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Deer: A Deadly Hazard for Motorcyclists

by Dan Petterson, Ed.D., President/CEO SMARTER, Inc.

In Michigan in 2009, there were 61,486 reported vehicle-deer crashes, with ten fatalities. All ten people killed were riding a motorcycle. Over 74 percent of motorcycle-deer crashes involve injury. Deer are the third most commonly struck object (behind collisions with another vehicle or with a fixed object). Over 90 percent of vehicle-deer crashes occur on two-lane roads, between dusk and dawn.

Vehicle-deer crashes are costly. In Michigan, they cost at least \$130 million annually. The average insurance claim is \$2,100, for damage usually to the front of the vehicle, which often leaves it undrivable.

These tips are written specifically for motorcyclists; however, much of the information is applicable to motorists also.

TIPS TO HELP MOTORCYCLISTS AVOID COLLIDING WITH DEER

Actions to take before riding your motorcycle

- ▶ Practice your braking and swerving techniques. Practice is the only way to ensure you have these skills when you need them. Be sure to practice braking hard, then releasing the brakes and swerving.
- ▶ Adding good, powerful driving lights are well worth the investment. Alternatively, fit a bulb with a 100-watt high beam.
- ▶ Wear protective gear. As with other collisions, no one plans to hit an animal. The only way to be ready when it happens is to be ready on every ride by wearing *All the Gear All the Time*. Read [Randy Klifman's story of survival](#) for an excellent example of what good gear can do for you in a crash with a deer.

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Actions to take while you are riding your motorcycle

What you will find on this page

- Actions to take before riding
- Actions to take while riding
- Actions to take if you see deer
- Should I swerve to avoid a deer?
- Are deer whistles a deterrent?
- Should I speed up to avoid crashing?
- What time am I likely to see deer?
- Where am I likely to see deer?
- What should I look for to avoid deer?
- Other resources about deer crashes

Deer-crash survivor stories

- Helmets Save U.P. Couple
- Randy's Quality Gear Vs. Deer
- Jim's Tips to Avoid Deer

Pop-up Glossary of Acronyms and Initialisms Used in Motorcyclist Safety and on This Site

- ▶ Slow down. A speed over 50 mph is likely too fast to give you time to react after you see the deer in your headlight beam. Decreasing speed gives you more time to spot an animal, more time to react and a greater ability to maneuver.
- ▶ Cover the brakes to reduce your reaction time.
- ▶ Use your high-beam headlight and your additional driving light when possible.
- ▶ If riding in a group, spread the riders out in a staggered formation. If one rider hits a deer, this will lessen the chance that other riders will be involved.

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Actions to take if you see a deer in or near the path of your motorcycle

- ▶ Brake firmly when you notice a deer in or near your path. Be ready to stop completely if necessary.
- ▶ If time allows, flip off your high beams or flash your headlights. This may break the spell that seems to cause deer to freeze in the road; or, alternatively, it may cause the deer to freeze at the roadside. Slow down until you know what the deer is going to do.
- ▶ Blow your horn with one long blast to frighten the deer away, but don't count on it.

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FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT TACTICS TO AVOID DEER

Should I swerve my motorcycle to avoid hitting a deer?

The advice for automobile drivers is to avoid swerving to miss a deer because there is greater danger in hitting an oncoming automobile or a roadside tree than there is in hitting a deer. For motorcycle riders the situation is different. Deer pose a life-threatening hazard to motorcyclists, and colliding with a deer while in a swerve is significantly more dangerous than colliding while in a straight-up position and in complete control.

If you choose to swerve, know your abilities and know that the path you will swerve to is clear. Hitting the deer straight up and in control might be the better of two bad options. If a deer crosses your path, brake hard, swerve only if necessary and, above all, maintain control.

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Are deer whistles a deterrent?

There isn't much reliable research that supports their value, and there is even some research that found a negative effect from whistles. Do your own research and make your own decision.

A good resource is the research paper "[Hearing Sensitivity in White-tailed Deer.](#)"

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Should I speed up to hit a deer to avoid crashing my motorcycle?

Most experienced motorcyclists have heard this story at one time or another: Motorcyclist rides through dead of night at warp speed, strikes a deer and slices it completely in half without crashing. Sure, a few of these stories are true, but the rider was lucky, not responsible or skillful. For every story like this, there are dozens of stories where riders are seriously injured or killed. Speeding up is not a responsible choice.

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At what time of day am I most likely to see deer on the roadway?

- ▶ Deer activity is at its highest in early morning and evening hours. Avoid riding at these times if possible. If you choose to ride at these times, be especially vigilant.
- ▶ Deer travel in groups and in single file. One deer means there are probably more; so even if the one you see is off the road and going away, proceed with extreme caution.
- ▶ On hot, muggy nights when there are a lot of mosquitoes, deer head out of the woods to escape them. If you have a thick film of bugs on your windshield, expect deer to be moving out of the woods to the roadside.

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Where am I most likely to see deer on or near the roadway?

- ▶ Be alert and drive with caution when you are moving through a deer-crossing zone. Highway departments don't put those signs up along roads just for decoration.
- ▶ Watch for dips in a road where the surrounding land is swampy or where a brook crosses under the road. These are usually trail areas used by animals.
- ▶ Watch for areas in cities that have "green spaces" where deer live due to overcrowding.
- ▶ Learn the characteristics of the roads you regularly ride. You will then already know where deer frequent and can make your riding decisions accordingly.

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What should I look for to avoid hitting a deer with my motorcycle?

- ▶ It is normal to see reflectors along roads, but if a reflector moves or "winks" at you, it is likely a deer's eye and the deer is facing you.
- ▶ If you are driving at night and see the oncoming headlights "twinkle," that is probably the legs of deer intersecting the headlight beams. Remember deer are rarely alone and may be with young. Slow down and keep your eyes open.
- ▶ Similar to the "twinkle" of oncoming headlights, a reflector that "blinks" or is not there at all (like a "hole" in a white fence or a "missing" reflector) might indicate the presence of an animal.
- ▶ Scan the edges of your headlight pattern for both movement and eye reflection.

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Conclusion

There certainly is no single way to reduce the risk of motorcycle/deer crashes. Deer pose a significant hazard to motorcyclists because they are so difficult to predict; however, just like for every other hazard motorcyclists face, being prepared, knowing how to act, having the skill to act, and making responsible decisions will reduce the risk associated with deer.

Here are some additional resources:

- ▶ [Michigan Deer Crash Coalition](#) - promulgated by the Insurance Institute of Michigan, providing informative tips for automobile drivers, links to Michigan's county-by-county statistics, and a downloadable brochure entitled "Don't Veer for Deer"