

## NATURALLY: Deer have adapted to the changing landscape

- By SARA KING Special to the Gazette
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Deer have adapted well to the changing landscape. This has been possible because deer are really mostly “forest-edge,” rather than forest, animals.

### Submitted photo

One day last spring, just as I had entered the woods, I saw a tiny, spotted fawn struggle to stand for the first time on wobbly legs. The adult doe was surprised to find me so close, but stood to protect her newborn as I walked away. The moment felt lucky and hopeful. It was an extraordinary moment in nature that will stay with me for my lifetime.

Images of deer have been found in 50,000-year-old caves. They are woven into the 11th-century Bayeux Tapestry. Pictures of deer are found in paintings, embroidered textiles, and jewelry, and on clay pots and clothing across centuries and cultures. In our area, beautiful wire-shaped, lighted deer are among the most common modern outdoor holiday decorations.

Peace, gentleness, wilderness, innocence, vulnerability, grace, harmony, and piety are some of the symbolic meanings attributed to deer. Some cultures recognize deer as providing connections to the supernatural; others see these beautiful animals as symbols of spiritual authority.

For many of the same reasons that, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, we in America lost all of our passenger pigeons, nearly decimated our migratory songbird populations, clear-cut our forests, and killed all but a handful of bison, wolves, bears, big cats, and other big mammals, we lost nearly all of our deer. What was behind all of this slaughter?

Erika Howsare's *The Age of Deer* (2024) and Wasik and Murphy's *Our Kindred Creatures* (2024) each provide a list of explanations. European settlers thought this new-to-them country, and everything in it, was infinite. Many of these immigrants, even religious leaders, disliked and feared wild animals and wilderness. Market forces and human greed that amounted to a kind of madness, according to Howsare, also played a huge part. These newcomers often saw no purpose for animals beyond short-term commercial gain. They saw all animals as objects devoid of the sentience that we now recognize.

By the early 1900s, most East Coast states, including Pennsylvania, had almost no deer left and brought in deer from Michigan and Wisconsin to re-establish the herds.

There is no way to know how many deer were in the United States before Europeans arrived. The most frequent guess is that U.S. white-tailed deer populations have just about recovered from the 19th-century slaughter, but Western U.S. deer populations, including mule deer, have not.

Now the deer populations on the East Coast, including Pennsylvania, are leveling off or declining. What has also declined across the East Coast and other parts of our country is undeveloped land and farmland. From 1800 to 1900, the human population of the United States grew from 5 million to 76 million people. Today there are 346 million of us. There is far less wild space.

Native Americans were shocked at the European settlers' destruction. Many Native American traditions specifically address humans' relationships with animals, including deer. Howsare interviewed a member of the Bad River Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Philomena Kebec, who explained that Native people have a dependence on these animals. It's not that they have dominion over them, but that the animals have kindly given life and life force to continue.

Native Americans saw themselves as participants in a great natural order of life, related in some fundamental manner to every other living species, wrote author Joseph Bruchac. Therefore, it was incumbent on them to respect every other form of life, to learn from them as best they could.

Some of the European settler families were also shocked at the destruction of the land and animals. Seeing the extraordinary loss, early conservationists, including Pennsylvania's Gifford Pinchot, argued that we have to manage land and animals so that they are always available for human use. They urged that we regard both animals and trees as crops and manage them accordingly—or “sustainably.”

Other new Americans, such as naturalist John Muir, saw the issue of protection of nature in ways more similar to Native American perspectives. Early preservationists (now called environmentalists) argued that if we are to survive, we need to see the Earth and all that live within it as an interconnected ecosystem in which all parts—flora and fauna—are not only valuable, but also play a vital role. If we are to protect this Earth, humans need to live as part of this ecosystem, not strive to dominate it. Nature has worth in its own right, both ecologically and spiritually.

In some ways, deer have adapted well to the changing landscape. This has been possible because deer are really mostly “forest-edge,” rather than forest, animals. They like to eat small shrubs and plants. Like a few other animals, such as coyotes, deer have adapted well to suburban life, which is often safe, welcoming, and full of good food. Mature woodlands may actually have less to offer.

Wasik and Murphy argue that although we are paying more attention to protecting—and not just using—animals today, we are still working out our relationship with them. We are still trying to understand what relationship we should have to animals and what treatment they deserve.

For Howsare, to look at our relationship to deer means asking the biggest question of all: How will we live on this planet?

The Naturally columns are brought to you each month by the Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.

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