

THE HUMAN TOLL OF DEER INVASION

The increase in deer numbers is causing many more road accidents than we have seen previously.

TRICIA Davis' 22-year-old son, Martin Jones, didn't stand a chance. Four years ago, in the early hours of a Saturday morning, he was driving along the A34 in Hampshire when he hit the largest female deer the police said they'd ever seen. Obscured from view by its position near the central barrier, it was lying on the ground – possibly already hit by another vehicle. Martin, who simply couldn't have seen it, died as a result.

Mrs Davis, who lives in Cheltenham, is now an ardent advocate of roadside deterrents in accident black spots involving deer. "Martin was a totally innocent victim, and we lost a dearly-loved son. He wasn't doing anything wrong – he was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. "Although there were warning signs on the road, there was no fence, no deterrent, and yet this is a busy dual carriageway and Hampshire is known to have a huge deer problem."

As a result of her experience, she has lent her support to 'deer collisions', a project that, since 2003, has been working to document all traffic accidents involving these animals. Heading up the research is Dr Jochen Langbein. His aim is two-fold: firstly to persuade members of the public to report any collision, however minor, to his website; and secondly, to collect the evidence needed to persuade county councils and other highway authorities to put money into safety measures.

"Overall, as a conservative estimate of numbers of deer-vehicle collision for Britain as a whole, we are confident they're unlikely to number fewer than 28,250 to 42,500," Dr Langbein says. "On the basis of figures available, we can estimate that around 425 people are injured annually in the UK as a result, of which around 10-15 per year lead to human fatalities." Compared with other counties, the chances of colliding with a deer in Gloucestershire are uncomfortably high. If

you take into account differences in traffic volume, then the county comes seventh in a league of 35 local authorities in England.

In the Cotswolds, you might hit a muntjac or a roe deer and get a shock. If you hit a fallow, which are herding species, you face a formidable opponent. A male could weigh up to 100kg – the same as a grown man. Cotswold black spots for such accidents are exactly where you'd expect: around the Wychwood Forest, the Forest of Dean, Coates near Cirencester, and the countryside around Stroud.

The difficulty is that deer are not a protected species. So unless the collision involved injury to a person, there's no obligation to report it. The result isn't just a lack of information for drivers: it also means dying animals are left in pain by the roadside.

As a specialist zoologist, Dr Langbein has a huge affection for deer. "It shouldn't be the case that more cars mean we should have fewer deer, but they do need to be managed and controlled in sensible numbers. It's not that we suddenly have a problem and we are having to start culling – we have always culled.

"Deer management is part of the solution, but we are also discussing where to do mitigation. We are running trials of roadside deterrents, including better warning signs – for example, laser beams activated by the deer themselves.

"Whenever you try to get county councils to spend money, they come to you and ask for the evidence. We're working to raise awareness: the more people who report collisions, the more evidence we will have to persuade authorities to act." ■

For more information about the deer collisions project, log onto www.deercollisions.co.uk; you can report a collision by emailing info@deercollisions.co.uk or ringing 01984 641366.

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