

Meet the neighbours, deer

They are are invading our space like never before

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The Hamilton Spectator

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They devoured his precious cedar trees.

Then they trampled the fence he raised to keep them out. His once-pristine lawn is now a minefield of deer droppings.

And still, the west Mountain's Ron Cruse can't bring himself to get angry.

"They've just destroyed my property, but they're so cute," he says. "I don't even have the heart to go outside and shoo them away."

While the longtime San Francisco Avenue resident has spotted the odd deer cross his property in winters past, this year has been "unbelievable."

The once-reclusive deer are getting bold. Mild winters and fewer hunters have increased their numbers while encroaching development is forcing more contact with humans.

The growing interaction has some Hamilton residents cheering while others, contending with destroyed property and crumpled car fenders, are growing impatient.

The Ministry of Natural Resources does not track precise numbers, but confirms the deer population is up across southern Ontario.

"The deer, like any other wild animal, is just responding to the availability of food and favourable weather conditions," says ministry biologist Art Timmerman.

In addition to climate change and urban sprawl, Timmerman points to a change in culture among people moving to rural areas from cities. They are refusing to allow hunting on their properties.

Municipalities are drafting bylaws that increasingly restrict gun and bow hunting within city limits.

And protected green areas like those throughout Hamilton and Niagara provide an ideal refuge and travel corridor for deer.

Dense deer populations will eventually damage natural habitats. But Timmerman warns that frayed human nerves may prompt



Barry Gray, the Hamilton Spectator
A deer crosses Scenic Drive on Hamilton's west mountain. A combination of of warm weather, urban growth and less hunting means more deer, more property damage - plus crashes with vehicles.



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action sooner.

"The habitat will support them for a while. The question is, socially, how long will we tolerate them?"

The cost of a burgeoning deer population on area roads and highways alone is staggering.

In 2006, 12 per cent (11,660) of 100,068 highway crashes investigated by the OPP involved wild animals, mostly deer.

Sergeant Cam Woolley of the highway safety division blames increasing development and longer commutes. With more people on the road around dawn as well as dusk, drivers are encountering deer when they are most active.

Woolley describes deer as dangerous road companions.

"Their fur doesn't reflect light, they're panicky and high-strung and they will dive right into the path of a car," he said.

Hamilton police have identified several danger zones within the city's limits, including Highway 52, from Jerseyville Road to Governor's Road, the Linc from Dartnall Road to Paramount Drive and stretches of Governor's Road and Wilson Street.

The city's animal control department has also reported a spike in calls to pick up deer killed or injured in crashes.

From January to April of last year, the unit responded to 37 calls. This year, they have received 52 in the same four-month period.

Damage to private property, including broken fences and landscaping, is also on the rise.

Acting conservationist Lisa Jennings of the Hamilton Conservation Authority has noticed an increase in calls from people asking if a bylaw exists to prevent their neighbours from feeding the deer.

While she discourages leaving food out, Jennings says there's nothing on the books to stop people.

That's good news for Westdale's Ken Ockenden, who has grown to love the daily visits from the deer that nibble on the cracked corn he's been leaving out.

He guesses this winter's deep snow has driven many of them out of the forest in search of more accessible food.

Ockenden admits their presence irritates his neighbours but insists he's smitten.

"They're so pretty and delicate, you can't really get mad at them," he says. "And anyway, they were here first, we're the interlopers."

But Ed Reid of the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters warns that, as conflicts between humans and an expanding deer population increase, the delicate animal's appeal will wane.

With overpopulation near urban centres increasing, Reid says the Natural Resources "needs to take better stock of deer density and refine deer management."

"When it comes to deer, nature won't take its course," he says. "Deer are very adaptive."

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Ron Albertson, the Hamilton Spectator

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Provincial statistics for accidents involving vehicles and wild animals.

1994

6 deaths, 351 injuries, 7,440 total accidents

2004 (most recent available data)

8 deaths, 556 injuries, 13,676 total accidents

Source: Ministry of Transportation

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