

Imagine looking out your living room window and seeing a herd of mule deer quietly chewing their cud. Only a dozen feet

suburban safari armed with a camera and note pad. One large estate had a herd of about ten deer, including two young bucks. Rocky Mountain mule

purchased thousands of acres around Boulder, prohibiting hunting. Biologists concur that mule deer are attracted to the “wonderful urban fringe” of garden food and protection from mountain lions. There’s no doubt that suburban living provides refuge from hunters and predators, while providing nutritious forage and abundant shelter.

Indeed, Boulder is accommodating to their deer. Certainly, fawns are born in backyards and driveways. And why not? These animals are among the old-

boulder

a deer's best friend

By Scott Palczak

away, they sit like statues with their placid eyes gazing at you. Three does and their fawns appear restless. The surreal herd rises to their feet and saunters away, vanishing behind a nearby house.

Your imaginary close encounter is reality for people living in Boulder, Colorado’s western edge. While the city is not swarming with deer, they’re seen parading through trailer parks and stamping across residential lawns. Saplings are nibbled, gardens are ransacked, and deer sleep in driveways, yet Boulderites remain unconcerned. A less compassionate town would consider Boulder to have a deer problem. But other towns are not Boulder. So what does this bastion of compassion do about their deer dilemma? Apparently *nothing*.

Long-time deer patrons Tom and Sallie Garnett spoke glowingly of their coexistence with mule deer. “I don’t object to the deer, but I have to put a fence around my roses – they love roses,” says Tom. He continues, “Basically people enjoy having deer around and there’s even been fawns born in backyards.” On a warm winter’s afternoon I found Alice McDonald jogging past a herd of deer. “Our neighbors have seen fawns only a few hours old that could barely walk, and every spring a doe named “Maggie” would give birth to twins in their yard” she revealed. I continued my

deer, or “Muleys,” are found from the western Great Plains westward. They look very much like whitetail deer but are on the average a trifle larger and their tail is tipped with black. Matriarchal herds contain female fawns that will live for many years with their mother and other does in the area. Statuesque does lounged in the front yard, patiently ruminating while surveying me through piercing, obsidian-colored eyes.

Eldorado State Park manager Steven Mulhouser says, however, that every few years some people take offense to the plethora of deer, but after awhile, the animosity subsides. Steve has a “gut feeling” that hunting pressure in the nearby national forest may be driving mule deer into Boulder. But Colorado Division of Wildlife biologist Janet George says that hunting has actually decreased in the last 30 years because the city and county have

est natives of the area. Ann Wichmann of Boulder Mountain Parks says, “This is mule deer winter range and has been for thousands and thousands of years.” Many residents told me that deer are seen strolling across busy streets in the heart of the city. Feeding deer is illegal after a city law was passed in 1987, but it’s generally



Photo: Scott Palczak

“Muleys” coexist peacefully with their Boulderite neighbors. Matriarchal deer herds may frequent the same areas for years.

assumed that some people put salt blocks in their yards to attract deer. This may be well intentioned, but misguided, because luring deer into the city is dangerous to the deer who can cause car collisions which also threaten human life and property. From 120 to

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200 deer are killed annually by cars in Boulder, and record keeping indicates that at least one deer is killed or injured on Boulder's roads each day throughout the year. Wildlife biologist Janet George says that special "Swareflex" reflectors were installed along some roads to "warn" deer of oncoming cars, but unfortunately, the expensive reflectors have proven ineffective at reducing deer and car collisions.

Boulder has published brochures explaining how to build deer-proof fences, evaluating commercial repellents, and listing plants that deer find unpalatable. To minimize the irresistible lure of suburban vegetation, people are allowed to install electric fences. I witnessed several lawns fortified with tall, but tastefully fashioned wrought iron fences – fencing is the easiest way to discourage trespassing deer. An immunocontraceptive called *porcine zona pellucida* (PZP) is showing promise at reducing pregnancies in does. Boulderites, apparently, find such drastic measures distasteful. Sterilizing the deer with contraceptives is considered impractical and fencing off neighborhoods is simply out of the question. Some years ago, Boulder conducted a survey showing that most people want nothing done to the deer – no bow hunters, no sharpshooters, or relocation programs. Forget SWAT teams of game wardens ambushing innocent does. Boulder's philosophy is live and let live.

Politically and environmentally correct, Boulder is a unique city of 100,000 residents. They're passionate about preserving open space and saving prairie dogs. Buddhism, vegetarianism and animal rights philosophy are often ingrained in their lifestyle and psyche. As a result, Boulder has maintained a remarkably harmonious relationship with their deer, as few communities have done. For some reason, mule deer populations have remained fairly stable – about 2,000 to 5,000 animals – with minimal damage to the ecology.

Muleys, however, are succumbing

to loss of habitat. Straggling subdivisions, cattle grazing, over-hunting of bucks and competition from elk are depriving the deer of a chance to rebound. To appease hunters, the Colorado Division of Wildlife and the Wyoming Game and Fish department are launching an ambitious "deer management program" designed to increase herd sizes. Basic strategies involve burning vegetation, spraying herbicides, timber cutting, mowing and grazing management. While these practices may increase the food supply for mule deer, the overall quality of the ecosystem is altered – and damaged.

In a misguided, simplistic attempt to further increase deer populations, the Colorado Division of Wildlife is considering shooting coyotes – who prey on fawns – from low-flying airplanes. But the real problem is not predation from coyotes, but ecological destruction caused by too many hunters and loss of habitat.

The people of Boulder have proven that humans can live in harmony with deer. For eons, the graceful mule deer have struggled among the incredible highlands of Boulder. Through all those centuries, nature has tended to their needs and spared them from extinction. Today, mule deer are silent, incarnate wild spirits, bringing peace and goodwill to people who care to listen. Let's hope this sublime and peaceful coexistence will stand the test of time. 🐾

Scott Palczak lives in Longmont, Colorado and has been interested in animals and animal rights for most of his life. An avid anti-hunter, Scott has been studying deer, hunting, and wildlife management for two years.