

# Safety Corner



## Deer and the Motorcycle

There are three major species of deer in the United States, and the most prevalent is the white tail deer which can be found in all of the lower 48 states. White tail deer is the principle species that populates our geographic area and a typical deer can vary in size from 90 lbs for a yearling to in excess of 230 lbs, although those found in north Florida do not typically weigh-in on the upper ends of the scale. Small or large, this is not an animal you would want to encounter while riding your motorcycle.

Deer populations are on the increase, and their habits and instincts put them on a collision course with motor vehicles, including motorcycles. In 2002, only 3% of the cars and utility trucks crashing into deer resulted in serious human injury or a fatality, but 75 percent of the motorcycle-deer crashes resulted in serious injury or death to the cyclist. These statistics have not improved in the intervening years as deer populations continue to expand, with the current North American deer population estimated to be between 20 and 30 million.

To emphasize the lethality of an encounter I will reference an incident involving a nationally known motorcycle safety expert and author who taught thousands of riders to handle themselves on the roads, Lawrence Grodsky, died following a collision with a deer while riding his bike in April 2006 in Texas. The point being, if it can happen to a highly skilled motorcycle riding and safety instructor, it can happen to anyone!



A "typical" encounter with a deer occurs when the animal unexpectedly crosses into the path of an oncoming vehicle, with the potential for horrendous consequences. What's surprising is the amount of damage that can occur with even a small deer involved crash. My personal experience with a deer/vehicle crash involves a family member who was traveling northbound on Meridian near Summerbrooke when a deer came out from the wood-line and into the path of the vehicle. The vehicle impacted the head and neck of the deer and did about \$4000 worth of damage to the right front of the car. There were no injuries to the driver and passenger, but the vehicle had extensive damage and the deer was killed. Had this been a motorcycle, without doubt the results would have been much more severe for the driver and passenger. I also know that of a friend who has totaled three cars in collisions with deer on Meridian Road. Draw your own conclusions, but in my opinion this particular road is a hot bed of deer activity. However; the danger present on Meridian Rd is by no means an isolated situation as there are many roads in Leon and adjoining counties that have a high potential for motorcycle/deer collisions.

What makes these accidents so menacing is that they are completely unpredictable and frequently without any forewarning. To get a better grasp of what to look for and how to lessen the risk, let's examine some deer behaviors. Deer are social animals that frequently travel in family groups.

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They are cautious by nature and prefer the cover provided by trees and vegetation to being out in the open. They generally feed and are more active earlier in the morning and after sunset. This means the risk of deer strikes increases when the sun is rising or setting. You will also see them along the sides of interstates and roadways browsing on tender grasses. Deer are frequently spotted during HOG full moon rides grazing after sunset along the roads in southern Leon, Woodville, Crawfordville and along 319 toward Sopchoppy and Panama. During the daytime they are typically bedded down in secluded areas.

To minimize your risk, here are some suggestions:

- 1) Scan the roadsides after sunset, if they are grazing the easiest way to recognize a deer is through the reflection from their eyes. The reflection is similar to those of road markers, but the deer's reflections will generally be above the road grade and will be in pairs. So if you see something that appears to be in pairs, the deer is either looking at you or facing you. Do exercise some caution, cover your brakes, slow down, and look for the unexpected.
- 2) Do keep in mind that deer mostly travel in family groups, so if you see one, there are likely more in the immediate vicinity. Again, once you see or think you see a deer, place your hands and feet over your brake controls, slow down, and expect the unexpected.
- 3) Do keep in mind that a deer's reaction is completely unpredictable. Studies have shown that deer will wait until the last second and generally bolt in the direction they are looking or facing, and then completely change course or run erratically in a zig-zag motion. Once again, if danger appears, or you sense it, cover your brake controls, slow down and anticipate the unexpected.
- 4) If you suddenly realize that an impact is unavoidable, fight the impulse to swerve to avoid the deer. Swerving will immediately create an unstable situation, which will more than likely exacerbate the consequences and heighten the chances you will put the bike down. The more stable your bike, the more control you will have and maintain.
- 5) Pay attention to the yellow deer crossing signs. One of the criteria used for placing these signs is the number of deer killed as a result of motor vehicle collisions in a given area. If there is a sign present, do heed the warning, as there is a higher than average deer activity in the specified area.
- 6) Deer whistles. Some people swear they are effective and others are equally adamant they have no effect in warding off deer. Draw your own conclusions, but I found no scientific evidence that supports they are effective in causing deer to avoid the source of the sound.

In closing, like it or not it's all about a game of chance. But the odds are markedly better for those who manage their speed and understand where and when deer are most active. Keep in mind we are the interlopers in the deer's environment, and making the suggested adjustments may improve your odds avoiding a collision with a deer.

Happy New Year, ride safe and stay alert for deer as you ride the beautiful country roads that we all enjoy so much.

Jerry

### Suggestion of the month.....

#### **Move the deer crossing to where there's less traffic**

A lot of deer get hit by cars west of Crown Point on U.S. 231. There are too many cars to have the deer crossing here. The deer crossing sign needs to be moved to a road with less traffic. - TIM ABBOTT, CROWN POINT