Deer, Skyline Drive, & Park Visitors

Deer numbers vary between the forested ridges and the hollows of Shenandoah National Park. West- and south-facing slopes at higher elevations tend to have dry shallow soils that do not produce the variety and number of plants that deer prefer for food. The same is true of many excessively steep or rocky slopes throughout the park. In contrast, north and east-facing slopes at lower elevations tend to support a greater variety and concentration of plants that deer favor. Habitat features such as clearings, meadows, and road and powerline corridors also tend to increase the variety and number of plants that deer prefer. Park scientists conduct surveys of deer in the Big Meadows area each year to better understand how many of them use this area.
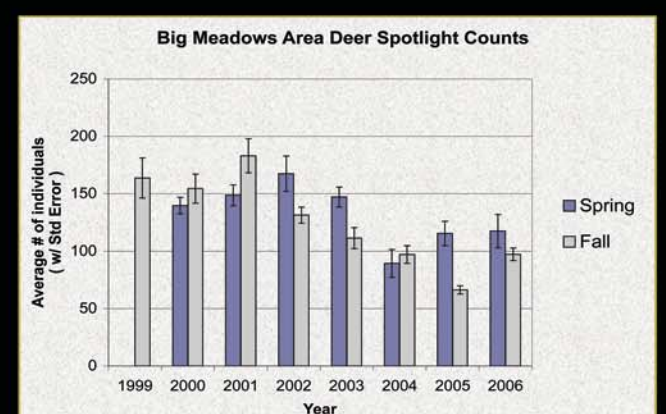
From a deer's point of view, the cleared road shoulders, overlooks, and developed areas along Skyline Drive are convenient places for finding and eating preferred plants that are scarce at many ridgetop locations. It is not uncommon to suddenly encounter a dozen or more deer gathered along both sides of the Drive in their search for food. Equipped with this knowledge, drivers should expect the sudden appearance of a group of deer around the next curve.

It is true that deer, to a degree, become accustomed to Skyline Drive traffic. However, deer are wild and can behave unpredictably near approaching traffic. As a result, a number of park deer are struck and killed by vehicles along the Drive each year. To prevent deer fatalities, drivers need to proceed with caution and give park deer the right-of-way.

YOU CAN HELP! Deer are also attracted to Skyline Drive, picnic areas, and campgrounds because they hope to be fed. Feeding any wildlife is illegal in the park, poses risks to visitors, and is unhealthy for the animal. Please do not be tempted to feed wildlife.

Deer are a frequent sight on Skyline Drive. Be sure to observe the 35 mph speed limit! NPS/Kuhns

Park scientists establish trends in Shenandoah's deer population by conducting spotlight counts. NPS/Gubler