



## The Road Warrior

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# Deer, sun glare are October's plagues

"Before my foot was off the gas, boom!"

That's how Oradell's Doug Montone describes the crash involving two midnight intruders who leaped over a Route 208 divider in Franklin Lakes and wrecked the front bumper, right fender and headlight on his new Toyota Camry.

That was 11 months ago, a time when AAA Northeast estimates that more than 9,000 of these animal-versus-vehicle confrontations occurred in New Jersey at the height of the deer-breeding season, the late-September-through-early-December traffic frenzy that's now upon us again.

Hunters happily call this season the rut. But when they get behind the wheel, they sometimes refer to it the same way many other road warriors do: the bad-luck season for driving that's exacerbated by early darkness and October sun glare.

In this context, bad luck can be defined as a comprehensive auto-insurance claim, which when settled, averages about \$4,000 in New Jersey - a bit more than Doug's \$3,052 loss. About 7,000 of these claims were filed statewide last year - half of them involving crashes in the fall with animals, which almost always are deer - according to The Farmers Insurance Co.

**Bottom line:** These figures rank the Garden State among the 10 most likely places for filing such claims, noted a Farmers spokesman.

According to the State Farm Insurance Co., little New Jersey now ranks with deer-rich territories such as West Virginia where a driver's risk of colliding with a deer is 1 in 45, or Montana (1 in 57), or Pennsylvania (1 in 63) or Ohio (1 in 134).

A New Jersey driver's risk is 1 in 222 - on par with New Hampshire (1 in 242), Utah (1 in 239), Colorado (1 in 277) and Oregon (1 in 256).

It wasn't always this way.

## The kangaroo myth

Exactly 30 years ago, Ho-Ho-Kus police began receiving strange calls from people who insisted they'd seen a kangaroo bounding through the borough. But even though deer were relatively rare in Bergen County back in 1988, Chief John Pattman was sure all the eyewitnesses were wrong.

It was probably a deer, maybe "a hunched-over deer," the chief told all callers, including a reporter from Australia. For the record, no indigenous Australian animal was ever found.

Kangaroo calls stopped long ago, but since then, when leaves turn orange, phones start ringing incessantly in New Jersey police stations because that's when four-legged intruders begin invading our space - sometimes in the most dangerously extreme ways.

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# Warrior

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Three Octobers ago, for example, a loud crash in her Saddle Brook home caused Dawn Scala to race downstairs where she confronted a hormone-driven buck that had smashed through her ground-floor window. After a brief flight up a stairway and back again, he galloped his way out through the same window.

Like the Ho-Ho-Kus chief, the responding Saddle Brook officer managed to calm the situation with what seemed like a reasonable explanation at the time:

"He said when the buck saw its reflection in the window, he mistook it for another male deer, so he charged," Dawn told a reporter.

Deer are rarely that aggressive, but two Septembers ago, a buck was filmed attacking a woman after she accidentally hit it with her truck in Middlesex County.

Ellen Snyder made the mistake of stopping and opening the door to check on the animal. That's when it tried to climb inside. When a Howell Township cop happened by, the video recorder in his police cruiser recorded the attack

which showed Snyder grabbing her attacker's antlers and shoving it into the street.

"I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it," said the officer.

Snyder suffered only bruises; the deer died of its injuries.

Police are hardly immune to such crashes. Peter Kamper, an off-duty police sergeant in Pompton Lakes, was killed in the early stages of last year's rut when a buck crashed into his motorcycle in Wayne.

## Deaths approach 200

Although official mortality figures aren't kept, safety experts say nearly 200 people are killed in deer-related road crashes annually in the United States. Injuries exceed 10,000. Deer fatalities exceed 1 million, an extraordinary number considering the fact that deer herds keep growing despite the carnage caused by vehicle crashes and various hunts and deer-management culls.

The state Fish and Game Division puts the New Jersey population at 112,000 for 2017, about 17,000 more than the 2016 count when the state's crop of acorns - a prime food source for deer - was much less plentiful. In addition to the 7,000 that didn't survive road crashes, some 48,000 deer were killed in

hunts and other deer-management campaigns last year, roughly the same number that were killed in 1992, the year that the late John Pattman retired as Ho-Ho-Kus chief.

Since then, however, deer have extended their territory north of Monmouth County, which produced the most animal-related crashes in 2016 - 1,156. By contrast, these crashes numbered 460 in Bergen and 196 in Passaic last year - nearly double the numbers posted 20 years earlier.

What could any of the recent victims have done to prevent what happened to them? Not much, say the experts, mainly because such crashes occur so quickly and unexpectedly.

"It happens in a blink of an eye," said Doug Montone, the Route 208 victim.

## How to stay safe

**Here are the usual bromides:** Stay buckled, drive a bit more slowly than usual in the fall, use your high beams at night, wear sunglasses to avoid glare by day, and expect a second, third or fourth deer when you see one because they often travel as a family.

But here's some advice that seldom generates much attention:

"Stay away from a wounded deer," said Carol Tyler, whose Tyler Animal

Control, has contracts with 25 Bergen and Passaic county towns to cart away dead carcasses. "They're not like us. They don't want to be cuddled when hurt. So leave them alone. Some can even survive with a broken leg."

In addition, don't swerve sharply to avoid a deer because you might hit something more lethal, such as a tree, by doing so, and if you must swerve, don't swerve ahead of the animal.

"They don't run backwards," advised motorcyclist Dave Bellizzi.

And if Polaroid sunglasses aren't enough to overcome the October sun glare that makes you especially vulnerable to unexpected, four-legged hazards, my former ophthalmologist suggests cleaning the *inside* of your windshield for additional protection - a safety habit that enable drivers to see more clearly, especially when it rains.

"Use a damp newspaper," advised Dr. Harvey Eyes. "That gets rid of all the gunk that accumulates there."

Yes, be wary of hopped-up deer that might unexpectedly wreck your door or your fender. But road warriors are even more likely to stay safe by keeping filmy deposits, such as perfume, cigarette smoke and gas fumes, from clinging to the interior windshields we need to help us spot any galloping danger.

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