

Natural South Marysburgh

Oh Dear—We Have Deer

Doubtless, winter is here and will continue until it decides it is over. There is always a discussion into whether or not to initiate winter feeding programs and the ethics of doing so. Most of us feed birds, a few may even offer feed to squirrels and chipmunks, but how about the deer that drop in? Do we feed the occasional deer that ventures into our yard? What do we offer, and how much? Are we helping or just interfering? There are examples of large quantities of hay being fed at deer yards that actually resulted in starvation when stomachs became packed with indigestible hay. *It is wrong to feed deer hay and grain during the hard winter months because they are in browsing mode and do not have the correct bacteria in their digestive tracts to digest the grain and hay.*

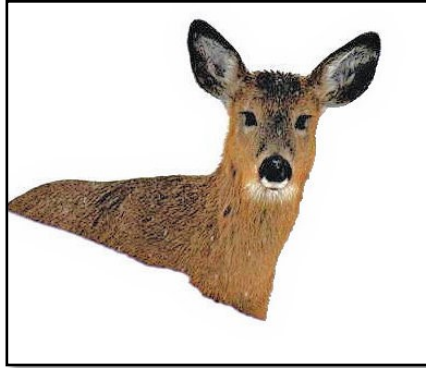


Photo by Don Carr

Let's start by saying that like birds, deer seldom need our help. A heavy snow fall or an ice storm might be an exception, but deer are pretty much designed for whatever winter throws at them. Deer shed their hair coat in the fall. The summer hair has solid shafts and lacks an undercoat, but the grey-brown winter coat has hollow hair shafts and a dense, wool-like under fur, providing effective insulation. They also have special muscles that can adjust the angle of their hair shafts to obtain maximum insulation.

In the fall, deer gorge increasing fat accumulation by as much as 30 percent. They seek out protein-rich food sources in the spring and summer for growth, and they start looking for more starches and sugars in the fall and winter to help them build fat stores. Protein-rich foods include alfalfa and clover. Starchy or sugary foods include corn, grapes and acorns. During the winter, they reduce food intake (regardless of availability), relying on their fat reserves for as much as 40 percent of daily nutritional needs. Deer conserve energy during winter months by becoming sedentary and restricting their movements to the deer yard where they have access to browse and cover, and survive on woody browse—twigs, buds and stems.

So, by offering food at this time of year, their digestion process can be upset, unless you know what you're doing, and understand the digestive requirements of deer in winter. For example, while deer may consume corn in the fall, offering large amounts in the winter can be fatal as a deer's winter digestive system is not equipped to handle a high carbohydrate diet such as corn.

Deer have issues with unconventional diets. Their systems depend on a variety of bacteria and microorganisms in their rumen—their stomachs—to break down the food into

usable components. Acidosis—a condition when there is too much acid in the body fluids, as well as diarrhea, may occur if they are fed the wrong foods, like excessive amounts of cereal grains. If artificial food is offered, then it must be introduced very gradually to supplement what the deer are already obtaining through natural browse. Most farm feed stores sell deer pellets that are specially formulated with vitamins and minerals and which can be offered safely to deer in winter. Obviously, feeding deer involves far more than simply throwing them a few bread crumbs from the sundeck of your home. To do it properly, if at all, one needs to do it with their winter diet requirements in mind.

Feeding one or two deer in your backyard is probably not a bad thing. However, we must remember that we are notorious for our bumbling efforts to be compassionate, and end up messing with a finely tuned biological process. If done on a massive scale, our efforts could result in a population that exceeds the carrying capacity of a given area. Look at the mess that was created at Presqu'île several years ago through well-meaning efforts of the public who preferred to see the provincial park as a petting zoo. Deer became overcrowded, cleaned out the understory and its native wildflowers in a desperate search for food, and be-



Photo by Sydney Smith

came weak with malnutrition. A cull was put in place to reduce the herd to a sustainable level and the understory returned and the resident deer became healthy again.

Nature is not kind, but she is knowledgeable. The best manager is nature herself who will ensure that only the strongest and healthiest individuals survive, ensuring a healthy breeding stock.

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