

General Information about Deer

A disproportionate number of those fatalities are motorcyclists. The [Wisconsin DOT site devoted to the deer problem](#) says that while only 2% of car-deer collisions were fatal to humans, 84.9% of the motorcycle-deer crashes involved human fatalities. (This percentage has increased in recent years.) The deer do even worse. Wisconsin also sponsors [the Deer-Vehicle Crash Information Clearinghouse \(DVCIC\)](#), which has a variety of information on the topic.

I started doing research and asking people who drive a lot at night in deer country for their advice. Some of it was familiar, but I picked up some fresh pointers too.

- **Deer travel in groups.** One deer means there are probably more, so even if the one you see is off the road and going away, slow way down immediately.
- **Heed deer-crossing signs,** particularly in the seasons and times of day when deer are active. Slow down, use your high beam, and cover the brakes.
- **The Wisconsin DOT says that deer collisions peak in October-November, with a smaller peak in May-June.** Such crashes between April and August are most likely to occur between 8 pm and midnight. Between November and January, 5 to 10 pm were the danger times.
- **Additional good, powerful driving lights are worth their weight in gold on a deserted road at night.** Alternatively, fit a bulb with a 100-watt high-beam.
- **Noise—a horn, revving your engine, etc.—may drive deer away. (Don't count on it though.** My son and I recently went out to plink not far from that Sierra Nevada road, and after we set up, a doe and fawn appeared perhaps 30 yards away between us and our targets. I figured they would be gone at the first gunshot, so we fired it in a different direction. They didn't move then or when we fired into the tree above them several times, dropping debris around them. We finally had to shoo them away.)
- **Flashing your headlights may break the spell that seems to cause deer to freeze.**
- Deer and other wild animals are designed to be hard to see. Aside from the flickering white tail of some species or reflection from an eye, they simply disappear. However, this absence of reflected light can also tip you off. A "hole" in a white fence or wall or "missing" roadside reflectors at night might be an animal. A reflector that "blinks" might also indicate an animal passing between you and it.

A bison threw a Harley and its rider into the air when the rider tried to pass through a herd crossing a road.

- **Don't challenge large animals by approaching them.** A buffalo, moose, elk, mountain lion, bear, or large deer might attack to drive you off. Stay away and consider turning and riding farther away. A rider and his Harley were thrown high into the air [by a bison](#) last summer when he tried to ride through a herd crossing a road.
- If an animal has been injured, stay away. It may attack or injure you unintentionally if it comes to and tries to escape.
- **If a collision appears imminent, do not swerve. Braking hard right up to the point of impact is good, but you want to be stabilized if you do collide, which will give you the greatest chance of remaining upright.**

- **If riding in a group, spread out.** This will keep one rider who hits a deer from taking other riders down with him.
- **Wear protective gear. As with other crashes, no one plans to hit an animal.** The only way to be ready when it happens is to be ready on every ride. Wearing a helmet for a relaxing evening ride may seem unnecessary, since you are taking it easy, but the deer won't care. A few years ago, a rider told me of a deer leaping over him and catching him hard enough with a hoof to leave a significant gouge in the side of his helmet and wrench his neck a bit. That rider was very pleased he was wearing a good helmet. A collision with a deer that leaves you lying injured or unconscious in the road is also one of those occasions when you will appreciate reflective material on your gear.
- **Some points to keep in mind:**
 - **On hot muggy nights when there are a lot of mosquitoes, moose and deer head out of the woods to escape the fly bites.** If you have a thick film of bugs on your eye protection, clue in that the animals are getting eaten alive and their situational awareness is impaired.
 - **If you are driving at night and see the oncoming headlights "twinkle", that is probably a moose or a deer legs intersecting the headlight beams. They are rarely alone and may be with young. Slow down and keep your eyes open.**
 - **During the spring time, deer and moose congregate along side of roads to lick the salt applied during the winter months to control road ice.**
 - **Small animal motorcycle collisions with raccoons and porcupines can also be deadly. A fast-moving motorcycle with the brakes locked is a recipe for disaster. A glancing hit can veer a motorcycle off the road. These animals are low and have a round body structure that doesn't "crush," causing the body to roll under an undercarriage. You will have to replace those tires after striking a porcupine!**
 - **Finally, there is the skunk. You don't want to slow down close to one, they will let you know that they are not happy that you invaded their personal space.**

Deer accidents continue to increase. Let's leave them for the cars.

Animal strikes are a significant hazard for those of us who enjoy long-distance travel. Statistically speaking, vehicle collisions are the major motorcycling hazard, but as motorcycling experience builds and we get a little smarter, our risks of a car/bike collision should decrease. But the risk of animal strikes remains high because animals are so difficult to predict. Wild deer are found all over North America, in large numbers, their population is increasing, and they have habits and instincts that put them on collision courses with motor vehicles.

If the motorist happens to be a *motorcyclist*, the odds are high that both deer and biker will be seriously injured. What's so insidious about motorcycle/deer collisions is the unpredictability.

You may have ridden for hundreds of thousands of miles, proficiently avoiding thousands of left-turners, alley jumpers, edge traps, graveled corners, and decreasing-radius turns. Then, on some easy country ride, a deer suddenly leaps out of the woods into your path, and **Thud!** We don't have reliable statistics on motorcycle/animal collisions, because many accidents don't get reported.

To understand what to look for and what to do about deer, let's consider their instincts and habits. Deer are cautious, and prefer to hide in the trees. They like munching on tender foliage. So, in the summer, expect wild deer in forested areas or riverbeds where the trees and underbrush provide lots of cover and fresh salad. That lush roadside grass the highway department keeps mowed is a dinnertime favorite. That means you should expect deer feeding along the shoulder of the road in shady areas.

Danger at Night

While Antelope, Elk, and Moose munch away in plain view in the broad daylight, deer are more cautious. Deer seem to prefer hiding in the shadows in the daytime, and feeding at dusk and dawn. That means the risk of deer strikes increases when the sun is rising or setting. It's definitely something to think about when you are considering a night-time transit on a highway passing through one of those scenic National Forests.

At night, brown deerhide doesn't reflect much light, but deer eyes will reflect a brilliant white from your headlight, similar to a reflector. How do you tell if the reflector you see is on a post, or on a deer? Easy: the deer eye blinks. If you see a reflector winking back at you, odds are it is a deer, and it's facing in your direction.

DEER CROSSING

Why do you think those yellow DEER CROSSING signs get put up along certain sections of farmland or scenic forest roads? Would you think the highway department or the Forest Service hires game wardens to count deer migrations across the road? *Wrongo, Big Dog.* What really happens is that the road crew tallies the number of carcasses and shattered grills, and if the numbers are high on one particular section of road, morning after morning, they put up a sign. The same holds true for Antelope crossings in the grasslands of Wyoming and Colorado, and for Moose crossings in Northern Idaho, Montana, and New Hampshire. The point is, when you see a sign, you really should pay attention.

It's also helpful to observe that deer often stick together in groups of 3. That's because does often have twins. And sometimes last year's twins stay with mom while she raises this year's fawns, so the group may be 7. The point of that is to expect several deer even if you only see one.

Wild grazers such as deer tend to migrate in herds, moving towards higher elevations in the Spring, and returning to lower elevations in the Fall. They follow age-old migration routes that predate the highway by thousands of years. The importance of that to the

touring rider is that risks are greatest where the highway crosses the migration areas. DEER MIGRATION signs should set off alarm bells in your head-bone in the Spring, and again in the Fall.



Those DEER signs are a big advantage to motorcyclists, if the situation registers between your ears. One good step is simply to slow down. Decreasing speed gives you more time to spot an animal, more time to react, and a greater ability to maneuver. OK, you may think, but how about that pickup truck on my tail? Well, if you're riding into a deer zone, why not be polite and let the pickup driver go first? By now, you should be able to figure out how to shake a tailgater, using some clever tactic other than just

screwing on more throttle.

OK, let's assume you know you're in deer country, you realize it's the right time of year and hour of the night for a close encounter. You've spotted the DEER sign, momentarily pulled on to the shoulder to let the tailgater on by, reduced your speed 10 mph to give yourself more time to react, and covered the brake lever. Can we really spot a deer ahead in time to react? And what should we do if a deer does leap out? Should we just keep riding along at the same speed, or should we attempt some avoidance maneuver? Should you slow down and then accelerate by as you would for an aggressive dog? Should you prepare to swerve, as you would for a car emerging from an alley? Or should you prepare for a quick stop, as you would for a left-turner?

Unlike an aggressive dog, deer seem to react more to proximity than to sight or sound. A deer may not show much interest in you until you get close, whether your cafe racer has loud pipes or your GL1500 is just burbling along quietly. The deer may glance up at you, and then nonchalantly go back to munching again. But when you get within 60 feet or so, the deer suddenly springs to action, jumping first straight ahead, then in a random zigzag "wolf-evasion" pattern. If it isn't obvious, the deer's first leap is in whatever direction it is facing. That's why hard braking is a smart evasive tactic.

Once the deer leaps into action, there isn't much time left for braking, so smart riders are already prepared to brake when riding into a suspicious area. Some of us brake hard when approaching any wild animal on the shoulder, as an automatic precaution. That's a primary reason for shaking tailgaters and keeping some right hand fingers curled over the brake lever in a deer zone, or anywhere there are wild animals.

When you suddenly realize that "log" in the left ditch has grown ears and antlers, or one of those white reflectors along the edge of the road starts winking at you at night, or a fawn tippy-toes out of the roadside underbrush, my advice is to practice a quick stop. If

the deer doesn't leap out in front of you at the last second, great. Just remember about that second and third deer, or perhaps a horny buck right behind mom. If you're in the habit of making quick stops, you'll make a power stop automatically, and think about it afterward.

What about swerving? It's tempting to think that you might be able to maintain speed and slip on by, or swerve around the deer if it should leap out in front of you. But swerving assumes you can predict which way the deer will leap. The typical zigzag "wolf avoidance" pattern is random.

What about speeding up? After all, the greater your forward energy, the greater your impact force. Yeh, we've heard the folk tale of a motorcyclist riding at warp speed through the forest at night, and slicing a deer in half without dropping the bike. Even if that folk tale is true, the rider was extremely lucky, not clever or skillful. For every folk tale of slamming into a wild animal without getting hurt, there are several other reports of riders being seriously injured, and motorcycles destroyed. And if the winking reflectors you expected to punch through happen to be the eyes of an elk, moose, or bear, the odds lean strongly in favor of not walking away from the impact.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates there are approximately 1.5 million auto deer collisions per year, resulting in damage losses of around \$1.5 billion USD, which works out to an average cost of \$1,000 per accident. One U.S. insurance agency also supports these statistics, and goes on to report that, in the year 2004, there were 150 human deaths in the United States that were directly linked to car deer accidents.

The bear is often considered to be one of the most dangerous animals in North America. As a combined group, polar bears, black bears, and grizzly bears are responsible for 5 to 10 human fatalities per year in North America. Comparing this statistic with the 150 human deaths caused in 2004 by auto deer collisions, one might come to the conclusion that the most dangerous animal in North America is, in fact, the White Tail Deer. An insurance study conducted in 2004 and 2005 indicates the ten states with the most deer hits per year are as follows:

1. Pennsylvania 2. Michigan 3. Illinois 4. Ohio 5. Georgia 6. Minnesota 7. Virginia 8. Indiana 9. Texas 10. Wisconsin

Statistically, most car deer accidents occur between the months of October and December, which also coincides with the deer's mating season. It has also been noted that more accidents occur during the night, or anytime between dusk and dawn. This is attributed to the fact that deer are a very nocturnal animal and spend most of their time foraging at night.

If you drive a great deal in the United States, especially in areas with high deer population, you are at risk of hitting a deer. However, with these guidelines in mind and a

good dose of common sense, you can reduce that risk and keep yourself and your passengers safe.

Although many drivers think about deer and vehicle collisions in the fall, statistics show that in four of the last five years, June was the worst or second worst month for motorist injuries from hitting deer.

Motorcyclists should be especially vigilant -- seven of the 10 fatal deer and motor vehicle crashes last year involved motorcycles.

The Wisconsin DOT has the following tips for avoiding deer collisions while on the road:

- Be vigilant in early morning and evening hours, the most active time for deer.
- If you see a deer by the side of the road, slow down and blow your horn with one long blast to frighten the deer away.
- When you see one deer, look for another one -- deer seldom run alone.

- If you find a deer looming in your headlights, don't expect the deer to move. Deer get confused by headlights and will often freeze.

- Do not swerve -- this can confuse the deer so they won't know where to run. The one exception to this recommendation is if you're riding a motorcycle. Motorcyclists should brake firmly and swerve if necessary to avoid hitting the deer.

- If your vehicle strikes a deer, stay in the vehicle and do not touch the animal. An injured deer trying to move could hurt you or itself, and walking onto the highway can be extremely dangerous. The best course of action is to move your car off the road if you can and call law enforcement.

Vehicle-deer crashes are most prevalent in October and November, but the collisions are the most dangerous in May and June, according to the state Department of Transportation.

June had the highest or second-highest number of injuries from vehicle-deer crashes in four of the last five years.

Statewide last year, seven of 10 fatalities in the 15,821 vehicle-deer crashes reported to Wisconsin authorities involved motorcyclists, and 73 percent of motorcycle-deer crashes resulted in injury or death, Hughes said.