



Collisions with wild animals can result in serious vehicle damage, personal injury or even death. There are 725,000 to 1.5 million wildlife-vehicle collisions (WVCs) in the U.S. every year, resulting in over a billion dollars in property damage annually, 29,000 human injuries annually, and over 200 human fatalities annually.

The Ninemile-Sixmile drainages are a major regional wildlife movement corridor.

Most of us are aware of the dangers while driving in an area rich in wildlife such as the Ninemile-Sixmile. Yet, even when educated, we are often distracted or surprised by an animal's unpredictable behavior, leaving us with an expensive vehicle repair and one less animal coexisting in the region.

Tips to Reduce Your Collision Risk

Take note of wildlife crossing signs along your regularly traveled routes. Don't disregard the signs just because you have seen them before - they are located at high wildlife use areas!

Slow down. Reducing your speed increases your response time. Speed reduces your ability to steer away from objects in the roadway, extends the distance required to stop, and increases the force of impact, in the event of a collision. Some studies suggest that wildlife-vehicle collisions occur more than expected on clear, dry nights, and on long straight stretches, as drivers tend to increase speed under good conditions. Drivers may be more cautious on curves or in poor weather. Wear your seatbelt at all times, at all speeds.

Practice active driving. Talking on your cell phone, text messaging or chatting with passengers is even more dangerous in wildlife areas. Be especially careful if you are on a motorcycle; 85% of deer-motorcycle collisions involve human fatalities.

Drivers and passengers should actively watch for:

- wildlife on the road, on the shoulder, in the ditch, and in the right of way
- movement on or alongside the road
- shining eyes, which will be your head lights reflecting off the animal's eyes. Note that moose are so tall that their eyes are normally above the beams of most vehicle headlights, and so are less likely to be seen
- flickering headlights of oncoming cars or tail lights of the vehicles in front of you - which may be an animal crossing the road
- roadside reflectors that disappear/reappear, as an animal may be crossing in front of them

Think like an animal; be familiar with wildlife behavior. Wildlife move across the landscape more frequently during seasons of mating, bearing young, and hunting. Where you see one animal, more may be nearby. Watch for mother and offspring groups or male/female pairs during the fall rut. Even if an animal sees you, it may still jump in front of your car; honk your horn to scare wildlife off the road. If an animal crosses safely in front of your car, proceed with caution because it may turn and try to cross back.

Don't litter. Some species enjoy "human" food as much as we do and will be attracted to roadsides if they smell fast food containers, apple cores, soda bottles, etc.

Think about the landscape that you are driving through. Is it good habitat for wildlife? Studies indicate that there are some common characteristics of high-risk locations for collisions.

Landscape spatial patterns can concentrate or funnel animals onto certain road sections, whereas certain road attributes can make a motorist less likely to observe wildlife or less able to respond in time. Problem locations include areas where creeks parallel or intersect roads, areas of good roadside habitat, and long straight stretches (because people tend to speed up). In the Ninemile/Sixmile, almost everywhere is good wildlife habitat - it is a regional wildlife corridor.

Reduce driving during times and seasons when collisions are most common Collisions can occur anytime, but there are peak times when they are most likely. 40% of collisions occur between 7:00 pm and midnight, and the high-risk months to hit deer are May and November. Spring is particularly high-risk as new green forage in roadside ditches attracts animals. Bear collisions peak in September and October as bears forage closer to communities. December and January are the high-risk times for moose collisions.

During dusk and dawn driver visibility is low and wildlife movement is at its highest level. Avoid driving on cruise control during these hours. Try lowering your visor/sunshield when the sky is lighter than the road ahead. As we all know, it is difficult to see wildlife in the dark. To improve your chances of seeing an animal at night:

- Use high beams when it is safe to do so to extend your effective sight distance, and scan the road and both sides of the road ahead with quick glances. However, be sure to immediately dim your lights when you see an animal so it isn't blinded and can safely move away.
- Keep your dashboard lights on low and don't use internal lights that can cause a glare on the inside of the windshield and reduce visibility.
- Keep head lights properly aligned to avoid blinding other drivers and optimize road coverage.

Don't rely on "deer whistles" or other related gadgets. The effectiveness of deer whistles is highly questionable, and several scientific studies have indicated their unreliability.

Keep up with regular auto maintenance. Make sure your windshield is clean and your dashboard is clear of objects that would obscure your ability to see animals on the road. Invest in bright headlights. Keep headlights, signal lights, and tail lights clean and in good working order.

To swerve or not to swerve? If animals such as deer are in your way at high speeds, think carefully, and consider using your brakes, not your wheel. Do not take unsafe evasive actions. Serious collisions can occur when drivers lose control of their vehicles trying to avoid an animal.

If you do hit an animal: For help, and to report the collision, call the city police, county sheriff's office, or the Montana Highway Patrol at 800-525-5555. If the animal is seriously injured but still alive, ask that a law enforcement officer or game warden be sent to dispatch the animal and safely remove it from the road. Do not attempt to tend to an injured wild animal as they can be very dangerous and unpredictable.

(Information adapted from Defenders of Wildlife's Habitat and Highways program
http://www.defenders.org/programs_and_policy/habitat_conservation/habitat_and_highways/
and from British Columbia Conservation Foundation's Wildlife-Vehicle Accident Prevention Program
<http://www.wildlifeaccidents.ca/hints.htm>)