

It's a Jungle Out There

By Nick Davenport #92384



They say that good judgment comes from experience, and that experience comes from bad judgment. We are the sum total of our motorcycling experiences, and carry sometimes hard-earned lessons with us when we ride. Let me tell you about one of mine.

It was Fall 1969 in the Texas Hill Country and our local motorcycle club, the Space Center Cycles, decided to go on a weekend camping trip to Canyon Dam, about 200 miles west of Houston. The nominal attraction was the annual New Braunfels Oktoberfest, where the old German settlers honored their homeland traditions with an annual celebration of feasting, beer and dancing. Unlike the flat swampy terrain of Houston, the Hill Country is another of those mythic lands that lures motorcycles—sparse traffic; rolling, twisty, two-lane back roads past little ranches and cabins tucked in the woods; and the smell of mesquite and live oak in the evening air. Backcountry, bratwurst and bikes—we couldn't resist.

Early Saturday morning, we packed up our sleeping bags and tents, and headed off, arriving on the shores of the lake around noon. We

unloaded the gear, pitched the tents, then made for the festival. There were six of us on an assortment of bikes—several Hondas, a Triumph Bonneville and two Beemers: an R69S and my trusty R50. The Bonnie was owned by the 'Alpha' male, our club president, and the only one of us accompanied by a lovely lady companion. In 1969, 650ccs was about as big and fast as most bikes got, and we were suitably in awe of both the bike and the lady. The rest of us were solo and hangers-on, socially speaking. We fell into our places, single-file behind the Bonnie, and headed for town.

From Canyon Dam the most direct (and best) route to New Braunfels and the Oktoberfest is along a beautiful winding stretch alongside the Guadalupe River called, logically enough, River Road. We banked and rolled through the turns, fording the Guadalupe at several crossings where the river flowed over the roadway. By the time we arrived at the festival, the cool autumn air, the exhilaration of the ride,

and the sheer freedom of sweeping through the canyon road ensured we had appetites and thirst to make the trip memorable. German sausage,

sauerkraut, polka bands and responsibly moderate amounts of beer filled the afternoon, until it was time to make the return trip to our lakeside campsite.

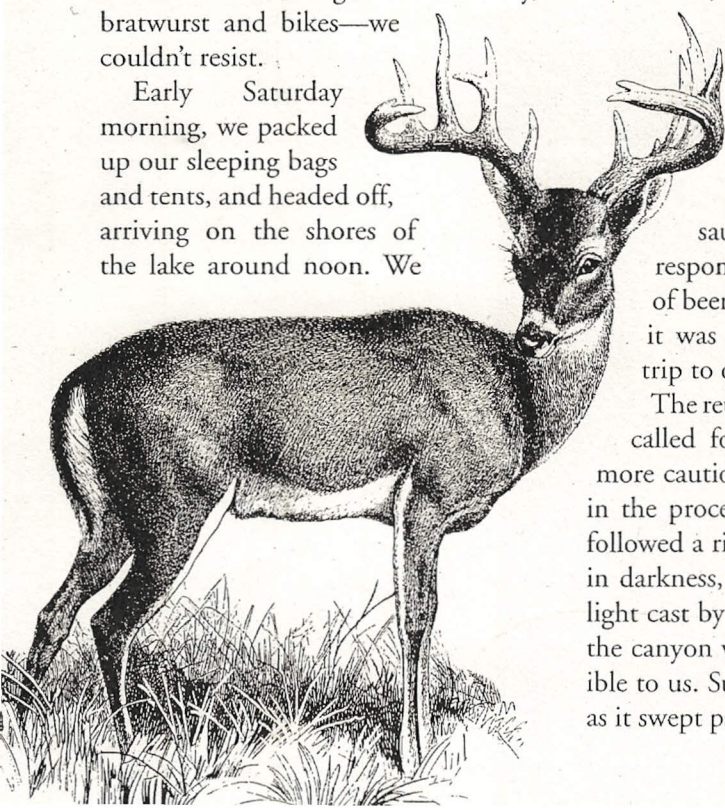
The return ride, now after sunset, called for a little less speed and more caution. I fell into fourth place in the procession heading home. We followed a ribbon of asphalt shrouded in darkness, except for the patches of light cast by our serial headlights, and the canyon walls and river were invisible to us. Suddenly, out of the gloom as it swept past, the Bonnie's headlight

painted a deer standing motionless at the right side of the road. This deer was your typical Texas Hill Country denizen, somewhere in size between a very large dog and a small buffalo, and she displayed the proverbial deer-in-the-headlights stare—frozen amid the lights and sounds of our passing bikes. Zip, zip, zip—three bikes passed her at close proximity and nary a muscle twitch did she show. Then it was my turn.

Blam! The frozen statue had suddenly bolted, directly across my path, and I'd slammed into her with all of my 45mph's worth of inertia. If I had any illusions of Bambi being soft and fluffy, they were dispelled that instant. She ricocheted into the ditch and I went down, sliding behind my R50 a distance of some 60 feet before stopping, using my shirt-sleeve-clad elbows for brakes (I paced off the distance the following morning, out of morbid curiosity).

"Wow! You OK?" The rest of the pack circled around to render assistance and assess the damage to me, the bike and the deer. I seemed fine, except for a nasty case of road rash along my forearms, and the bike seemed rideable, although the headlight was smashed. We discovered that the deer was dead, eviscerated at the wayside. We limped home, me relying on the headlights of the other bikes to show the way, finally crawling into our tents around 10 p.m. However, I spent the rest of the night pacing aimlessly back and forth around the campsite, unable to sleep from the pain of my abrasions. That gave me plenty of time to think about what had happened.

I believe it was Mark Twain who said something to the effect that someone who rides a bull knows five or six things about that experience that someone else who hasn't, doesn't. I



now know five or six things about hitting a deer that I didn't know beforehand. For instance, I know that it's possible for a motorcyclist to dispatch an animal broadside, in head-to-head-light close combat, that a hunter can't sneak up to within 50 yards, even while trying. And that a spooked animal is just as likely to run toward a threat as away from it. As far as reaction time, I had no time to react. Whatever amount of space as a safety cushion I thought I was maintaining turned out not to be there. I couldn't explain why it had happened, but I'd sure convinced myself that it was all possible. My judgment had just crept up a notch.

There's a story of the lady who called the highway department and told them to move the "deer-crossing" signs somewhere else, as it was far too dangerous for them to cross there, since so many were being killed. Turns out that deer and other animal strikes are pretty common occurrences and, like mine, often don't get reported. The signs are put there by the highway department when they get tired of picking carcasses off that particular stretch of road. If you kept up with the latest Iron Butt Rally this summer, whose riders covered over 992,000 miles in 11 days, you'll recall that while none of the participants hit another vehicle, there were certainly a bunch of animal strikes or near-misses, including several deer, a rabbit, a coyote, an eagle and a buffalo!¹ When I see a "deer-crossing" sign, I slow down and

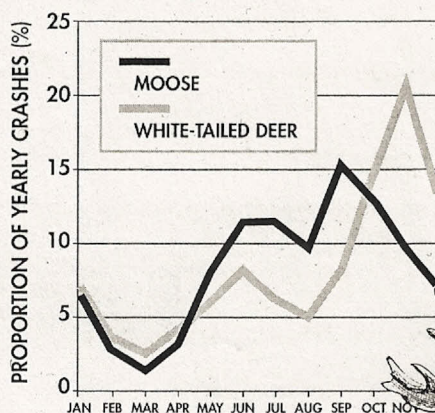
start watching closely. Once bitten—twice shy, as they say.

All of this brings me to an interesting article I stumbled across while thumbing through my medical journals recently, and which bears passing on. This one caught my eye, being a bit different from the usual dry medical fare, and got me thinking again about my encounter with my deer years ago: "Deer-Vehicle Crashes: Extensive Peak at 1 Hour after Sunset." Two Finnish investigators decided to look closely at deer-vehicle crashes, and see if the timing of these fit a pattern. Whereas others had looked at accident statistics and deer-vehicle crashes by time of day, these investigators referenced the time to local sunset at the time of the year and location of the crash, and made a surprising discovery. What they found is graphed in Figure 1, and shows a whopping increase in crashes centering around *one hour after sunset*. When they adjusted the data to account for numbers of vehicles on the road at that time of day, they found up

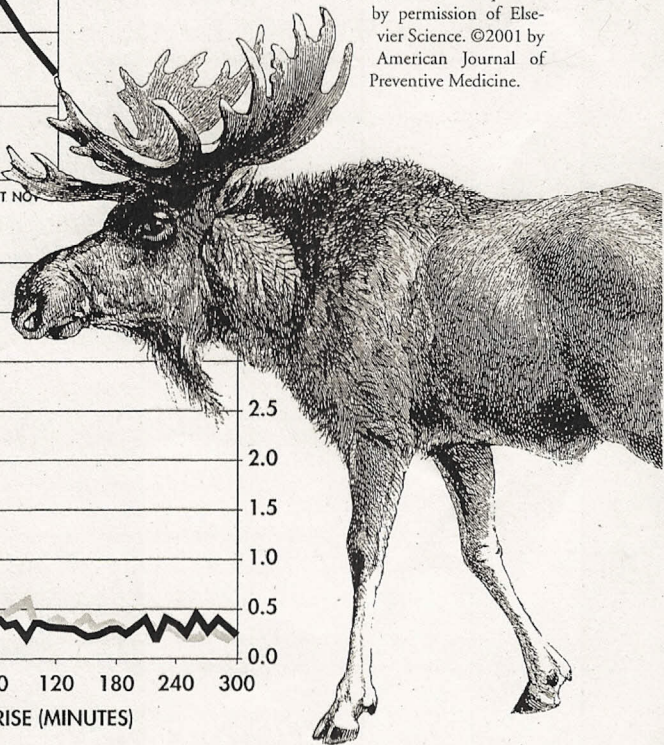
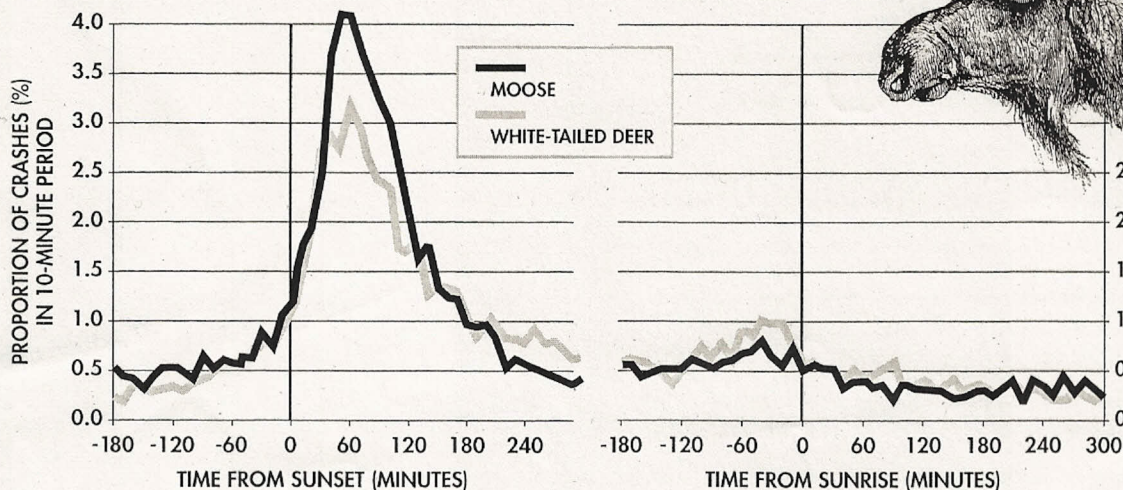
to a 30-times greater risk of hitting a deer the hour after sunset, compared to other times of the day. And hitting a moose at that time was even more likely, at 40 times (if you're in moose territory, of course) compared to daylight hours.

Figure 2 shows the hit rate by month for both moose and deer. March is the safest month, with the rate steadily increasing to a peak September through November. My hitting a deer after sunset in October sure fit the pattern. The complete article is printed in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, October 2001 issue, by Hannu Haikonen and Heikki Summala.²

The take-home message behind all this might be when riding in wild animal country to remember—it's a jungle out there. An hour after local sunset turns out to be rush hour for the deer heading for dinner. That might be a great time to duck into that roadside restaurant, and linger over that piece of pie and second cup of coffee, while the grazers out there head towards their favorite eating sites. That way you both can enjoy a nice meal, uninterrupted by a chance encounter. ☉



1. Courtesy, Mike Kneebone, President, Iron Butt Assoc.
2. Haikonen H, Summala H. "Deer-Vehicle Crashes: Extensive Peak at 1 Hour After Sunset." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 2001; 21(3): 209-13. Reprinted by permission of Elsevier Science. ©2001 by American Journal of Preventive Medicine.



Many deer caught in headlights

Report puts cost of resulting crashes at \$400M in Pa.

By Jon Schmitz
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

You've got the foliage, which is very pleasant, but this time of year also brings carnage, as deer begin their annual mating-season gallop into traffic.

Mid-October through mid-December is the peak season for deer vs. vehicle collisions, and Pennsylvania is one of the nation's most active battlefields. State Farm insurance projects that about 119,500 collisions occurred in Pennsylvania in the year that ended June 30, 2012, and the average damage claim for that period was just over \$3,400.

That works out to more than \$400 million in damage wreaked in the state by wayward deer, and that doesn't count the value of the gardens they devour before roaming onto the roads.

Pennsylvania is the undisputed leader in the number of deer-vehicle crashes, with Michigan a distant second at 87,277, according to State Farm. But West Virginia remained the state where a typical motorist stood the greatest chance of taking a deer in the headlights — a 1 in 38 chance. Pennsylvania was fifth, with a 1 in 73 chance.

State Farm, which faithfully tabulates deer-vehicle encounters each year, said the odds of a driver hitting one have declined by 4.3 percent nationwide. Pennsylvania Department of Transportation figures say motorists here shouldn't relax.

Reportable deer-related crashes (including ones where the driver missed the deer but hit something else) have steadily increased statewide, going from 4,109 in 2008 to 4,855 last year. Fourteen people died and 1,352 were injured in 2012.

Allegheny County recorded 308 reportable crashes, up

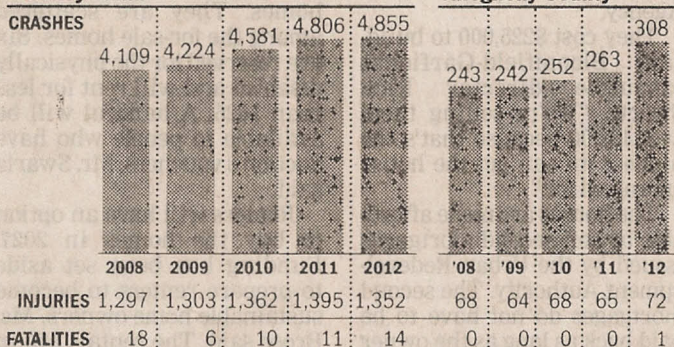
Peak season for deer-vehicle collisions

Pennsylvania is the undisputed leader in the U.S. in the number of deer-vehicle collisions, but the state ranks fifth in likelihood of hitting a deer.

Top 5 states: likelihood of hitting a deer, 2011-12

RANK	STATE	LIKELIHOOD
1.	West Virginia	1 in 38.2
2.	Montana	1 in 61.0
3.	South Dakota	1 in 65.1
4.	Iowa	1 in 67.1
5.	Pennsylvania	1 in 73.1

Deer-related crashes, injuries, fatalities Pennsylvania



Source: State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Company, Pa. Department of Transportation James Hilston/Post-Gazette

Deer crashes cause millions in damage

DEER, FROM PAGE B-1

sharply from the 263 that occurred in 2011. Seventy-two people were hurt, one fatally.

The problem might be worse were it not for a volunteer organization, Whitetail Management Associates of Greater Pittsburgh, which provides experienced archers at no cost to municipalities that want to thin their deer herds.

The group's president, Joe McCluskey Jr., said members are hunting in nine Allegheny County parks and a handful of other communities. "We want to try to make [the population] a healthy number. We don't want to overharvest," he said.

In addition to reducing the potential damage to vehicles and property, the group has donated more than 25 tons of processed venison to charity since its creation in 1996. Hunters donate the meat from their first deer and every third one after that to the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank.

According to Cornell University Cooperative Extension, deer cause at least \$2 billion in damage to vehicles, crops, timber and gardens annually in the U.S., with half of that inflicted on vehicles.

The Pennsylvania Game Commission says mating season for deer extends from mid-October to mid-December, peaking in mid-November. It is during this time that deer tend to dash about with little regard for their safety.

Experts offer a range of advice to drivers: Slow down,

use high-beams when there is no nearby traffic, be extra cautious around dawn and dusk, and if you spot a deer, assume others are nearby. Never swerve to avoid a deer; you could lose control and risk colliding with oncoming traffic.

"A little precaution goes a long way," said John Mackey, police chief in Bethel Park, where the deer population has become a source of concern to some residents.

"We do have an awful lot of deer," he said. "It's not like we're in crisis mode." He estimated that "10 or so" deer-vehicle collisions occur in a typical year.

Damage from striking a deer is covered by the optional comprehensive portion of auto insurance, which typically means the driver pays a lower deductible than for a crash. If the deer is missed but the motorist hits something else, collision coverage applies—another reason experts say not to swerve.

If a struck deer dies, the driver or a passing motorist can claim the carcass, provided they are Pennsylvania residents. They must report it to the Game Commission within 24 hours.

That venison might be their most expensive meal of the year.

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W. Va. most crash-prone

NEW YORK — One in 53 drivers in West Virginia will probably hit a deer in the next 12 months as motorists navigate roads that wind through forests, according to State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Co.

The state had the highest rate of such collisions in the 12 months ended June 30, according to a statement Monday from Bloomington, Illinois-based State Farm, the largest U.S. auto insurer. West Virginia was the most crash-prone state for the fifth straight year, and the latest rate compares with 1 in 42 in last year's report, according to the company. The estimated number of U.S. collisions in the 12-month period dropped 7 percent to 1.09 million.