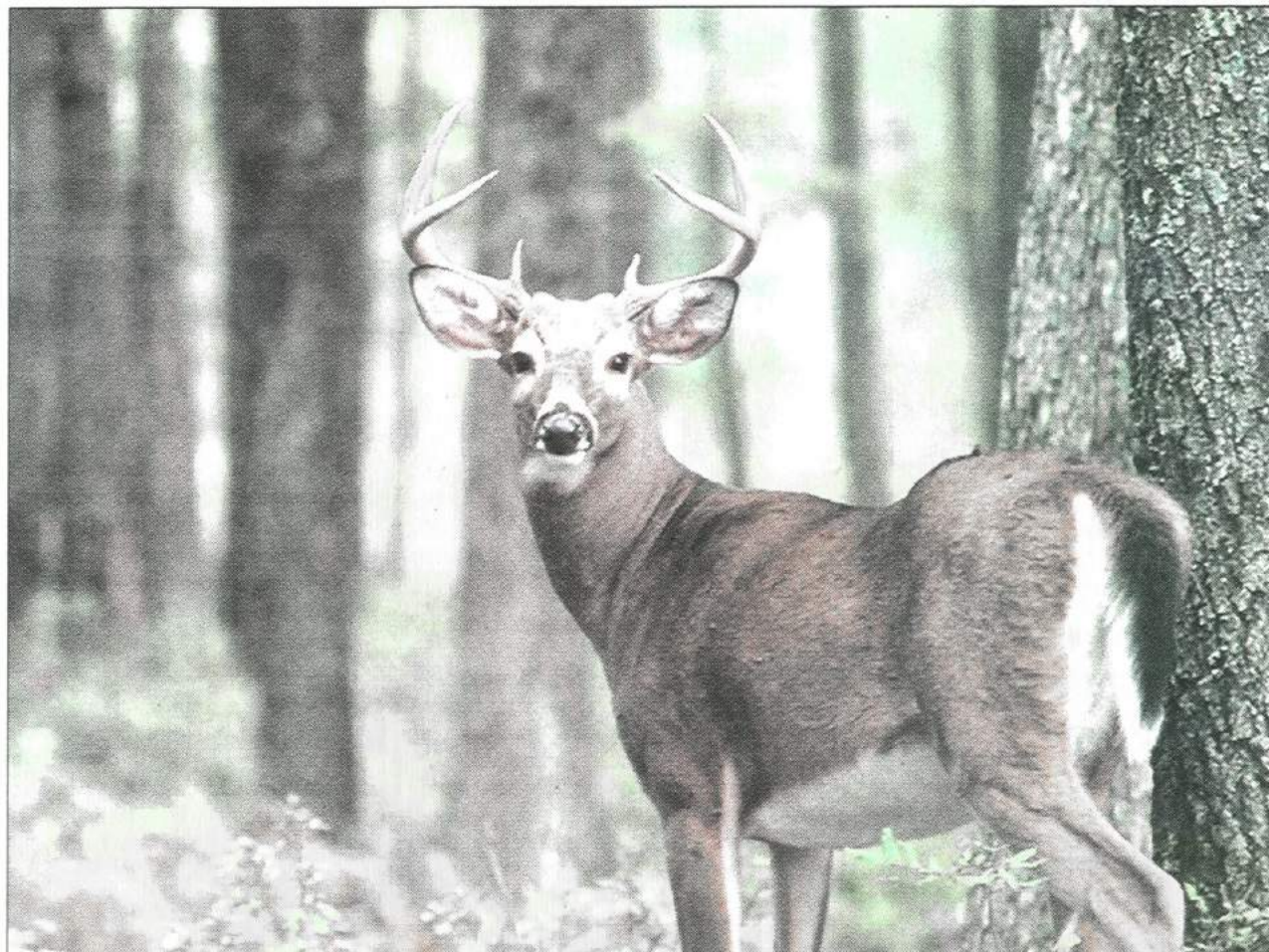
The island's biggest vegetable producer, Richard Coulombe, said he is becoming increasingly frustrated by the amount of time and money he spends dealing with the foraging fallout from the island's deer population. In addition to losing large percentages of his lettuce and broccoli crops, which the deer eat while the plants are flowering, he had to leave an acre of specialty purple carrots (roughly 700 50-pound bags worth \$10 apiece) in the field last year because deer had trod, defecated and slept on them.

As well, the soft plastic tubing that Coulombe and most farmers here use to irrigate their crops are easily perforated or severed by the sharp hooves of the deer, requiring regular repairs.

"It's a real pain and the problem is getting worse every year," Coulombe said. "I'd be happy not to see any deer here at all."

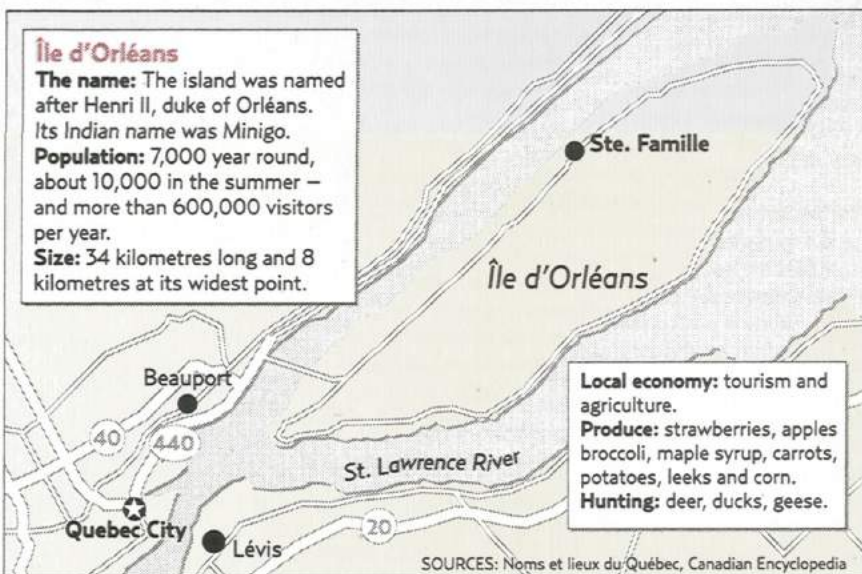
He may soon get his wish. With the support of both the province's powerful farmers' federation – the Union des producteurs agricoles – and the Quebec Agriculture Department, the island's farmers first convinced the province's Wildlife Department in 2002 of the need for the first-ever licensed deer hunt on the island. A three-year plan based on aerial surveys that determined the size of the whitetail population to be around 250, the hunt mirrored conditions in the surrounding Region 27, a vast hunting zone on the north shore of the St. Lawrence that stretches from Portneuf to Charlevoix. In Region 27, deer-hunting season is open for only nine days in October, is limited to males, and is restricted to the use of bows and crossbows during the first six days, and muzzle loaders – no rifles or shotguns – the last three days.

Dissatisfied with the impact the hunt had on the deer population over the three years, Île d'Orléans farmers succeeded in having it widened in 2006. Notably, in addition to the regular conditions for bucks, a draw was held for 100 permits for females and fawns, another



JOE KOSACK PENNSYLVANIA GAME COMMISSION

The easing of restrictions on hunting Île d'Orléans whitetails doesn't sit well with the hunters: "This is an abusive hunt aimed at completely wiping out the deer population on Île d'Orléans," says Marc Leclerc, president of the regional chapter of the Fédération québécoise de la faune.



Deer are a real problem for Île d'Orléans apple growers like Laval Gagnon of Ste. Famille.



PHOTOS: FRANCIS VACHON THE GAZETTE

Ste. Famille farmer and apple grower Suzanne Blais inspects an apple tree damaged by deer.

60 permits were issued for so-called educational and scientific permits, and the season was expanded to two weeks. As a result, 102 deer – including 63 females and fawns – were taken in 2006, a five-fold increase over the number of deer taken in any of the three previous years.

Last month, however, when wildlife officials privately told representatives of a half-dozen hunting and conservation associations who sit on a regional consultative council (Groupe faune régionale) that the 2007 deer-hunting sea-

son on the island would again be expanded – this time to 16 days and with no restrictions on the types of weapons used (although rifles and shotguns are still prohibited) – they fired back publicly in defence of the deer.

"This is an abusive hunt aimed at completely wiping out the deer population on Île d'Orléans," said Marc Leclerc, president of the regional chapter of the Fédération québécoise de la faune, which represents the roughly 1 million registered hunters in the province – 25,000 of

whom live in Region 27.

According to Leclerc, who issued a press release on May 1 that brought the issue to light, he and the other members of the consultative body – including outfitters, conservation groups and the Huron nation – reacted angrily to the proposal. In particular, they pointed out the estimated deer population on the island is now down to 1.5 animals per square kilometre, far below both the 10 deer-per-square-kilometre ratio in the Montérégie region and the five-deer-per-

square-kilometre benchmark the Wildlife Department uses to define an acceptable and sustainable population level. "There aren't enough deer on Île d'Orléans to justify a cull like this," said Leclerc, who suggested farmers here should build fences and take other actions aimed at protecting their crops.

"They just want hunters to do their dirty work for them."

While officials with Quebec's Wildlife Department refused to comment on the situation, saying a final decision on the 2007 hunt on the island has not been made (although an announcement is expected as early as next week), wildlife experts say the province's big whitetail deer population is a complex problem that has no easy solution.

According to Michel Huot, a big-game biologist with the ministry since 1978, there are an estimated 327,000 whitetail deer in Quebec (140,000 of which live on Anticosti Island, which is twice the size of the island of Montreal). There are 15 million whitetails in North America.

Huot said the Quebec population is concentrated mostly in the maple-rich forests in the southern regions of the province. "They are a relatively small, timid animal that prefer to live in forests," he said. He added that, while whitetails prefer to eat branches of trees, they adapt rapidly to new sources of food – everything from hay and vegetables to alfalfa and apples. "Fruit," he added, "are like candy to them."

Not surprisingly, that has caused headaches for farmers in southern areas of Quebec. "Deer have been a big problem here since the early 1990s," said Francis Jobin, an apple producer in the Eastern Townships and president of the Quebec Federation of Apple Growers. "They eat whatever they can get their teeth on. Even Christmas tree nurseries are being hit."

Jobin said apple producers face the biggest threat from deer. Part of the problem, he added, is that almost all of the province's 650 apple growers, who produce 5.5 million bushels a year, have moved away from tall trees to dwarf varieties, which produce more fruit in less space.

"The deer couldn't reach the branches in 18- to 25-foot-high trees," he said. "But now our trees are only seven-to-eight feet high."

Tall fences, added Jobin, are the only protection. "And they have to be well maintained and all the way to the ground," he said. "If not, they'll actually crawl under them."

With the demise of natural predators like wolves and cougars, and with the advent of milder winters, Huot said whitetail deer populations have been growing steadily in recent years on the north shore of the St. Lawrence. Like elsewhere in the province, he said, the trick is to control populations through hunting.

In Montérégie, for example, he said, the number of whitetail deer there was cut in half over the past two years – it is now down to 15,000 – through changes to permits, in particular the inclusion of fawns and females, which reproduce at a rate of 1.5 fawns annually during most of their 20-year lifespan. "We need to control populations not only because of the damage they cause, but for the continued good health of the animals themselves," said Huot, explaining that when deer are forced to share shrinking wooded areas in areas of intense agricultural activity, studies show they are more prone to disease.

As for the deer on Île d'Orléans, they may yet benefit from a reprieve of sorts – thanks in large part to the efforts of area hunters. According to Leclerc, Wildlife Department officials offered him "a deal" at a meeting on Thursday night that, in return for the hunters' approval, the 2007 hunt on the island would be 12 days instead of 16, and muzzle-loaded guns would be restricted to the final six days. The ministry, he added, also offered to carry out a detailed survey of the deer population next winter. "The downside," added Leclerc, "is there won't be many deer left there next winter."

That would suit Turcotte just fine. "We don't want to see the deer wiped out," he said. "We just want to see their numbers kept at a socially acceptable level."