



Road Safety and Deer



Image credit: Joshua Oglestone

You are heading home from work and looking forward to the movie you will be seeing with two of your friends tonight. You pull into your neighbourhood and debate whether all of you should get together for dinner first before the movie or do something afterwards. You start to consider different restaurants as you turn down your side street when a deer suddenly darts across your path from the yard of one of your neighbours. You swerve in an attempt to avoid hitting the deer while at the same time the deer suddenly seems to twist in mid-stride and bolt in the direction it just came from – the direction you swerved towards. You did not anticipate the sudden change of direction by the deer and you hit it directly in the chest. The deer was knocked hard, falling down and seemed stunned when you rushed out of your vehicle to check what happened. Just as you think you should approach the deer to see if it is seriously injured, it begins to kick its legs, quickly stands, and sprints away.

Everything happened so quickly that for a moment you do not do anything. You are in a bit of shock. You slowly realize that you need to move your car off of the road and take a moment to collect yourself. You were not expecting to see a deer in your neighbourhood, but then you remember that there is a large park nearby and you have often seen deer in the park. One must have ventured onto your street, possibly eating from the shrubs by the house next to the road. You take a look at the damage on your car and it appears substantial enough to call the police. You also think to phone animal control since you are not sure how seriously injured the deer may be, and it could be in distress and need help. You realize how lucky you were that the crash was not more serious.

How to reduce collisions and injuries with deer

In North America, the majority of all vehicle collisions with wildlife occur with deer. Drivers should be aware of the additional precautions below if faced with colliding with this quick and unpredictable animal.

- Review the **Tips to help prevent collisions with wildlife** and carry the **card/handout** in your glove compartment for easy reference.

- **Do not swerve to avoid deer.** The majority of accidents are caused by drivers attempting to avoid animals and instead lose control of the vehicle or crash into another vehicle or roadside hazard.
- When deer are directly in your path, steer straight towards them and firmly apply the brake to stop.



Deer are erratic when frightened and naturally twist, zigzag, and jump around to avoid danger. You cannot predict which direction they will go; however, chances are they will not remain in the spot where they are standing.

- Deer are crepuscular and most active at dawn and dusk. Drivers should be especially alert at these times, watching the sides of roads where deer like to forage.
- Deer can easily jump over fences, roadside ditches, and roadside fencing that is less than 3 m high. Do not expect these barriers to prevent a deer from suddenly jumping into your path.
- Deer travel in herds. If you see one, there are likely more around.

Safety Tips

- Do not swerve to avoid deer!
- Many animals travel in numbers – when one appears, watch out for others!
- If you are about to collide with an animal, take your foot off the gas, immediately reduce speed by easing on the brake, and stay in control of your vehicle.

- At night, deer typically freeze in the presence of headlights, usually as a result of overstimulation to their eyes. Flash your lights on and off to allow deer to recover from the overstimulation and react. Again, steer your vehicle directly at deer in your path. When their eyes adjust/recover or when they decide to flee, their direction will be unpredictable.
- Do not rely on deer whistles to frighten away deer. Studies show that whistles have little to no effect. Refer to the [Myths and Misconceptions](#) or [Mitigation Measures](#) page for more information.
- When a vehicle hits a deer, the animal may be deflected onto the hood and slide into the windshield and interior of the vehicle. Be prepared



for dangerous flailing legs and other frantic animal movements if the body of the deer enters the occupant area.

- Expect deer in urban areas. They are attracted to gardens, parks, and other food sources.

What characteristics of a deer increase collision risks?

Deer, and in particular the white-tailed deer, are the most common large mammal found across North America. Equally important is that deer are widely dispersed across their natural habitats, which include forests and meadows common across Canada, but also are increasingly found near residential areas. Thus, the chances of encountering a deer are very high. Indeed, the majority of all vehicle collisions with wildlife occur with deer.

Outside of their sheer numbers, collisions with deer are also more likely due to the way in which they react to a threat. Unlike many other animals, their natural flight response is to run in an unpredictable dodging motion, similar to a zigzag pattern. Deer are physically designed to perform these quick twisting movements. This is how they attempt to evade predators. When drivers come across deer in their path, they simply cannot predict which way deer will dart, regardless of what direction the animal's body is facing.

Deer are also incredible jumpers, able to leap as high as 3 m and as far as 9 m. For this reason, some roads and highways are lined with special tall, reinforced animal fencing. However, in most areas, fences or drainage ditches are not typically designed to prevent deer from accessing the road and will not stop them from doing so.



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Deer travel in herds. As such, when you see one expect more, particularly in the spring and summer when fawns follow their mother. Although they travel in herds, deer can be spaced out and may not be immediately close to one another. Therefore, when one deer ventures across your path, it may be a moment or two before another appears.

Roads often divide animal habitats thus act like a barrier to movements between the various needs of wildlife such as water and food sources or migration and mating activities. Wildlife will cross roads to reach these destinations; however, their natural defences

against predators are not very useful to protect them from or to avoid vehicles. Furthermore, at night, bright headlights mask the large vehicle behind them. Researchers continue to investigate the reasons behind why deer freeze and stare into headlights, but emerging evidence suggests that deer are blinded by the light which overstimulates their sight. Their eyes are designed for low-light conditions, thus deer remain immobile until they are able to see again.

When and where are collision risks with deer highest?

Did you know?

The white-tailed deer is known for its excellent jumping capabilities. It can jump upwards as high as 3 m, higher than the typical 2.1 m fences that surround homes. And they can leap forwards as far as 9 m in a single bound. The white-tailed deer is also very agile and can dart back and forth through brush and change direction very quickly, making some of their movements unpredictable. While running, they can reach speeds of 48 km/h..

When? Drivers should be prepared for more deer during both fall and spring peak periods. Collisions with deer are typically highest during the fall mating season, also referred to as the rut. Male deer are particularly active as they vie to mate with females. However, this is also the hunting season and thus deer frequently move around to avoid human activity.

The second highest period for crashes occurs during the spring. Spring, as well as winter, coincides with deer migration when deer move from winter foraging areas to summer grazing areas. Spring is also the time where

mothers give birth to their young; therefore, small young often trail behind their adult counterparts..

Where? Due to decreased numbers of predators, deer have increased to large numbers in many areas. Combined with decreasing food sources as humans encroach into deer habitats or increases in new desirable vegetation planted in residential areas, you can expect to see deer across both natural environments and on the outskirts of urban/suburban areas. In the natural environment, you are likely to see deer while driving through forested and brush areas; however, you will also encounter deer travelling to graze in nearby meadows or alongside agricultural lands and roads, particularly if feed has spilled onto roads from transport trucks. In urban areas, deer may forage for food in gardens or eat from shrubs or trees, thus drivers may encounter deer in their own neighbourhoods, particularly areas close to parks or water sources.

More information

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Find out **Why wildlife may be found on or near roads** and **What to do after a collision** by checking out the **Road Safety** web page of the Wildlife Roadsharing Resource Centre website or download the **handout/quick reference card** to carry in your glove compartment.

Project Information

The Wildlife Roadsharing Resource Centre (WRRC) is a centralized source of information, research, education, resources, and many other features to answer any questions you may have regarding wildlife-vehicle collisions.

Visit www.wildliferoadsharing.tirf.org to learn more.



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