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Deer Mating Season: Drivers Beware



A close call for a buck on Mill Road in East Aurora, N.Y., in September 2012.

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It's the deadliest time of the year for deer, which also pose a particular danger to motorists in autumn with the arrival of the mating and hunting seasons.

Nearly half of vehicle accidents involving white-tail deer occur from October to December, according to Chad Stewart, a deer research biologist at the Indiana State Division of Fish and Wildlife.

“With the number of deer and the number of vehicles out there, deer-vehicle accidents will happen,” Mr. Stewart said. “The best thing drivers can do is to take measures to keep them to a minimum.”

The confluence of mating and hunting seasons makes November the month with the most deer-vehicle collisions — about 18 percent of the annual total — according to State Farm.

In 2001-11, collisions with animals resulted in 2,083 fatal crashes nationwide, according to AAA's examination of data from the federal Fatality Analysis Reporting System.

In New York state, there were about 35,000 reported deer crashes in 2011, the latest data available, according to Carol Breen, a spokeswoman for the Transportation Department. That year, four people were killed and 1,311 injured in deer-related accidents.

And while deer collisions tend to get the most attention, encounters with smaller animals like squirrels, raccoons and dogs also cause drivers to veer and crash, noted William Van Tassel, who leads AAA's national driver training programs.

He recommends that drivers entering a roadway — especially from sunset to sunrise — scan the area continuously and play a “what-if game” a couple of times.

“What if a deer or animal runs out in front of me — what should I be doing?” Mr. Van Tassel said. This allows drivers to prime their brain, hands and feet, he said, “to do what they need to do, just in case.”

Among the driving tips offered by the Insurance Information Institute are these: be aware that deer tend to travel in groups; that they are most active in the evening, around 6 to 9 p.m.; and that they can be highly unpredictable, especially when caught in headlights, exposed to loud noises like horns or confused by fast-moving vehicles. The institute says drivers should not rely on devices like car-mounted deer whistles or roadside reflectors, which despite advertising claims have not proved effective at keeping deer out of a vehicle's path.

In a recent study of fatal animal crashes, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety found that 60 percent of the people who died were not wearing safety belts. “Most of the human deaths could be prevented if every driver buckled up and every motorcyclist wore a helmet,” said Russ Rader, the organization's senior vice president for communications.

Recently, State Farm noted a 3.5 percent drop in deer collisions nationwide, to 1.22 million, for the one-year period ending on June 30, 2013. It said the odds of a driver striking a deer had declined by 4.3 percent from the period a year earlier.

However, State Farm said the average deer-collision damage claim in that period had risen 3.3 percent, to \$3,414.

Using its own claims data and drivers' license information, the insurer said in September that it had calculated the chances of a driver hitting a deer over the next 12 months to be 1 in 174, down from 1 in 167 in its estimate for the previous year.

Chris Mullen, director of strategic resources at State Farm, said that it was hard to pinpoint a single reason for the decline, but that factors like driver awareness, deer-crossing signs, fences and technology might have contributed.

A disease that reduced the deer population last year may also be a factor, Mr. Stewart of Indiana said. In 2012, he said, deer were hit hard by epizootic hemorrhagic disease, which spread particularly during drought conditions in states including Indiana. The disease is not as much of a factor this year, he added.

In New York, one element that helped to make 2012 the safest year in the nearly six decades of the New York Thruway, with a total of 2,053 incidents, was the addition of deer-crossing signs at locations with a higher-than-average history of vehicle-deer collisions, said Dan Weiller, a spokesman for the New York State Thruway Authority. Those high-traffic areas included Westchester and Rockland counties in the lower Hudson Valley.

"We analyze all accidents that occur on the Thruway to determine if there are changes we can make in the roadway to lessen the chance of recurrence of a similar accident," he said. The Thruway is on track for another decline in deer collisions, with 1,052 reported through September.

To be sure, technology like night-vision systems and pedestrian-avoidance systems may be aiding some drivers as well, according to Mr. Rader of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. He noted that for the first time in September, the group issued crash-avoidance ratings.

What's more, automakers are starting to roll out animal-detection technology.

The 2014 Mercedes-Benz S-Class is now available with a third-generation infrared night-vision system developed by Autoliv Electronics Night Vision, that detects animals in the car's path and alerts the driver. The system will soon be offered on some Audis and BMWs. Volvo is also working to develop an animal-detection system.

The unit of Autoliv, a large Swedish supplier of auto safety systems, says its system allows drivers to detect wildlife and pedestrians “in about 150 milliseconds, which is as fast as a blink of the eye.” Once the infrared unit detects a hazard, the system provides visual and audible warnings to alert the driver about a potential collision. It has a range of about 525 feet.

“In the future,” said Mr. Rader of the insurance institute, “we can foresee that some of these systems will be beneficial in preventing both pedestrian collisions and collisions with animals.”