

Be alert for deer on the highway

By Jim Anderson
Correspondent

Motorists in Sisters Country need to be alert for deer on the roadways. This is the season when deer and elk are on the move, and that increases the possibility of collisions that don't end well for anybody.

According to Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), "Overwinter fawn survival was high, so we expect to see a good number of yearling bucks this fall. However, there was little snowpack and moisture this year, resulting in dryer than normal conditions throughout the districts. Hunter harvest of deer last fall was about average throughout the districts, however, deer populations continue to be lower than management objectives due to habitat loss and disturbance, poaching, predation, disease and road kill."

Wildlife Biologist Sara Gregory of ODFW was asked to bring attention to the big game migration dangers on the highway.

"Typically mule deer must cross at least one highway, twice each year as part of their migration between winter and summer ranges," she said. "Before modern human settlement, the primary challenge migrating deer faced was avoiding predators, such as cougars and bears, on their cross-country journeys. In the last 100 years, humans have created another set of obstacles to deer movement. We have built roads and fast-moving cars that, according to ODFW studies, kill at least one deer each day. Neighborhoods and other developments have compromised habitat and increased deer encounters with domestic dogs, fences, and other seemingly innocuous objects such as tomato cages and hammocks that can have fatal consequences. These factors are among many contributing to a decline in deer populations over the last 20-plus years."

Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) has posted warning signs where frequent deer crossings occur.

One of the areas where deer and motor vehicle collisions happen regularly in Sisters Country — and especially during the deer migration season — is just south of Highway 20 and Fryrear Road, between Mileposts 7 and 8. Mule deer have been moving through that area long before the highway was built. The lay of the land, the numbers of trees and plant cover, the direction of the

wind, the food for mule deer to eat and other factors favoring deer is such that that route to the winter range is perfect.

Now there are hay farms on the east side of the highway to make the route even more attractive to mule deer. That stretch of highway — actually all the way from Fryrear to Bend — is deadly for deer thinking about food, the coming snow, cold and cougar. They continue to travel their ancestral trails and will probably never learn to look both ways before stepping out on the roadway.

Today, passenger cars traveling to and from Sisters on that stretch of road do so at 65 mph normally, but it isn't uncommon to be passed by a vehicle exceeding 75 mph.

Lt. Mike Biondi of the Deschutes County Sheriff's Office has the following suggestions for motorists:

- Slow down. In today's traffic that may seem like an impossible suggestion; it appears drivers won't slow down for anything. But when you consider how fast and how much ground you cover while driving at 65 miles per hour it makes all the sense in the world. Just about the time you see a deer ahead of you, you're already there.

- When you see an ODOT deer crossing sign ahead of you at night, lift your foot off the accelerator pedal, and if there are no vehicles oncoming, flip your headlight into the high beam mode. (If there is another vehicle coming toward you, drop the headlights to low beam and stay alert.) Pay attention to both highway shoulders; deer and elk usually do not advertise their intentions.

- Be aware that most deer activity occurs in the hours just after sunrise and shortly before sunset.

Both ODFW and ODOT warn that we won't always see a deer or elk's eyes reflecting light back at drivers, so don't relax after one or two cross the road. Deer and elk often travel with others of their kind this time of year, and a doe could still have a fawn or two traveling with her, just out of sight.

Sometimes a deer or elk will cross the road ahead of you, then for some unknown reason, stop and turn around and run back across in front of you. If you see a deer or an elk on the shoulder, expect anything to happen, start slowing down, and be prepared to stop quickly.

Stay in your lane. Swerving to avoid a deer or elk could cause you crash into someone head-on, or side-swipe another vehicle.

There are hundreds more

vehicles on the road today than during earlier deer migration seasons, and it seems everyone is in a big hurry to get somewhere. Wildlife trying to cross a busy highway are seemingly oblivious to this traffic interrupting their need to be somewhere else. A serious accident could occur — in which the deer or elk will be killed, your vehicle damaged, and the occupants could be potentially injured or even killed. In the final analysis it is the driver's responsibility to avoid trouble.



PHOTO BY JIM CORNELIUS

Sisters is full of deer, and that can make for potential danger on the highway.

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