As a kid growing up in the Finger Lakes region of upstate New York, I was always thrilled to travel down Route 96A in the back seat of my parent’s car, past the Seneca Army Depot to glimpse the white deer behind the barrier fencing. I had no idea back then what an impact that herd of white, white-tailed deer would have years later on a community and a state.

Native American folklore tells of the mystical presence of white, white-tailed deer. For the Seneca tribe of the mighty Six Nations of the Iroquois, who once inhabited this sprawling landscape between Seneca and Cayuga Lakes, seeing a white deer was a prophetic sign from the Great Spirit. It signified major change, and many Native American elders would call tribal gatherings after such encounters to interpret the message this amazing creature’s spirit was trying to convey.
Centuries later, in 1941, a new, 10,000-acre military munitions storage facility (originally the Seneca Ordinance Depot) was constructed on the site. The white, white-tailed deer would not make an appearance until 1949, when a buck and fawn were first encountered. The intrigue and astonishment at these sightings must have been amazing.

In 1957, Colonel Franklin Kemble, Jr. granted the white deer full military protection. By then, the overall deer population had experienced staggering growth due to lack of predators and a prohibition on hunting within the 24 miles of fencing that served as the base perimeter. Even though the deer could easily hurdle the 6-foot high fence with 18-inch angled barbwire atop, why would they? They did not feel threatened. Unfortunately, by the late 1950s, their population growth had caused starvation in the winter, and those that survived past winter were grossly underweight.

To protect the deer population and the expanding number of white deer births, the Army sought management assistance from the New York State Conservation Department. With the help of some of the department’s expert deer biologists, including Bill Severinghaus, Peggy Sauer, and Bill Hesselton, a herd survival plan was developed, which aligned with the protected white deer hunting ban. Through some trial and error, a healthy herd soon resulted, and because of this success, the Seneca Army Depot became a model for deer management in North America.

In 1955, the construction of a “special weapons” area—the “Q-area”—began, and by 1958, these weapons started to arrive at the Depot. Rumors would soon abound that the white deer were the result of a military overspill, or munitions detonation fallout. The truth is, they are a result of a recessive gene for leucism (a condition causing a lack of pigmentation in the hair follicle) that was enabled to artificially expand in numbers because of the population’s isolation and protection through fencing and a ban on hunting the white deer. While some people think these deer are albinos, they differ from albinos in that they have brown eyes, predominantly black noses, and normal, visibly healthy body frames.

In 1995, the Department of Defense determined the Depot’s function was no longer needed and began the process of downsizing staff and removing munitions. As of July 2000, the new millennium ushered in the official shutdown of the facility, and all personnel were removed, leaving behind 519 vacant munition igloos and numerous support buildings. Oversight of the property was transferred to the Seneca County Industrial Development Agency (IDA). Suddenly, a community and the entire Finger Lakes Region became alarmed at the fate of the white deer, which had always benefited from the blanketed protection of the Army’s presence. At this time, there were nearly 200 white deer, the largest known herd of white, white-tailed deer in the world. What would become of them?
Fortunately, Arthur Hall of Waterloo, former President of the Seneca County Federation of Sportsmen, had a vision for the conservation of the land and its wildlife. In 1998, he convened a group to discuss what combined efforts could be made to protect these precious resources. Not long thereafter, the group incorporated as Seneca White Deer, Inc. (SWD), a not-for-profit organization with a mission “committed to the preservation, development, and display of the unique resources of the former Seneca Army Depot, [and to] protect, conserve and educate the world regarding the life and habitat of the world’s largest herd of white, white-tailed deer.”

SWD spent nearly two decades educating the public, both locally and statewide, about the fate of the white deer herd, and appealing for financial support and public voices to be heard to preserve the land and its history. Eventually, in 2016, the IDA decided to auction off the remaining 7,000 acres of former Depot lands through a private bidding process. Seneca Falls entrepreneur Earl Martin submitted the only known proposal (besides that of SWD) that incorporated a plan to preserve 3,000 plus acres for the conservation of the site and to promote an ecotourism opportunity on the property, its military history, and all its wildlife, most notably, the white deer herd.

Martin won the bid and Deer Haven Park, LLC was established. Shortly thereafter, he sought the help of Dennis Money, now president of SWD, along with the organization’s board of directors and numerous volunteers, to make the site an ecotourism adventure open to the public. Autumn 2017 saw the construction of the John and Josephine Ingle Welcome Center at what would soon become the entrance to Deer Haven Park. On November 16 of that year, Seneca White Deer, Inc. officially opened the park to the public, providing year-round guided bus tours throughout the property. Visitors are taught about the property’s military history and get to participate in a unique watchable wildlife experience—seeing white, white-tailed deer in their natural habitat.

For more information, visit: www.senecawhitedeer.org.
Dee Calvasina is a freelance writer who has been actively involved in the conservation efforts of Seneca White Deer, Inc. You can read her monthly column, “Beyond the Fence” in the Finger Lakes Sunday Times and will often see her when visiting/touring at Deer Haven Park.

An array of birds and wildlife call the Seneca Depot home—and you can see them in their natural settings. Visitors can also see the remnants of the Seneca Army Depot, which officially closed in 2000.

If You Go

Visitors looking to see the herd of white, white-tailed deer can do so via a 90-minute guided bus tour of the former Seneca Army Depot. Tours are available year-round and include visits to abandoned sites and information about the vast military history of the Finger Lakes Region. Hiking, biking, birding, photography, and personal tours are also available. In addition to the deer, visitors may see bald eagles, wild turkey, beavers, coyotes, osprey, blue heron, songbirds, geese, and fishers.

Location: Seneca White Deer’s John and Josephine Ingle Welcome Center is located at 5479 Rte. 96A, Romulus, NY 14541; 315-759-8220; email info@senecawhitedeer.org

Fee: $30 adults, $27 military and seniors (65+), $15 children (5–15 yrs.), children under 5 yrs. free; specialized group tour discounts also available. Inquire about private, bike, or hiking options.