

How to Avoid Wildlife Collisions When Driving

We live in excellent wildlife habitat--great for viewing wildlife, but sometimes not so great for safety. We've had fatalities due to wildlife collisions in the Nine Mile area and you can expect deer, bear, moose, bighorn sheep and elk on many of the roads we drive. Hit one of these critters and you, your passengers, your vehicle and the wildlife will all have a bad experience. There are plenty of smaller animals that can also suffer from collisions. Turkeys are one example that I occasionally see dead in the road. Road carrion attracts scavengers that can also be hit by vehicles.

The Ninemile Wildlife Workgroup has put up signs along the Six Mile, West Nine Mile and Remount roads several years ago to try to remind people to be cautious while driving in wildlife areas and reduce wildlife collisions. Many of these signs have been vandalized to some extent with one location having been stolen twice. At the other extreme, one that I like, a sign has been modified to show a little respect to our kids and dogs.



Just how effective are warning signs at reducing wildlife vehicle collisions? An internet search showed that most studies conclude that signage is not effective. One report, *Wildlife-Vehicle Collision and Crossing Mitigation Measures: A Toolbox for the Montana Department of Transportation*, states that “Based on available data, standard deer warning signs are concluded to be ineffective in reducing wildlife-vehicle collisions”. Additionally the report states “Education and public information campaigns appear to result in increased driver awareness of the risks of wildlife-vehicle collisions and makes drivers aware of actions they can take to try to prevent severe collisions”.

In the spirit of informing drivers about avoiding collisions, here's a list of wildlife avoidance tips culled from various resources. You can substitute most large animals for deer in this list.

Slow Down and Save a Buck!

- A driver's best defense is to drive responsibly. Drive at a safe speed—this means slower when visibility is limited or when roads are slippery. Always wear a seat belt and insist passengers wear them, also.
- Make sure the vehicle's windshield is clean inside and out. Wash your headlights during mud season.
- Enlist passengers to help keep an eye out for deer.

- Keep an eye on vehicles up ahead. If their brake lights suddenly come on, there might be a deer (or a herd) near or on the road. If a car slows down coming towards you, slow down and stay alert, they may be slowing down for animals that you don't see. Ditto if a vehicle has hazard lights flashing or is stopped alongside or in the road.
- If you see one deer or elk cross the road, expect others. Also an animal may quickly cross back where it came from.
- Be especially aware at dusk and dawn. This is when deer presence is heaviest by the sides of roads, and it's harder for humans to see.
- Actively scan both sides of the road as you drive looking for any signs of movement, flashes of eyes, or body shapes.
- Drive near the center line if there is no oncoming traffic.
- Drive defensively. Be ready to take evasive action. If a deer appears on or near the road, slow down and stop if necessary. Another not often used tactic is to speed up before the animal crosses your path, although I'd use this one sparingly and only if you cannot stop in time and believe you can avoid a collision by speeding up.
- Honk your horn when you see a deer about to cross the road. This is an effective way for deer to know where the car is coming from and heading to. Their instincts should do the rest.
- If there's a choice between hitting a deer and swerving into traffic or off the road, hit the deer. Animal advocates may not like it, but studies show many crashes happen not only when drivers hit deer, but when colliding with another vehicle in the opposite lane while trying to take evasive action. Head on collisions or driving off the road can often do more damage to your vehicle and passengers than hitting the deer would have.
- Use the high beams where possible. Lights help illuminate the eyes of animals so they can be seen sooner. Don't switch on the vehicle's internal lights. This causes glare on the inside of the windshield which could reduce visibility and make the animals harder to see. Also, flash the high beams to warn approaching drivers when deer are spotted on or near the highway.

If You Do Hit a Deer

- Pull over if possible. Put your hazard lights on and if you can, put the headlights onto the animal or as close as possible.
- Check passengers for injuries and treat accordingly. Even if there are no injuries, shock will probably occur fairly quickly. Try to reassure one another and if it is cold, put on warmer clothing immediately as shock or fear increases the inability to ward off cold. If it is winter, stay in the car for warmth.
- Avoid going near the animal; it may kick or gore you from fear and pain. If it blocks the road, use your hazard lights and headlights and keep your car stationary. Only attempt to move the animal if you are 100% certain that it is dead.
- Use road flares or triangles if you have them.
- If you need help, call 911 or flag down someone.