



Avoiding Deer – Vehicle Collisions

Autumn is the deer breeding season, or ‘rut’. The rut brings a peak in deer movement and we experience more deer on New Jersey roads, leading to a number of deer-vehicle collisions. Municipal vehicles are not immune from this hazard and in some cases, their operations can increase the likelihood, such as the 24 / 7 / 365 operations of police, fire and EMS agencies. The Safety Director offers the following best practices for avoiding deer-vehicle collisions.

Know your local ‘Danger Zones’ – As you conduct your everyday business, learn the local areas where you see more deer than other places all year-round. Often these are places where trees form pinch points that create natural funnels. Pay extra attention to these areas, and mentally mark them as danger zones. Make a mental note of the locations of the deer crossing warning signs.

Be vigilant – This is your most effective defense against a deer - vehicle collision. In areas where woodlands adjoin the roadway, be on the lookout in the ditches and forest edges for deer. Deer are most active at dusk and dawn: periods when your vision is most compromised. To add to their terrible timing, deer are most on the move after we turn our clocks back an hour and you are more likely to travel in darkness. You may also spot a deer because their eyes will brightly reflect a car’s headlights, making them easier to spot.

Avoid distractions – There are a lot of things in work vehicles that can take our attention away from the road; radios, cell phones, computers, and conversations with passengers. Make a conscious decision to resist these distractions as much as possible, especially in danger zones.

Slow Down Early – When you think you see a deer ahead, slow down and be prepared to completely stop if necessary. At night, deer may be blinded or confused by your headlights. They may not be sure if there is danger or where it is located and may dart suddenly in front of you. Depending on traffic, you may also be able to move towards the center of the road giving you more time to react if the deer decides to enter the road.

Blow Your Horn – Once you spot a deer standing on the roadside ahead, slow down and blow your horn. The structure of a deer’s ears, and their ability to pivot each ear independently, makes them very good at pinpointing the locations of sounds. Some experts recommend that one long blast of the horn will scare deer out of the road. Do not rely on hood whistles or other devices designed to scare off deer. University of Georgia researchers tested a variety of sounds of different frequencies and intensities to see how deer on a roadway reacted. These sounds, emitted from a specially equipped car, included a wide range of the high-frequency sounds that “deer whistles” are claimed to emit. In hundreds of trials, high-frequency whistles did not change deer behavior from the way they reacted when no sound was being emitted.

Use your high beams – When traveling at night in suburban or rural areas, use your high beams whenever possible to help you spot deer on the roadside. Of course, don’t forget to dim your lights for oncoming traffic.

Anticipate more than one deer – Deer are pack animals, and rarely travel alone. If a deer crosses in front of you, chances are there are more nearby. During the rut, a doe that runs across the road is very likely to be followed by one or more bucks. If you see one deer run across the road ahead of you, slow down and be prepared to stop.

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Do not swerve to avoid hitting the animal - If you see a deer, brake firmly and calmly, and stay in your lane. Do not swerve into the opposite lane or onto the shoulder of the road to avoid hitting the deer. Swerving or oversteering could make you lose control of your vehicle and turn a bad situation much worse. Deer can be unpredictable, and you could actually swerve directly into their changed path of travel.

Experts advise braking firmly up until the very last second of impact, and then releasing the brakes. This should propel the deer away from your vehicle instead of on to the hood or windshield. Should the animal make contact with the windshield, there's a chance it will smash through, causing the driver to lose control of the vehicle, resulting in serious injury and in some cases, even death to the driver and passengers.

Wear your seatbelt – While wearing a seatbelt may not help prevent a collision with a deer, if the situation worsens and an impact is inevitable, it may lessen the consequences. A seat belt will keep you behind the steering wheel and in a better position to operate the controls of the car.

Investigate new technology – Researchers are constantly searching for new and innovative solutions to the hazards of deer – vehicle collisions. For example, developers have introduced a siren that they claim produces a sound wave that better scares deer away from the source of the noise. While the Safety Director does not recommend any particular product, we do recommend members evaluate for themselves promising new products, procedures, or ideas. We also promote sharing of successes among members.

If you are involved in a deer – vehicle collision:

1. Stay calm.
2. Move your vehicle to a safe place. If possible, pull over to the side of the road and onto the shoulder. Most accidents occur between dusk and dawn; times when you or your vehicle may be less visible to other motorists. Get out of your vehicle and stand in a safe place, well off the roadway.
3. Turn on your hazard lights.
4. New Jersey law requires you to call 9-1-1 if persons were injured or there is property or vehicle damage in excess of \$500.00. The Safety Director recommends the police be notified of any deer-vehicle collision involving a public vehicle or a personal vehicle being driven on official business.
5. Notify your supervisor.
6. Stay away from the deer. If it is still alive, it could be confused, injured and dangerous if approached. A wounded deer could use its powerful legs and sharp hooves to harm you. When contacting the authorities, let them know if the deer is injured or blocking traffic or creating a threat for other drivers so that it can be quickly handled.
7. Document the incident: If it's safe to do so, take photographs of the roadway, your surroundings, damage to your vehicle, and any injuries you or your passengers sustained. If witnesses stop, take down their account of what occurred and ask for their contact information.