

FEATURED SUBMISSION

Lecture, ticket or toe tag?

Roadside wildlife requires more than a passing thought

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About 20 years ago, when I was a young impressionable driver, I was pulled over by a California highway patrol officer. I stepped out of my '71 Olds Cutlass and walked to the back of the car to meet the officer, a manner I had been taught by my father.

The officer approached me brandishing a weathered citation booklet. "Ticket or lecture?" he said, as if this were his standard salutation. Time stopped momentarily. "Pardon me?" I replied. "Do you want a ticket or a lecture son?" he reiterated, half annoyed but not surprised. "Lecture, Sir," I replied, fast enough to make up for having to ask for clarification the first time.

The lecture I received from the highway patrol officer that day was long, but cheaper than a citation. More importantly, however, the lecture opened my eyes to the impressions that a veteran police officer, fully aware of the dangers of unsafe driving, can leave on a young mind. I've never blown a stop sign since.

Although the "lecture or ticket" strategy may be rarely used in highway patrol, lecturing motorists is a technique that in the realm of wildlife-vehicle collision mitigation would, in my academic opinion, have real merit.

As a researcher and educator interested in the interactions of wildlife and motorists, I've come to realize that school lessons, public announcements, pamphlets and other such outlets have their place in conveying information to the motoring public about the dangers of meeting moose and other game animals on dark Canadian highways, or any highways for that matter. However, information from a police officer armed with



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Between four and eight large animals are struck by vehicles every hour in Canada — that could be over 70,000 killed every year.

data, a citation booklet, anecdotes and photos about what accident scenes with animals look like would likely be more impressive.

Powerful statistics

Having just helped to complete an in-depth analysis of 77,000 accidents between 1996 and 2005 on wildlife-vehicle collision patterns in northern British Columbia, the RCMP in our area now have at their fingertips a set of statistics that outline when and where motorists are most likely to strike animals. Information that can be used by police agencies to predict collision occurrence and teach motorists about collision risk is powerful stuff.



Fort George Highway Rescue Society

The owners of this car struck a moose north of Prince George, B.C., in 2004. The driver sustained severe neck injuries and three years later is still under medical care. The passenger suffered relatively minor injuries and has made a full recovery.

Like officers in northern B.C., highway patrols across the country should request — no, demand — access to wildlife collision statistics for their jurisdictions. Provincial stats are better than no stats, but regional and community-specific statistics on what animals are being hit, at what time of year and time of day, are much better.

Collision patterns with deer on Vancouver Island are different than patterns of moose collisions in Prince George and patterns of bison strikes in the Peace River country.

Once armed with the data, officers should obtain some graphic but inoffensive photographic evidence of what a collision with a large animal can do to a minivan. I also recommend officers gather anecdotes from colleagues who have attended accident scenes. Some stories, like pictures, have a way of leaving indelible etchings in our gray matter.

Tips for safe driving

Drive during the day

If you can, avoid driving at night. Most collisions with large animals occur at night when animals are most active and difficult for drivers to see.

Slow down

Drivers should buy themselves time to react by resisting the tendency to speed up on straight stretches of road where wildlife collisions occur more than might be expected. If you drive 70

Next, particularly during peak animal-collision season, officers (if they are not already doing so) should do a quick inspection of vehicles that they pull over and cite drivers for things that could impair their ability to detect an animal and increase their odds of a strike, such as poor windshield clarity, headlight malfunctions and driving without corrective lenses.

Instructing motorists that a cracked windshield not only impairs visibility, but also reduces the integrity of the windshield to withstand an impact from an animal, may decrease the pain associated with getting written up. Convincing motorists to observe recommended nighttime driving speeds (most animals are struck at night) and to generally slow down increases the odds of a driver being able to brake and stop in time for an animal, or any other object for that matter.

In short, if lectures or citations can impress drivers enough to facilitate even the slightest change in the way they view the road and the uncertainties that lurk in the dark, the gains may far outweigh the pains. Better to sport a thinner wallet than a toe tag. Who knows, such a lecture-based approach may even help to convert the contempt some drivers feel for “cops” to a sense of gratitude toward an officer of the law who took the time (as one did for me some 20 years ago) to share potentially life-saving information.

Finally, where possible, officers can help build locally relevant databases that can be used to help determine risk by recording four simple pieces of information when attending a wildlife-vehicle collision in their jurisdiction.

The time of day and day of the year when collisions occur are presumably always recorded in accident reporting.

kilometres per hour with standard headlights, you will not have time to stop for anything in your path — a moose or a fallen tree.

Animals are different than people

It sounds elementary, but remembering that difference is critical when driving. Animals may not recognize that a vehicle means danger or that the sound of a horn means watch out. They are often attracted to the road and roadside area for food and do not think of them as dangerous.

Deer whistles don't work

They aren't loud enough to be heard and are at the wrong frequency.

Swerving is very dangerous

In most situations, it is better for motorists to use their brakes instead of their wheel to avoid animals.

—Gayle Hesse,

Wildlife Collision Prevention Program

For more information on wildlife collision prevention, visit

www.wildlifecollisions.ca

Related info:

www.gnb.ca/0113/moose/alert-e.asp

However, in addition to these two pieces of information, recording the species of animal involved and the exact location of the collision can eventually allow researchers to determine species-specific patterns of animal movements near roadways for use in road safety planning.

This information, along with recommendations from officers who are in the field and dealing with collisions first hand, provides powerful information that can be used by road safety planners for mitigating collision risk and helping to save the lives of motorists and wildlife.