

# From Freeway to Freezer

How to avoid colliding with a deer, elk, moose, or pronghorn. And some good news if you do.

BY JESS FIELD



**SILVER LINING** Each year tens of thousands of deer and other big game animals are struck by vehicles across the United States. In 2014 Montana joined many states in allowing the roadkill to be salvaged, preventing tons of venison from going to waste each year.

In December 2014, I was heading home to Missoula on U.S. Highway 89 after a weekend of bird hunting at my parent's farm near Dupuyer. Just south of Choteau, I spotted a whitetail doe leaping a barbed-wire fence that ran parallel to the highway. She continued on across the road right in front of me and we collided. Though my car wasn't seriously damaged, the impact killed the deer.

I called my cousin, who lived nearby, and he soon arrived with his pickup and helped me move the carcass to a place where I could legally field-dress it.

Later that day, I applied online (see editor's note on page 31) for an FWP Vehicle-Killed Wildlife Salvage Permit, printed it out, and had the deer, along with the permit (which acts as the possession tag), at my local processor that night.

While telling others about my accident and deer salvaging experience, I learned that many people, especially older Montanans, were unaware of the salvage permits, which FWP began issuing in 2014. In fact, I had to repeatedly reassure my father that I was not breaking any laws by field-dressing the animal before applying for the permit.

But I wanted them and others to know about the new permit, because it is prevent-

ing literally tons of venison from going to waste each year—not to mention helping remove hundreds of big game carcasses from Montana roadsides.

## **SENSIBLE LAW**

In 2013 the Montana Legislature passed House Bill 247, sponsored by Representative Steve Lavin of Kalispell, authorizing Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks to establish the

permit. Representative Lavin is also a major with the Montana Highway Patrol. The idea originally came from a fellow trooper, and Lavin immediately thought a permit system could pay dividends. It has.

In 2014 FWP issued 1,100 permits, says Mike Lee, manager of the agency's Commercial Wildlife Permit Program. Whitetails accounted for nearly 65 percent (709) of the permits. Elk and mule deer combined for a

total of 355, moose accounted for another 32, and four pronghorn added to the total. The permits are good for salvaging deer, elk, moose, and antelope only. In 2015, the total number increased to 1,269, with roughly the same percentage breakdown in species.

Dave Holland, FWP game warden in Fort Shaw, says that wildlife collisions occur year-round. During early spring, animals feed along roadsides on new vegetation



**VULNERABLE VISITORS** Big game animals end up as roadkill for different reasons. In spring, newly emerged vegetation attracts deer (above). In summer, elk calves and deer fawns have yet to learn the hazards of speeding vehicles. During the fall rut, reckless male elk, deer, and even moose may venture onto highways.

exposed to sunlight. Summer brings out fawns and calves less wary of traffic than adult deer and elk. During the fall rut, love-crazed bucks and an occasional bull elk or even moose wander onto highways. In winters with deep snow, big game use roadways as travel routes.

As for time of day, “the most dangerous periods are the hour after sunrise and the hour before sunset, what we wardens call ‘deer-thirty.’” Holland says. “That’s when deer and elk are most active, and the low light makes it difficult for drivers to see what’s ahead.”

**SLOW IS SAFE**

Traffic safety officials say the most important thing drivers can do to avoid colliding with wildlife is to drive more slowly during the hours around dawn and dusk, and scan ahead for animals on or approaching the highway. Larry Irwin, a lieutenant with the Montana Highway Patrol, says that drivers should also be especially alert when they see yellow “Deer Crossing” signs. “They are there for a reason, to alert drivers of increased potential for wildlife on or near the roadway so they can slow down,” he says. Irwin adds that a slower speed allows drivers to stop before



**“Swerving, though it seems intuitive, is in fact a very dangerous maneuver.”**



**DEER CROSS HERE** Safety officials urge drivers to drive more slowly after passing yellow “Deer Crossing” signs, posted in areas where big game animals are commonly found in or near the road.

hitting a live animal on the road or a downed animal struck by another vehicle.

If you see a deer or elk on the road, slow down or stop to let the animal continue crossing. Do not swerve while driving at high speeds to avoid either a live animal or roadkill. Irwin says trying to avoid hitting deer or other animals on a road often causes the vehicle to roll over. “Though it seems intuitive, swerving is in fact a very dangerous maneuver. It can put you in the ditch or worse,” Irwin says.

So what do you do if you can’t brake in time to avoid a collision? “The safest thing is actually to drive into the animal,” says Irwin.

If you hit a deer or elk, pull off to the shoulder with your hazard lights on. Check that no one in the vehicle is seriously hurt. If it can be done safely, remove the dead animal to the roadside to prevent it from becoming a hazard to other vehicles. “If it’s lifeless, and you are sure you won’t get hit by approaching vehicles, you can quickly drag it off the road,” Irwin says. “But if the animal is still alive and moving, or traffic is busy, that’s not a safe option.”

Next, call 911 and report the collision to the Montana Highway Patrol.

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LEFT TO RIGHT: HALLIE FUGHEIMER, DAWNY WILSON, DONALD M. JONES, PAUL N. QUENEAU

If the animal is still on the road, figure out a safe way to warn approaching motorists. “Putting out flares along the roadside will get people to at least slow down so they can see the carcass ahead of them,” Irwin says.

Holland warns against trying to kill the animal if it is wounded. “Never discharge a firearm on or near a public roadway. It’s too dangerous, and it’s also illegal,” he says. Instead, call the authorities and see if a game warden, sheriff, or other peace officer can drive out and safely dispatch the animal.

**CHECK FOR SPOILAGE**

If you decide to salvage a big game animal hit by you or someone else (the law also allows people to pick up dead deer, elk, moose, or pronghorn they did not hit), treat the carcass as you would any downed animal. The meat of a newly killed animal is likely in good shape. But if you come upon a carcass hit by someone else, you’ll definitely want to check for open wounds, sores, and signs of spoilage or scavenging.

In either case, consider the temperature and how long it will take to transport the animal to a processor or home. One of the biggest challenges of salvaging a roadkill is that you must remove it whole. Field-dressing along the roadside or even in the barrow pit is strongly discouraged, says Holland.

“No one wants to see gut piles along the side of the road,” he says. “And gut piles attract scavengers or predators like eagles and coyotes, creating additional traffic hazards.”

That means you must transport the animal somewhere you can field-dress it and dispose of the gut pile responsibly.

Once you remove the carcass from the road, you have 24 hours to apply for, in person or online, and obtain a salvage permit, available at no cost. Game wardens or highway patrol officers called to the accident scene can issue one. Or, once home, you can complete the online application and print it out. Processing facilities will not accept a carcass if you don’t have the *printed* permit (showing them the permit on the screen of a cell phone or other mobile device doesn’t qualify).

I hit that doe in late fall. The deer was not too damaged (only some broken ribs) and the temperature was perfect for transport. Even so, the thought of eating roadkill was not easy to wrap my mind around, at first. But once the processor turned the carcass into several dozen packages of tasty venison, I put any misgivings behind me. If I ever have the misfortune of hitting another deer—or elk, moose, or pronghorn (or finding one recently killed by another vehicle)—I’m fully prepared to once again make the best of the situation and not let that meat go to waste. 🐾

*To apply for a Vehicle-Killed Wildlife Salvage Permit, visit [fwp.mt.gov/hunting/licenses/salvagePermit.html](http://fwp.mt.gov/hunting/licenses/salvagePermit.html).*



**GOOD START** In 2014, the first year of the new Vehicle-Killed Wildlife Salvage Permit, 1,100 animals were salvaged statewide and processed into venison steaks, burger, roasts, and chops. Last year the number increased to 1,269.