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DEER AND CARS: The Buck Stops Here (c) 2000 Mark Spreyer



Fawn photographed at
Stillman on 5/17/08

Pop quiz: Which type of wildlife is responsible for the most human fatalities?

A) coyote B) cougar C) deer D) bear

Those of you who circled "C" go to the head of the class. Nationwide, an average of 120 people die each year as a result of deer collisions.

In Illinois, approximately 17,000 cars bash deer each year. The frequency of these collisions peak in November.

From a deer's perspective, autumn is a difficult time. It's breeding season, you're looking for some honeys but a bunch of hunters are looking for you! Then, of course, there are those nasty automobiles which kill thousands of your fellows each fall.

Background

So, exactly what might we be hitting? If it is a doe, a female deer, it stands 32 inches at the shoulder and weighs around 160 pounds. An adult buck, a male, is 10 inches taller and averages between 175 and 200 pounds. Their average age is 3 - 5 years old although, under ideal conditions, a deer may live for 15 years. Rutting (or mating) season begins in late Oct. and is usually done by mid-Dec.

As hard as it may be to believe, in Illinois, white-tails were exterminated late in the 19th century. Starting in the 1930's, a concerted program of reestablishing the species was undertaken. Today, as is obvious, the species is back.

Barbecue & Bambi

Rest assured, I don't take the subject of deer/car collisions lightly. Years ago, while researching great gray owls in Minnesota, I rented a house from a state conservation officer. One day, he called to tell me about a deer that had just been killed by a car very close to my house. He thought I might be interested in the meat. Given my non-existent income, I took a look at it. Indeed, there was a lot of good meat on the animal. With the help of a neighbor, we butchered it and enjoyed venison for weeks to come.

The meat wasn't what prompted the call from the game warden. What I didn't mention was the dead deer had been a pregnant doe that, had a car not interfered, would have given birth to twins in a day or so. As it was, one of the fawns died in the collision and the other ended up, with its dead mother, on my doorstep.

Having worked at a nature center that did wildlife rehabilitation, I did the best I could to keep it alive. After a few days, it got stronger but I realized that it needed to be with a licensed rehabilitator not an owl researcher. Luckily, I found such a person and bid farewell to the fawn that cheated death.

Later, I heard the critter was doing well. Of course, if it was released back to the wild, the rehabilitated deer would have to learn how to dodge speeding cars and bullets. Nonetheless, I thought it was the right thing to do.

Hide & Seek

Hiding from hunters is something deer excel at. In one study, 39 deer were fenced in a square mile of forest. It took six veteran hunters four days to find one buck. It's no wonder, then, that they can be

next to impossible to spot along the road. With this in mind, here are some tips to help you avoid colliding with a white-tail.

- Drive cautiously at dawn and dusk, particularly in autumn. In other words, get off the cell phone!

- Watch for eyes! Deer's eyes reflect headlights and will appear to glow at you from the side of the road. Slow down when you see them.

- If one deer bounds across in front of you, expect another to do the same. Does often travel in pairs or small groups.

- Flash headlights or honk horn to encourage deer near the road to move on.

- Be aware of your surroundings. Remember that deer prefer "edge" habitats such as forest margins.

If you want information about discouraging deer from your yard, I suggest reading a copy of *Deer-Proofing Your Yard and Garden* by Rhonda M. Hart. If you want to attract deer, I recommend planting tulips. It is a little known fact that these plants were named after deer. You see, around here, the only time you will see the flowers is as they disappear between the "two lips" of a deer.