

# TwinCities.com

## Lots of deer. Lots of crashes. What to do?

Minnesota has so many deer, MnDOT is abandoning those ubiquitous yellow warning signs and looking for more effective ways to keep drivers safe

By John Brewer  
jbrewer@pioneerpress.com

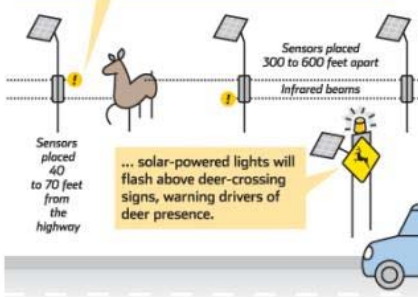
Updated: 06/19/2009 10:19:11 AM CDT

### Deer detectors alert drivers

Deer-vehicle collisions have decreased by more than half near a state park in Marshall, Minn., since a deer-detection system was installed to warn drivers of approaching deer. But the system cost \$150,000 to build on a stretch of road less than a mile long.

#### Here's how it works

When both infrared beams (placed at 29 and 35 inches above the ground) are interrupted at the same time ...



Source: Minnesota Department of Transportation and Minnesota Department of Public Safety

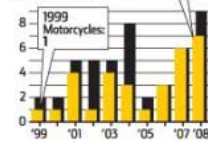
Consider all of Minnesota a deer-crossing zone.

The state is the first in the country to quit putting up new "deer crossing" signs and to stop replacing worn-out ones because deer are crossing roads nearly everywhere — including busy stretches of Twin Cities interstates.

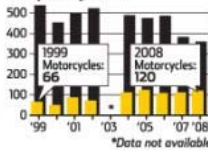
### Fewer but deadlier

Though state data show a decrease in deer-vehicle collisions in Minnesota, last year was the deadliest in a decade. Nine people died.

#### People killed



#### People injured



\*Data not available PIONEER PRESS

It's no longer a question of if you'll hit a deer in Minnesota, but when, said Pat Hahn of the motorcycle safety division at the state Department of Public Safety.

"We have more deer in Minnesota now than we did when the pilgrims landed," he said.

The state deer herd is estimated at 1 million and accounted for an average 4,490 reported vehicle crashes a year over the past 10 years. While the most recent state data show a decrease in collisions — 2,538 in 2008 versus a peak of 5,557 in 2002 — last year was the deadliest in a decade: Nine people died in crashes with deer in 2008; seven of the dead were on motorcycles.

Hahn pointed out the most recent fatal motorcycle-deer collision — the death of Nick J. Block, 39, of Newport. Block was riding without a helmet on eastbound Interstate 694 the night of June 11 when he hit a deer near the exit for White Bear Avenue. He was thrown off his Harley-Davidson into another lane. A passing car ran over him, and he died at the scene.

"You wouldn't expect a horrid deer accident on 694," Hahn said.

But maybe we should.

"We want people to know that deer are all over the place," said Kent Barnard, a Minnesota Department of Transportation spokesman.

At their peak, 700 deer-crossing signs dotted Minnesota's highways. But two years ago, MnDOT quit fussing with them. Why? The state agency cited two reasons:

A commissioned study at the University of Minnesota found that people were easily

Advertisement



**UNIVERSITY of SAN FRANCISCO**

## End-to-End Training as It Should Be: 100% ONLINE!

### Earn Your Master Certificate in Internet Marketing

→ SEO & Paid Search

→ Online Branding

→ Web Analytics

→ Internet Law

→ Media Buying

→ Social Media

→ 1-800-268-9943

→ USanFranOnline.com/FD

Print Powered By 

# TwinCities.com

desensitized to the bright yellow signs emblazoned with a leaping deer.

Deer are ubiquitous.

Barnard has hit a deer — and been hit by one. Sunday night, he narrowly avoided striking a deer



A deer crossing sign was photographed on northbound Centerville Road in White Bear Township on Tuesday, June 1 2009. (Pioneer Press: Richard Marshall)

as he drove near Lino Lakes, identified as a deer-collision hotspot in a 2003 Pioneer Press analysis.

## NEW WARNING SYSTEM TESTED

To combat the problem, the state is testing a deer-warning system in southwest Minnesota, where it has significantly reduced deer collisions, Barnard said.

The system set up along Minnesota 23 near Camden State Park decreased deer collisions by 57 percent over an 18-month study period, according to MnDOT. But the 0.9-mile system — featuring a wall of light beams that trigger flashing roadside lights to warn motorists when deer approach — cost

\$150,000 to build.

The system could be expanded along stretches of highway near Racine and Winona in southern Minnesota. A Minneapolis consulting firm is putting together estimates to produce the system in standard — and cheaper — lengths.

A more effective system — but equally unwieldy — would be to line Minnesota roads with unending stretches of 8-foot fencing, said Bob Weinholzer, MnDOT's state programs administrator and its unofficial "deer guy."

Studies have shown the fencing to be 98 percent effective at reducing collisions, but the fence has to go on uninterrupted for long distances to be successful — meaning no breaks for driveways.

Other systems, including miles of reflectors meant to scare deer from roadsides and the whistles drivers attach to their bumpers, are next to useless, experts say. But people keep trying to figure out ways to decrease collisions.

Keith Knapp, director of the Deer Vehicle Crash Information and Research Center at the University of Minnesota, said animal collisions are a problem across the country and abroad. "They even have a deer commission in Scotland," Knapp said.

State Farm Insurance uses its claims data to estimate that Minnesota has about 35,000 deer-vehicle collisions a year — up 18.4 percent from five years ago. The number makes Minnesota the 12th most likely state for these crashes.

The insurance company's total might be much higher than law enforcement's collision count because deer-related crashes reported to insurers for claims might not have been reported to police if no one was injured.

Advertisement



**Florida Tech**  
UNIVERSITY ONLINE

## Bring the Classroom to Your Home With a Degree Online From Florida Tech

**APPLY TODAY!**  
FloridaTechOnline.com/FD | 1-888-253-5946



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

# TwinCities.com

Comparing claims from the last half of 2007 and the first half of 2008 to motor vehicle registration counts from the Federal Highway Administration, State Farm estimates a Minnesota vehicle has a 1-in-139 chance of colliding with a deer during the next year. Wisconsin ranked sixth nationally, with a 1 in 110 chance.

Deer-vehicle collisions are most likely to occur in West Virginia, where drivers have a 1 in 45 chance. A driver has less than a 1 in 10,000 chance of hitting a deer in Hawaii.

## 'DON'T VEER FOR DEER'

Weinholzer said the crashes rarely end in death if the person is wearing a seat belt or a helmet. But in terms of damage, they are expensive.

He estimates an average crash costs about \$2,000. Combined with State Farm's crash numbers, that comes out to \$70 million a year in deer-caused damage in Minnesota.

Other damage estimates are much lower.

According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, about 1.5 million deer-vehicle collisions occur nationally per year, killing more than 150 people and causing \$1.1 billion in property damage, or about \$733 a crash.

Stopping deer from crossing roadways has never been easy, and it might not even be the answer to lowering the number of collisions.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources has tried to aid Twin Cities communities in managing their deer populations by extending hunting seasons on deer locally and lifting restrictions on limits. But the animal is extremely adaptable and thrives in the metro's mix of parkland

and woods, said Lou Cornicelli, the big-game program director with the DNR.

"When it comes to high deer densities in urban areas, we need to look in the mirror," he said. "Deer like the development here, our chunked-up pieces of property."

After 10 years of tracking deer issues on Minnesota roads, MnDOT's Weinholzer has come to a couple of conclusions.

First, it might not be the deer that need to be managed.

"Almost every system we have is to change the action of the deer — reflectors, whistles, you name it — and they don't work," he said. "The reason the (new) system at Camden works is because it is set up to change the action of the driver, because they see the flashing light."

The second conclusion?

"Don't veer for deer. That's the biggest one," he said, meaning it's safer for a car to plow into a deer than to swerve around it. Motorcyclists need to slow as much as possible and then try to steer for an escape route.

Knapp said steering for the deer is difficult — it's a human reaction to swerve.

"As a safety guy, it's the toughest thing for me to tell someone to hit something," he said.

John Brewer can be reached at 651-228-2093.

## ONLINE

To learn more about deer-vehicle collisions, go to the Deer Vehicle Crash Information and Research

Advertisement



**Florida Tech**  
UNIVERSITY ONLINE

## Bring the Classroom to Your Home With a Degree Online From Florida Tech

**APPLY TODAY!**  
FloridaTechOnline.com/FD | 1-888-253-5946



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™