

# Oh, Deer

Technology can only go so far in reducing wildlife collisions – the rest is up to you *by Lawrence Herzog*

**E**ACH YEAR, VEHICLE COLLISIONS with wildlife generate millions of dollars in damage claims, kill thousands of animals, injure hundreds of humans and sometimes can be fatal for drivers and passengers. In 2008, two Saskatchewan motorists were killed and 384 injured in 16,340 animal-related collisions, resulting in total claims of more than \$40 million. Incidents where vehicles meet wildlife have been trending up, and all that roadkill troubles government officials.

“Reducing the number of these collisions is part of our long-term traffic safety strategy, and we continue to look for new ways to address this issue,” says Kwei Quaye, Saskatchewan Government Insurance’s (SGI) assistant vice-president of Traffic Safety Services. In 2007, SGI worked with the Saskatchewan Ministry of Highways to erect five kilometres of deer fence on Hwy. 7 near Harris (80 km southwest of Saskatoon). Preliminary findings indicate that the fence has successfully reduced the number of deer hits on that stretch of road; the ministry is still evaluating the cost and safety value of the fence.

Elsewhere, collision prevention strategies have found considerable success along the twinned sections of the Trans-Canada Highway through Banff National Park, which sees more than 10,000 vehicles per day in the summer. Since 1982, 22 wildlife underpasses and two 50-metre-wide overpasses have been built along these sections of highway, along with more than 45 km of 2.4-metre-high fencing. Between 1996 and April 2009, 11 species of large mammals used the two-dozen crossing structures more than 186,000 times. And even though vehicle traffic continues to increase along the highway, animal-related collisions and fatalities have dropped by more than 80 per cent, with a 96 per cent reduction for elk and deer alone.

Traditional wildlife warning signs, although frequently used and inexpensive,



tend to be ignored; one Swedish study found that 60 per cent of drivers don’t even notice the signs. Complex warning systems set up along highways haven’t been much more effective. The devices use lights, sounds and even scents to scare animals away from the roadway. The Saskatchewan government started testing a system in 2002 on Hwy. 7 southwest of Saskatoon but abandoned it because of technical problems. Deer whistles, which attach to vehicles and emit a sound designed to scare deer away, have also been touted, but their effectiveness is in dispute.

In the end, solutions based on technology are costly, and blanketing the province with them isn’t feasible. So, as SGI’s Quaye notes, it all comes back to where most traffic safety solutions begin: with the driver behind the wheel, and the driver’s awareness and preparation. Given the size and geography of the province, encounters with wildlife on our roadways are inevitable. It’s how we manage those encounters and take precautions that make the difference.

A good start is to be extra vigilant during May and June, when animals are drawn to ditches for road salt and to escape biting insects, and late fall and early winter, when deer and moose are mating and migrating.

Peak times for collisions are dawn and dusk. When a collision is unavoidable, traffic safety experts recommend that drivers remain calm and aim their vehicle at the spot where the animal came from, not where it is going. Try for a glancing blow rather than a head-on encounter, and let up on the brake just before the collision so the front of the vehicle rises slightly and reduces the chances of the animal going through the windshield.

Animal collisions should be reported to the police or local RCMP detachment. If damage to the vehicle is minor, motorists can then continue driving and follow

normal SGI claims procedures. If an animal is killed or injured on a provincial highway and poses a hazard to traffic, it is removed as soon as possible by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Highways and Infrastructure. Staying at the scene until help arrives is a good idea. ▣

## where the wild things are

- **Slow down and use caution** when driving through typical wildlife habitat such as parks, wooded areas and fields.
- **Scan the road** from shoulder to shoulder and slow down if you see movement.
- **Animals, especially deer**, tend to travel in groups or pairs. If you see one, chances are you’ll soon encounter another.
- **Flashing lights and honking** may chase away a deer, or discourage it from moving onto the road. Honking does not usually work with moose. □

Sources: CAA Saskatchewan, SGI, RCMP, Canada Safety Council, Parks Canada.