

Bambi not so benign when he's hurtling toward your windshield

Wildlife collisions cost ratepayers \$14 million last year: November and December are high risk months

It is lovely to look outside these days and see a world transformed by bright lights and holiday lawn decorations. I admit it, I'm partial to those little white lights formed into deer shapes. I like the look of them perching daintily on my neighbour's lawn, framed nicely by my front window.

However, coming across the live version, framed by your windshield, is a very different story.

While many of us have Christmas shopping on the mind at this time of year, moose and deer turn their thoughts to... love. It's mating season for big game, which means they're more likely to wander in search of a member of the opposite sex. The more rural your neighbourhood, the more likely you are to run across (no pun intended) a moose or deer on the road.

Readers living in Winnipeg are probably wondering why I would even write a column about this. It



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can't be that big of an issue. Most of the population lives here, so there can't be that many collisions outside the Perimeter, right?

200 injured last year

Wrong. Wildlife collisions cost MPI (and remember, that's your pocketbook) more than \$14 million last year. Nearly 13,000 collisions have been reported since 1999, and more than 200 people were injured last year. November is the high-risk month for wildlife collisions, followed by October and December. You know, since more than 1,400 collisions were reported last November alone, and since everyone heads out of town occasionally, that

makes it column-worthy.

Three successive mild winters have allowed the big-game populations (deer and moose) to grow, which is making the problem even worse.

And when I say big game, I do mean big game. Have you ever been up close and personal with a full-grown moose? They are much, much bigger than they look on TV, I assure you.

I was travelling the Pine Pass in British Columbia, which is a treacherous route at the best of times, but it was one of those evenings (just after a big snowfall) when it was so stunningly beautiful that it looked like a Disney film. I had slowed to a crawl to watch some Northern Lights, and I distinctly remember thinking that all I needed was Bambi peeking around a tree, and it would be perfect.

Well, Bambi didn't show up, but his very large cousin did. I swear to you, I didn't see him or hear him, but all of a sudden I looked out my side

window and all I could see were legs. There was no top or bottom to the thing, just these tree stumps trotting along side my car. Now, granted I wasn't in an SUV, but let me tell you it's humbling to realize an animal is bigger than your car.

Bigger than car

I braked. He took a hard left and headed back into the bush, and I sat on the side of the road until my heart started beating again. You see, I knew I was lucky. I had been moving slowly, and he turned up beside me, so there was no real harm done other than an almost fatal adrenaline rush. But, what I knew from the sad experience of talking to survivors, is that a head-on could have been lethal.

Back to those long legs. What happens in a head-on collision is that, in many cases, the vehicle hits the animal at the knees, not the body. The body then flips onto the hood and plows directly through the windshield.

I remember a road safety youth conference in northern BC where two of the planning students were killed on opening night in a collision with a moose. You don't believe it happens, but it does.

So, what can you do? Be extremely vigilant at dusk and dawn, when animals tend to come out to migrate and feed. A particular heads-up for motorists in the Brandon/Westman region: about 3,600 wildlife claims were reported in that region in 1999, more than triple the number recorded in the second-highest regions of Steinbach and Dauphin. Be careful out there!

That's it for this week. Until next week, be **RoadWise**.

Paul Allen is Road Safety Manager for Manitoba Public Insurance. He would like to hear from you. His e-mail address is pallen@mpi.mb.ca and his mailing address is Room 824, 234 Donald Street, Box 6300, Winnipeg, MB R3C 4A4.