

# Critter Safety

Perhaps nothing causes more concern to a motorcyclist than the thought of encountering an animal in the road. Whether it's a deer, a dog, a moose, or an alligator, the unpredictability of animals can make for particularly troubling riding situations.

Ideally, you should already be using the "SEE" (Search, Evaluate, Execute) strategy any time you ride. So the first step in dealing with critters is simply heightening your awareness in situations where animals may be present, and being prepared to react accordingly when and if you see one. It's also helpful to understand some of the behavior patterns of animals you're most likely to encounter.

## DEER

In terms of frequency of collisions, deer are by far the most hazardous animals to motorcycle riders. Deer populations are rising across North America, and as undeveloped land disappears, animals are more likely to be on the move, crossing roadways (even in residential areas) and heading into the paths of motorists with increasing frequency.

Consequently, deer collisions remain frequent, both for drivers and motorcyclists. Unfortunately, riders bear the brunt of the death and injuries caused by deer. According to the Wisconsin Department of Transportation, 87.7 percent of motorcycle-deer collisions in 2006 resulted in death\* or injury – compared to only 2.6 percent of deer collisions involving passenger cars. A startling difference!

## DOGS

Fortunately, there aren't as many loose dogs running around as there used to be. That's a good thing for both dogs and motorcyclists. But you'll still encounter them occasionally in rural areas, where farm dogs often are free to roam – and protect their master's land!

If you see a loose dog start to chase you, the best strategy is to outsmart it. Slow down a little, then accelerate. By varying your speed, you can cause it to "miscalculate" its angle of approach. If a dog does manage to "catch" you, resist the urge to kick at it, as you're more likely to cause a crash than you are to successfully fend off the attack. If you can, accelerate past it. And think of this scenario as just one more reason to wear sturdy boots and other protective gear (especially pants).

## VARMINTS

Running over a squirrel, groundhog, or other small animal is not a pleasant experience, but it's preferable to swerving off the road or into oncoming traffic to avoid it! Better to slow down (if you can do it safely), maintain your course, and treat a pending collision as you would any obstacle in the road: keep the bike pointed straight with a steady throttle, resist the temptation to brake, and rise off the seat slightly to let your legs absorb some of the impact. Hopefully, you'll miss it; if not, your motorcycle should roll harmlessly over the unlucky creature.

## CATTLE

In some areas, such as the southwestern U.S., you may encounter signs indicating you are in "Open Range." This means you're likely to encounter cattle roaming freely, with no fences. Give them the right of way and treat them much the way you would a herd of bison. Chances are, they're tamer than buffalo, but you never know when they might become suddenly aggressive.

Lions, Tigers, and Bears?

Riding in "exotic" locations means you'll potentially come across new and unexpected animals in your path. The bottom line is to stay prepared and alert. Educate yourself about what animals you might encounter while riding, pay attention to road signs, recognize high-risk situations and areas, and anticipate to the best of your ability when you may find yourself crossing paths with one of our four-legged "friends."

*\* In Wisconsin in 2006, seven people were killed in vehicle-deer collisions; five of them were motorcyclists.*

### Staying one jump ahead

**The best way to survive a collision with deer is to learn to avoid having one. Here are a number of basic guidelines to keep in mind when riding:**

- **Remember** that grazing deer, with their heads down, may be well camouflaged next to the road. That "tree stump" you're approaching might really be a 12-point buck!
- **Heed the warnings** of deer crossing signs. They're generally not in areas where a lot of deer have been seen, but where a lot of carcasses have been removed from the roadside.
- **Use extra caution** riding at dusk or dawn, when deer are most active, especially in autumn. When riding at night, learn to look for moving shadows and tell-tale glowing eyes. Ride with your high beam on in the absence of oncoming traffic.
- **If you see one** deer, assume others are nearby. Don't relax after a deer crosses safely in front of you, as
- **Expect the unexpected.** When a deer jumps, the first jump is almost always in the direction it's facing. But subsequent jumps can be in any direction, often in a zig-zag manner (all the better to evade a wolf). Safely slowing or stopping is better than trying to dodge it.
- **Though some** people swear by them, deer whistles (which emit an ultra-high-pitched sound) are not proven effective at keeping deer out of your path.
- **Always wear** proper protective gear.