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Deer Need a Little "Tough Love" in Winter

by Jim Knight, MSU Extension Wildlife Specialist (retired)

12/02/03 BOZEMAN -- The deer you plan to feed over the winter may need some "tough love" instead.

"Just as people have learned that sometimes well-meant help facilitates unhealthy behavior, so winter feeding of deer is unhealthy, or even deadly, for deer. Most people don't know that some common feeds can harm deer or change their behavior to the point that it leads to their destruction."

Feeding seems like a generous answer to starving wildlife at first, says Knight. However, most people don't know that some common feeds can harm deer or change their behavior to the point that it leads to their destruction.

"Many people think that feeding deer in a hard winter can do nothing but help," says Knight. "That's not always the case." Knight describes the following scene he witnessed during the winter of 1996-97.

A tearful woman was talking to a central Montana wildlife biologist.

"We can't afford any more food, and the poor things are dying," the woman complained. "Every day more and more come to the feeders, but we're already spending \$100 a month. Isn't there something you can do?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am," the wildlife biologist said, "but you're drawing deer from all over the area. They aren't used to a diet of hay and corn, so I'm afraid you're going to have more of this," he said, pointing to two frozen carcasses of yearling deer only feet from hay-filled feeders.

This scene is repeated many times each winter in Montana, says Knight.

Feeding deer hay or corn can kill them, because they cannot always digest it. Deer digestion involves protozoa and bacteria that help break down food. Different micro-organisms help digest different types of vegetation. If a deer has been feeding on aspen or willows, it has built up the micro-organisms that digest only this kind of vegetation. If this same deer suddenly fills its stomach with corn or hay, it may not have enough of the corn- and hay-digesting micro-organisms in its stomach to digest the food. A deer can starve to death with a full stomach.

In addition, deer can become fixated on a food source, says Knight. Deer will stay near a sure food source, even an inadequate one, rather than seek more sufficient food in other areas.

Once food is discovered, deer concentrate around a feeder rather than scattering through the available winter range. Often, they remain in an artificial feeding area

getting only half the food they need rather than fighting the snow to use natural browse. They quickly deplete any close-by forage and can stay in a feeder area until they starve to death. This is why spring searches often reveal concentrations of dead deer within the immediate vicinity of feed areas.

So if you still decide to feed deer, you must feed every day, says Knight. If you become ill and can no longer feed, the deer that depend on you for food will suffer. Any interruption, whether due to depleted funds, a vacation, a snow storm or a midwinter move to a warmer climate, will eliminate part or all of a deer's diet. Once a feeding program starts, it must continue until spring when delicate new growth lures deer to resume foraging away from your feeder.

And, another problem is that deer won't "divvy up" feed equally.

Deer need 3.5 pounds of good browse daily. If you aren't feeding this much for each one, some will be undernourished. Even if you provide this much food per deer per day on average, some deer will eat five pounds leaving other deer with too little. So some deer will starve.

In addition, artificial feeding makes deer abnormally competitive.

Competition between deer in natural situations usually is limited, because natural food sources are scattered. In artificial feeding situations, deer often become combative, striking one another with hooves to assure themselves a share of the food. Young deer, the ones that need the food most, are kept away by larger or stronger deer.

Artificial feeding also can spread disease.

When deer are abnormally close to one another, contagious diseases or parasites are more easily spread. Wildlife pathologists now suspect that artificially-fed deer in high populations may develop disorders that lead to peculiar habits, such as eating hair from themselves and other deer.

Early last spring, Knight says he had the unpleasant experience of seeing a yearling buck infested with black, wart-like growths. These growths, which are caused by a contagious virus, had completely covered the deer's face. The blinded animal was running into fences, trees and other obstructions and had severely cut itself before being put out of its misery by a wildlife biologist. This deer was killed within a half mile of the woman's feed station mentioned earlier.

The consequences of artificial feeding mentioned up to now are direct and easily observed. There are, however, other less obvious implications.

Many deer visiting feed stations are carrying fawns. If the food being provided is not as abundant as natural browse, not only the doe, but also her fawns may be undernourished.

Artificial feeding may force deer to ignore their instincts. Deer have evolved to fear man. This has helped them survive. Artificial feeding forces them to ignore the presence of people. In some cases, this could be their downfall.

Finally, artificial feeding would have to increase infinitely to feed all the animals that would come.

If you found the perfect diet that provided all necessary nutrients, and if you were able to feed the equivalent of 3.5 pounds per deer of good browse daily, and if you were

able to get the feed divided equally among the animals, and if you were able to minimize the spread of disease due to the animals being closer together than they would be naturally, even then your problems would not be at an end.

Next year, the perfectly fed and healthy animals' offspring would come with their mothers. Each year, you would need to provide more feed for the new generations.

In truth, you may hurt more deer than you help if you feed them.

There is a way to help, however.

"Create and maintain a natural habitat and combine that with proper hunting. It's the only way to minimize starvation and work for both deer health and humane treatment," says Knight. "If deer populations aren't controlled by man or other predators, you will have starvation."