

Apostle Islands National Lakeshore

U.S. Department of the Interior



White-tailed Deer in the Apostle Islands

White-tailed deer were scarce in NW Wisconsin prior to the mid-1800s. The densely forested north woods lacked the clearings that provide a critical food source for deer in the spring. This began to change in the late 1800s as extensive logging dramatically altered the ecosystem allowing the deer population to explode. Deer numbers in the Apostle Islands reflect this trend.



Bow hunt on Rocky Island in the early 1950s

Boom and Bust

Surveys and reports have tracked changes in the Apostle Islands deer herd...

- 1919 – Biologist reported no sign of deer on 7 islands visited.
- 1937-38 – State biologist found very low deer populations on Stockton Island.
- 1946 – Deer abundant on Stockton Island.
- 1950s - Deer explosion on Rocky and several other islands accompanied with severe impacts on vegetation. Liberal hunting quotas, deteriorated habitat and harsh winters greatly reduced deer populations on these islands by the 1960s.
- By 1971, less than 10 deer were harvested from the islands.
- Even when deer numbers were highest on some islands, deer did not colonize Sand, York, Raspberry, Devils, North Twin, Outer, Gull and Eagle islands.
- Until recently, deer populations were limited to Oak and Basswood Islands, where there has been a muzzleloader hunt since 1983.
- Recent colonization and a very rapid increase in deer numbers on Sand and York Islands threatens the unique plant communities that occur there.