

Deer in the Road

Driving too fast causes most collisions with animals. Slow down and be prepared to stop.

If you ask residents who live near deer habitat if they have seen deer you will hear that deer are definitely around. The residents may report that the number of deer is increasing and that they are becoming more visible as more homes are built in deer habitat. We may relish the experience of living among these beautiful animals and seeing them up close. However, most people who have survived striking a deer with their vehicles remember the experience as a painful one that they never want to repeat.

Vehicles kill hundreds of thousands of wild creatures in this country every day. Motorists pay a steep price, too. According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) there are about 1.5 million deer/vehicle collisions in the United States every year, with vehicle repair bills exceeding \$1 billion. In 2002 deer/vehicle collisions resulted in injury to nearly 30,000 people and death to over 200 people and 920,000 deer. The IIHS has noted an increase each year in the number of fatal accidents involving motorists and deer.

Fortunately, motorists can prevent many such collisions. By driving more slowly, especially in wildlife habitat, drivers can protect themselves and deer from potentially fatal collisions.

Expect the unexpected.

Certain times of the day require extra vigilance. Many wild animals are most active in the early morning, the late afternoon, and dusk. Unfortunately, those are the times when trees cast shadows on the road, making animals in the shadows very hard to see. They are also the hours of commuting, when traffic is heaviest. Be especially watchful on roads where vegetation grows close to the edge, and you can't see browsing animals. Be especially vigilant on two-lane roads bordered by trees or fields, where 89% of all vehicle/wildlife accidents occur. A driver that drives at slow to moderate speed when driving

near deer habitat has greater control and can often stop in time. Plus scanning the edges of the road as you drive will alert you to other potential hazards such as bicyclists and children at play.

During the months of October to January when deer are mating they are often seen crossing roads. A doe may bound across the road with a stag in pursuit, both oblivious to traffic. In areas where hunting is allowed, panicked animals may charge across roads as they flee from hunters. Motorists can never assume that a deer they see crossing the road is alone. Deer frequently travel in groups. Fawns and other young animals follow their mothers. Always look for the second or third animal.

The aware driver can often spot trouble ahead and avoid it. Lower your dashboard lights so that you can see the reflection of your headlights in the animals' eyes. The reflection is a warning to reduce speed and be ready to brake for a possible animal crossing.

Keep in mind that animals are unpredictable. Assume that a deer standing beside the road may suddenly dart across it. Headlights can also blind animals such as coyotes, raccoons, opossums, and cougars. If an animal "freezes" in your headlights, slow down and blink the lights on and off. Honk your horn repeatedly. Most important, reduce speed, and be ready to stop.

Slowing down can also save the lives of animals that are on or near the road during the day. Squirrels often pause and may reverse direction as they cross the road. Birds eating on the road need time to take off. Don't be surprised if moose gallop down the road in front of you for several minutes before taking off into the woods.

No second chances for injured adult deer

Once adult deer are injured and unable to stand, the outlook for them is bleak. Because of their skittish temperament and large size, there are almost no wildlife rehabilitation centers that will accept them. Many rehabilitation centers will receive injured fawns, but injured adult deer are more than they can handle. The unfortunate injured

adult deer are euthanized, often on the spot.

The Humane Society of the United States advises that if you strike a deer or other animal not to put your own safety at risk. Stop and turn on your emergency car lights or emergency road flares to warn approaching vehicles. Call your local wildlife rehabilitation center or the local police or sheriff's office for assistance. Emphasizing that the injured animal is a traffic hazard may bring help quickly. Stay nearby in a safe place until help arrives. Avoid handling deer and other wildlife. They do not know that you have good intentions and may kick or bite in self-defense.

Some communities reduce animal-vehicle collisions by installing reflectors on steel fence posts next to roads where animals often cross. The patterns of light that occur when headlights strike the reflectors can startle animals and reduce their crossings. In the United States funds from the U.S. Department of Transportation are available to help local governments purchase the reflector system. (see www.strieter-lite.com.)

Look for temporary warning signs about deer that are put up during the months when deer crossings are more frequent. When drivers heed these signs and slow down they can reduce the number of collisions with deer. Drivers who are watchful and cautious can avoid the expense, pain, and heartbreak that result from deer/vehicle collisions.

Information courtesy of www.creativecrittersolutions.org