



Introduction: MV Aerial Deer Survey, 2026

The attached report details the results of the aerial deer survey conducted Island-wide between February 17 and March 19, 2026. It shows that across the Vineyard, and particularly in Aquinnah, Chilmark, and on Chappaquiddick, the number of deer per square mile has reached extremely high levels, impacting our ecology, biodiversity, and, most importantly, our public health. The heatmap included in the report shows multiple hot spots with more than 100 deer per square mile. While the down-Island towns may, at first glance, seem relatively removed from the damage and threats because of smaller total numbers, there are elevated densities where deer gather in every town across the Island.

Tick Free MV initiated this survey because white-tailed deer are the primary reproductive host for ticks, and the Island has some of the highest rates of tick-borne disease and allergy in the country. It was clear that getting accurate, current population data on the deer herd was an important marker in making informed deer management decisions. This effort builds on a deer survey conducted with traditional aircraft in 2013, commissioned by the Island Boards of Health, which at the time confirmed densities on the Island well exceeding mainland levels.

This 2026 survey, using state-of-the-art drone technology detailed in the attached report, counted 4,681 deer on the Vineyard as of mid-March. That gives us a count-based density of 53 deer per square mile. But it should be noted that our survey was conducted at the lowest herd count of the year, directly following the hunting season where 934 deer were harvested, and preceding the birth of fawns which will significantly boost the population in May and June. It is also important to note that because the survey results were based on deer detected by drone thermal imaging, they should be viewed as a minimum.

Findings align with MassWildlife's deer density estimates, which have long documented the Islands as having the highest in Massachusetts. MassWildlife's deer density estimate for the entire Island has been 55+ deer per square mile, or higher in areas not open to hunting. Their target for the state is 12-18 deer per square mile.

The survey expands other key initiatives undertaken in our first six months:

- Before formally launching in December, Tick Free MV convened a November workshop focused on the Island's tick crisis that brought together public health officials, town leaders, hunters, conservation groups, landowners, landscapers, the Tribe, local nonprofits, and others.
- We supported MassWildlife's emergency extension of this past winter's hunting season, which added another two weeks from Feb 1 through Feb 14 to follow the additional January hunting season on the Islands. The combined extra 6 weeks contributed significantly to the local harvest, with 329 deer taken over that period. The extended hunting season for the Islands is now permanent.
- We participated in MassWildlife's statewide listening sessions and advocated for the three legislative bills Governor Healey announced in March: ending the ban on Sunday hunting, expanding crossbow access, and reducing the archery setback from 500 to 250 feet. Those bills have now been filed and will be taken up this legislative session.
- Along with public health and healthcare leaders from the Island, we advocated for the Massachusetts Department of Public Health to begin tracking Alpha-gal syndrome. Gov. Healey announced a one-year pilot reporting period. In 2025, Martha's Vineyard Hospital reported 742 positive tests for Alpha-gal IgE out of 1,689 performed - up from two positive tests out of nine in 2020. Now local boards of health can investigate those positive tests and characterize the allergy experience on MV to improve public health, healthcare, and public understanding of this condition.
- We co-hosted a MassWildlife information session with the MV Agricultural Society on Deer Damage Permits, resulting in the first permits ever issued on the Island. These allow for year-round removal of deer in situations where there is crop or other agricultural damage.
- In partnership with the MV Tick Program, Tick Free MV will underwrite more than \$12K to fund hunter incentives that support MassWildlife's Hunters Share the Harvest Program. Hunters receive \$150 for each doe and \$100 for each buck donated. Between the two island processors - MV Hunt Club and Island Grown Initiative - donations are distributed to the Island Food Pantry, Kinship Heals and the Tribe. There were 95 deer donated this season - up from just 17 last season - providing a significant food source to our community.
- We are working with Island partners to develop year-round deer processing capacity, essential infrastructure for the seasons ahead. Tick Free MV will learning from our neighbors on Nantucket who opened a deer processing facility this past fall.

Tick Free MV is just beginning, and our team remains fully committed to the mission to reduce tick-borne disease and allergies on Martha's Vineyard by reducing the number of ticks in the environment. Gathering the data - whether it's recording the incidence of Alpha-gal or understanding the scope and distribution of the deer across the island - is a foundational first step.

This is a multi-year undertaking that will require multiple interventions to dramatically reduce the overabundance of ticks in the environment. With deer being the primary reproductive hosts for ticks, our initial efforts will focus on ways our community can come together to manage the deer herd to a level that improves our public health outcomes as well as maintaining the Island's ecology and biodiversity. We now have data to share and look forward to engaging with the community to digest the results and discuss what comes next - together.

We had remarkable local support to make this aerial deer survey possible, with permissions granted for over 100 launch sites by all six towns, the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah), conservation groups, and many private landowners. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the community for making this work possible.

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