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Hunters encouraged to reduce deer population to increase safety on roads

Culling deer numbers helps drivers

By Andrea Uhde

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Pat Gernert pulled on camouflage coveralls, strapped on a rifle and trekked into the Oldham County woods in search of doe.

"I take the biggest one, because it's the breeding female," said Gernert, who hunts near Exit 18 off Interstate 71. "I figure that's one less that's going to play in the traffic."

Gernert's mission was typical among many hunters across the state -- target female deer to keep them from breeding, and reduce the number colliding with cars.

And it seems to be working.

Even as national numbers rise, the number of deer accidents on Kentucky roads has been dropping, on average, since at least 2000, when there were 3,333 reported incidents, according to state police records.

Last year, there were 2,900 accidents, and this year is shaping up to be even lower, with only 2,353 accidents reported as of mid-November.

Most collisions occur October through December, during deer-mating season, when bucks are roaming the wilderness in search of females in heat. The females that aren't in heat try to evade them, often rushing across roads.

"There's not as many deer out there now as there were about three years ago," said David Yancy, a wildlife biologist with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife.

And one reason could be that hunters are shooting more female deer, "which is something we've been hammering at," Yancy said.

Promoting hunt idea

He said the department uses the media, Kentucky Afield magazine and KET to spread the message that after hunters kill an antlered deer, "you really should try to keep hunting (doe). Even if you don't want them, try to line them up for friends or family."

Nationally, there are more than 1.5 million deer-vehicle collisions each year in the United States, causing \$1.1 billion in property damage, according to State Farm Insurance, which tracks all such claims.

Animal-related accident claims have increased 14.9 percent over the past five years, according to the company.

In Indiana, deer collisions have increased the past several years, rising from 14,501 in 2005 to 16,569 last year. So far this year, more than 11,150 accidents have been reported.

Chad Stewart, a deer research biologist for the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, said he's not sure why the accidents have increased there, although he believes there are more drivers on the road than in the past.

"We've put more pressure on hunters to try to harvest antlerless deer, and that has paid off, but it's a slow process," he said.

White-tailed deer, the most common kind in Kentucky and Indiana, can travel between 25 and 30 mph, and weigh between 100 and 200 pounds.

Most accidents happen an hour before and an hour after sunrise and sunset, when deer are most active. Unfortunately, that's also rush hour for drivers.

Anne Wheeler of Buckner was driving on Ky. 393 near Interstate 71 at 8:30 p.m. last week when she saw a deer leaping toward her Ford pickup.

"The next thing I knew, he was on my truck," she said. "I didn't see antlers; I couldn't see much at all."

The deer hit the fender on the driver's side, broke the side-view mirror and jammed her door shut before running off in a blur, she said.

The damage will cost \$4,800 to fix, though her insurance will cover most of it, she said.

Not all deer collisions are reported.

In Bullitt County, where there have been 19 reported accidents this year, the state transportation department has already picked up 50 to 60 deer carcasses along the roads, especially along Interstate 65 and Ky. 245 near Bernheim Forest.

In Jefferson County, there have been 90 reported accidents, but the department had picked up about 130 deer by early this month, the majority of them from Interstate 265/Ky. 841 and Interstates 71 and 64 and Dixie Highway. In Oldham, where there have been 28 reported accidents, the department has found 75 to 80 deer, the majority along I-71.

Close encounter of deer kind

Nancy O'Leary, who lives in Jeffersontown, said she sees the deer along I-71 when she's driving to Madison, Ky., to visit family.

"A few of them, they get right up to the edge of the interstate," she said. "My husband's on the lookout

for them while I'm trying to drive."

She said she gets in the slow lane and "just prays that nothing jumps in front of you."

Nationwide, about 150 people die each year in motor vehicle accidents involving deer, according to the state Transportation Cabinet. Last year, Kentucky had three fatalities.

One of them happened last November, when Megan Lucas, 17, of La Grange was in a car that hit a deer and then was struck by a tractor-trailer on I-71 in Oldham County. She died at the scene.

Oldham officials and concerned citizens have discussed adding more signs along I-71 or putting up a fence in the median to keep deer from crossing. But Yancy said the best way to reduce the number of accidents is through legal hunting, which starts in early September and lasts through most of January.

Kentucky has 255,000 hunters, and in most of the state they are allowed to kill one antlered deer and three others -- either doe or young males. In the Louisville area, however, the deer population is so heavy that hunters are allowed to kill one antlered deer and an unlimited number of doe and fawns. Female deer, on average, have two fawns a year.

The deer population in Kentucky peaked in 2003 at 1.1 million deer, and it's closer to 1 million now. Yancy said the department doesn't want to see more than 25 deer per square mile. Bullitt and Jefferson meet the guideline, but Oldham has 40 per square mile, he said.

"The big challenge now is going to be to annually kill enough to keep deer-auto collisions and crop damage complaints at a tolerable level," Yancy said.

Reporter Andrea Uhde can be reached at (502) 582-4663.

Additional Facts

Avoiding deer accidents

Be attentive from sunset to midnight and around sunrise.

Watch out at deer-crossing zones, in areas known to have a large deer population, and in areas where roads divide agricultural fields from forestland.

Use high beam headlights to better illuminate the eyes of deer on or near the roadway.

Slow down and blow the horn with one long blast to drive deer away.

Brake firmly if a deer is in the road, but stay in the lane. Many serious crashes occur when drivers swerve to avoid a deer and hit another vehicle or lose control of their cars.

Always wear a seat belt. Most people killed in deer-related crashes were not buckled.

Source: Insurance Information Institute
