

Roadside memorials

On August 11, 2002, James Hubach, a biker from Atlantic City, NJ was riding his motorcycle south on Rt. 231 when for some unknown reason he ran off the road, struck a wooden fence and died.

It was broad daylight. No other vehicles were involved. Neither alcohol nor drugs were a factor. There were no witnesses, although there was some private speculation that a deer may have run into the road causing him to swerve and crash. We'll never know.

About a week or so later, two women were seen constructing a makeshift memorial in James Hubach's honor. Were they a wife and daughter? A mother and girlfriend? An aunt and sister? We'll never know.

The memorial stands to this day, attached to a utility pole, now that the fence has been torn down. It consists of a cross, a small tattered American flag, a forlorn faded plastic flower, and a weather beaten sign that says, "The Mule died here, 8-11-02."

Memorials and shrines of traffic fatalities are a common sight along our roadways. Although they vary in complexity and tastefulness, they all say the same thing. A human life was extinguished here...right here.

VDOT is caught between a rock and a hard place on this one. No matter what its position is on roadside memorials, the state agency is going to look like a bad guy. This was particularly true when the family of Lois Deane, 49 and her two grandchildren,

Cheyenne, 4 and Renae, 10 were killed in a traffic accident on Route 29 several years ago. And oddly enough, that wreck was blamed on a bee that flew in the open window of a woman's car, stinging her, causing her to lose control and strike the Deane vehicle.

The Deane family erected what may be the most elaborate roadside memorial in the state, with three large white crosses bearing the names and ages of the victims on one side of the road and a large flower bed in the median. The memorial is pristine. The crosses are freshly painted. There's not a weed in the flower bed. It is quite beautiful, and it is quite poignant. Its construction and maintenance came as a result of lengthy and painful negotiations between a reluctant VDOT and the bereaved family.

Spokesman, Lou Hatter says "We don't encourage people to put them up," adding "VDOT's concern is the potential distraction of what they look like and where they are placed." VDOT's position is that the memorials are distracting to drivers and dangerous to family members when they erect and maintain them. But he quickly adds "We certainly understand their feelings and try to be sympathetic to that." And certainly VDOT does not drive around tearing memorials down, unless of course, they are causing a highway safety problem.

The roadside memorial says different things to different people. For family members they may be



At left, relatives or friends erected this memorial to James Hubach of Atlantic City, NJ on a lonely stretch of Rt. 231 in Orange County. Hubach lost control of his motorcycle, struck a fence and died in this spot on August 11, 2002.

Below, the bereaved family of Lois Deane erected this roadside memorial on Route 29 South in Albemarle County. Note the flower bed to the left and the three crosses to the right.

Photos by Phil Audibert



comforting. To the general driving public, they say something else. As Hatter terms it, "they are a powerful reminder" that driving and riding in these two-ton hunks of metal and plastic can be hazardous. Roadside memorials tell us to be careful...even that this particular place in the road may be dangerous. When we pass one,

we become more alert and aware. They also make us think and reflect that a human life was extinguished in this exact spot...that someone made the transition from this world to the next through an invisible portal...right here. A mix of emotions is always unsettling, in this case eeriness and sadness at the same time.



Deer in the headlights

Not long ago a family of three was driving down an Orange County road when an approaching truck hit a deer, cutting the animal in half. One-half of the airborne animal smashed through the car's windshield, striking the father in the head and lodging in the back window. The mother and daughter were covered in blood and entrails. The father suffered hearing loss in one ear for three days. The interior of the car had to be replaced.

That's just one horror story in what must be the deadliest season ever for deer/vehicle collisions in

Orange County. The sight of dead deer on the side of the road has become commonplace. During the height of

the rutting season in early November, you could typically count multiple deer carcasses on any 10-mile stretch of primary road in the county. If you don't have your own story about a collision with a deer, you know someone who has.

The cost of these accidents is staggering. David Rutt of Pro Autobody in Orange confirms that "deer hits" are the most common body-work damage he has to fix. By the week after Christmas, he'd done 59 "deer hit" repair jobs just since September. "I'll bet there's five deer hit every year right here by my shop," he says incredulously. "People hit a deer and they'll pull right in.



Top photo, a common sight on Orange County's roads, in this case, Route 15 North of Orange. At least 157 vehicles collided with deer in Orange County from October-December. Bottom photo, the White-Tailed Deer population in Virginia is estimated to have stabilized at between 800,000 and 1 million. About 34,000 are killed on Virginia's highways every year. Another 200,000 are killed by hunters.

Photos by Phil Audibert

Most people agree that if hitting the deer is inevitable, go ahead and hit it.
DON'T SWERVE.

"When they swerve to miss the deer, they'll hit a tree or a bank or flip over. The best thing to do is to hold your steering wheel straight and just try to slow down as quick as you can and then if you hit it, you hit it. But if you run off the road, you're going to cause more problems."

David Rutt of Pro Autobody.

It's unreal." He rolls his eyes, adding wryly "I've been accused jokingly of putting corn on the road."

Brian Hargett of Mason Insurance Agency says deer/vehicle collisions are second only to cracked windshields in claim frequency. Three years ago, he says the average cost to repair a car that hit a deer was between \$1,500 and \$2,500. Today the number is more like \$3,000 to \$5,000. "The deer aren't getting any bigger," says Hargett, "but the cars are getting more expensive to fix."

Bridget Donaldson of the Virginia Transportation Research Council, says, "I've estimated that over 34,000 deer-vehicle accidents occur annually in Virginia." Far less are reported. Since 1966, 41 people have lost their lives as a direct result of a traffic accident involving deer in this state. And last year alone, 456 people were injured as a result of "deer hits" on Virginia's highways. State Farm Insurance ranks Virginia seventh worst in the nation for deer/vehicle collisions.

It's hard to come up with rock-solid numbers for Orange County, but at least 157 deer have been hit and killed by vehicles on Orange County roads in the past three months. That's how many an independent contractor named "Shorty" has collected for VDOT. Working with a winch and a slab of plywood, he piles multiple carcasses into the bed of his white two-wheel-drive S-10 pickup truck and hauls them off to a landfill somewhere. Business is good for Shorty. He also rids Culpeper and Rappahannock County roads of their dead deer.

So why are there so many accidents involving deer?

Several reasons. One is, more of us are building homes and driving through the White-Tail Deer's natural habitat. Another reason is there are indeed more deer.

Those of us old enough to remember will tell you that 40 years ago, if you even saw a deer, you wrote a letter home about it; it was that big a deal. Nowadays, herds of deer barely raise their heads from

grazing in local pastures and fields as we drive by.

If we want to avoid hitting them as we drive by, it might be helpful to know a little bit about this 145-

pound animal known as the Virginia White-Tailed deer. Plentiful in the 1600s, this species was hunted almost to extinction in this state by 1900. By 1931, the statewide population was estimated at only 25,000. Over the past 10 years, however, the deer population in Virginia has stabilized at, (are you ready for this?) between 800,000 and 1 million! Those figures come from the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF).

Hunters kill about 200,000 a year, about 2,400 in Orange County alone. DGIF says that if no deer were hunted, the population would double in five years. By the way, hunting season statewide closed last Saturday.

DGIF has all manner of programs designed to control the burgeoning deer population. In our area the

bag limit has steadily increased to six deer per season, three of which must be antler-less. Hunt clubs and landowners can also sign up for programs like Damage

Control Assistance Program (DCAP) and Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP). And there are all kinds of studies about how many deer certain areas can support and tolerate. The problem is if their

numbers grow and the gene pool shrinks, deer populations will become stunted and unhealthy. The average White Tailed Deer is not, repeat NOT, some little spotted liquid-eyed Disney character gamboling about in a wildflower meadow. It is a wild animal. Generally nocturnal, deer are herbivores who can wreak havoc on crops and gardens.

If he isn't hit by a car or an arrow or a bullet, a deer will live seven years. Born in late spring and early summer, a male deer will not grow antlers until he is a year-and-a half old. Antlers start out in velvet stage in mid-summer and gradually harden by the middle of September. They fall off in mid-January.

Contrary to popular belief, the breeding season, known as the "rut," is not triggered by the first frost but by shortened day length. Deer act strangely during the "rut." They wander more and become unpredictable. Males become aggressive, not just against other

males but against humans, livestock, even vehicles. Yes, they have been known to occasionally charge cars. DGIF estimates that fully two-thirds of the deer-vehicle collisions happen during the months of October,

November and December. So, we're over the hump this season, but definitely not out of the woods.

Several years ago, VDOT experimented with a "reflector fence" along Rt. 15 in Madison County. The idea here was that deer grazing in the field by the road would see car headlights in the reflectors and be deterred from approaching the road. Bridget Donaldson says, "in general, reflectors have not been found to be effective." VDOT tore the reflectors down.

So what do you do if you see deer in the headlights?

DGIF says deer are most active during dawn and dusk, which, regrettably, is the same time we are most active in our cars going to and from work.. The department also warns that if you see one, be prepared to see another; they frequently travel in groups. Some people swear that laying on the horn from the moment you see them until you've passed helps. The jury is still out on those little whistle thingies you attach to your bumper.

Most people agree that if hitting the deer is inevitable, go ahead and hit it. Don't swerve. "When they swerve to miss the deer, they'll hit a tree or a bank or flip over," says David Rutt of Pro Autobody. "The best thing to do is to hold your steering wheel straight and just try to slow down as quick as you can and then if you hit it, you hit it. But if you run off the road, you're going to cause more problems." Insurance agent Brian Hargett agrees emphatically, adding that younger drivers tend to make the mistake of swerving because they feel sorry for the animal.

Speaking of younger drivers, David Rutt has a story about his 15-year-old son, who two weeks earlier had earned his learner's permit. A deer crossed in front of him. "He hit his brakes as hard as he could," remembers David. "I was in the passenger seat next to him," he says wiping an imaginary bead of sweat off his brow. "He held it straight, and we were like TWO INCHES from this deer. The anti-lock brakes did it. If he had let off, he would have hit it."



"Deer hits" cause extensive and costly damage to vehicles in Orange County every year. This car awaits repair in the back lot of Pro Autobody in Orange. You can still see deer hair stuck in cracks around the wheel wells.

Photo by Phil Audibert

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