

Deer on the Road

Most people who have survived striking a deer with their vehicle 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. According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) there are 1.5 million deer/vehicle collisions in the United States every year, with vehicle repair bills exceeding \$1 billion. Motorists and deer pay a steep personal price, too. 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 accidents involving motorists and deer.

Fortunately, motorists can prevent many such collisions simply by driving more slowly, especially in wildlife habitat. Driving too fast causes most collisions with animals. A driver who drives at slow to moderate speed when driving through deer habitat has better control and can often stop in time to avoid a potentially fatal collision.

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. Deer are also quite active at night. Be especially watchful on roads where vegetation grows close to the edge, and you can't see browsing animals. Increase your vigilance on two-lane roads bordered by trees or fields, where 89% of all vehicle/wildlife accidents occur. Frequently scanning the edges of the road as you drive will alert you to other potential hazards such as bicyclists and children at play.

Take note when you see motion-activated flashing lights mounted on deer crossing signs that warn motorists about the presence of deer. 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 a second, third, or fourth 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 other 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 seed on the road need time to take off. Moose will sometimes 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 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.

Making roads safer for deer

Some communities reduce animal-vehicle collisions by installing Strieter-lite reflectors on steel fence posts next to roads where deer or other animals often cross. The patterns of light that occur when headlights strike the reflectors can startle animals and deter 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.)

Special "green bridges" constructed over or under highways and roads for safe crossing of deer and other wildlife are proving to be very effective in reducing collisions with deer and other animals. An article by Jennifer S. Holland that was published by the Pew Charitable Trusts in *Trust Magazine* Spring 2020, June 10, 2020 <https://pewtrusts.org/en/trust/archive/spring-2020/wildlife-crossings-can-protect-migrating-animals> provides details about the structures already in use in Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, Utah, and Wyoming and the importance of incorporating them into highway construction and renovation plans.

A new approach to reducing deer-vehicle collisions involves attaching a rear-facing LED light bar between the headlights of a vehicle to illuminate the grill area. The starkly illuminated grill area tends to frighten deer away from the road rather than cause them to freeze (become temporarily immobile) in the headlights. Dr. Travis DeVault (travis.devault@uga.edu) headed a team of researchers at the University of Georgia that tested the light bar and published their findings in the July 27, 2020 issue of *Ecosphere* (<https://esajournals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ecs2.3187>)

According to Dr. DeVault, the researchers are looking for an industry partner to work with them in developing a version of the light bar that drivers can attach to their vehicles. Until then, drivers can read a detailed description of the device in the published findings of the researchers.

Modifying the behavior of both deer and motorists can reduce the high number of deer-vehicle collisions. Communities that build safe crossings over or under busy roads, install warning lights, and clear heavy roadside vegetation lower deer's risk of being struck by a vehicle. Drivers who heed road signs about deer, drive cautiously, and reduce speed in deer habitat will most likely avoid the expense, trauma, and loss of life that result from striking a deer.

Information courtesy of *www.creativecrittersolutions.org*