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Tick Free Martha's Vineyard to Launch Island-Wide Aerial Deer Survey Using Thermal Drone Technology

Tick Free Martha's Vineyard (Tick Free MV) will launch an Island-wide aerial deer survey next week. The survey will use thermal drone technology and run between **February 15 and March 7, 2026**, weather permitting.

The survey is designed to collect baseline data on the Island's deer population size and distribution. Deer are a key host in the tick life cycle, and the Vineyard experiences some of the highest rates of tick-borne diseases and allergies in the country. Accurate deer population data is a foundational input for informed public health and land-management decision-making.

Tick Free MV has retained White Buffalo, an independent conservation nonprofit based in Connecticut, to conduct the survey and analyze the results. White Buffalo has conducted multiple aerial deer surveys with this technology across New England. Dr. Jason Boulanger of White Buffalo is overseeing the operation on Martha's Vineyard.

The drone flights will take place between dusk and dawn, when cooler ground temperatures and leaf-off vegetation allow deer to be clearly detected using thermal imaging. These small, unmanned aircraft systems, equipped with infrared thermal cameras, will be operated by FAA-certified pilots in compliance with all applicable federal aviation regulations. The drones follow a systematic grid pattern to ensure consistent, Island-wide coverage. All launch and landing activities will occur at pre-approved locations, with advance permission from public and private landholders.

Thermal imagery detects heat signatures, allowing trained wildlife observers to distinguish deer from other animals or heat sources. The survey does not capture identifiable images of people, faces, or homes, and the sole purpose of image review is to confirm and count deer.

"This survey is about collecting reliable data," said Virginia Barbatti, Executive Director of Tick Free MV. "Understanding how large our deer population has become and where they cluster is an essential step in having informed community conversations. The last local deer survey was conducted in 2013 using traditional aircraft. This survey will use the latest drone technology to provide an updated, more comprehensive view."

Island residents may notice nighttime drone activity during the survey window.

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