

The Winter of Deer

By Gloria Hildebrandt
Photos by Mike Davis

We began calling them The Gang of Five. Last winter we began seeing five or six deer in the woods almost every day. We saw them run away from us, we saw where they browsed, we even saw where they slept. We learned the sounds they make.

Their Sounds

I can't remember the first time I heard the deer, but I must have been astonished. I'd always thought of deer as being quiet. I have heard them stamp their feet in defence – in fact I saw a doe do that in front of my first dog, decades ago. Moments later, I saw a very young, tiny fawn, so the mother had been protecting her young. But last year we came to learn The Gang of Five's vocal repertoire.

They sneeze. They snort in what sounds like obvious disgust. They combine the two into a sneeze-snort. They will give this sound repeatedly, more than once. It got so that I'd hear them before I saw them, moving away from my little dog Thomas and me. I learned to freeze when I hear the sound, and look for them among the trees. I don't usually see them until they move. Sometimes they don't move far away, and once I see them I can continue to watch them for a while. Sometimes I have become tired of watching them, and have moved on while they remain standing still among the trees. I think they're not too alarmed by us, as we wouldn't hurt them. Even Thomas, who has an underbite and can't get most of his teeth to make contact with each other, couldn't do much harm to them if he were ever to catch up to them.

Their Food

On my daily walk I sometimes saw deer tracks in the cedar forest leading to a scuffed-up area where brown leaves were churned up above the snow. Later in the winter I saw cedar saplings with branches that had been nibbled, and small green cedar leaves were lying on the snow. I also saw clear nibble marks on the narrow trunks of Dogwood bushes. The marks left large V shapes where the bark had been removed down to the pale bare trunks.

Their Beds

Mike discovered the beds first. Out with his camera, he had followed a lot of deer tracks to clear, round depressions in the snow. To our surprise, they were very close, between one of my neighbours' house and mine. It was strange to think that the gang had slept within sight of my bedroom window. We came to recognize deer beds in the snow as round circles about three feet across, with edges higher than the undisturbed snow, often melted right to the ground. I even was able to spot the melted traces of past beds, as just bare circles on the ground surrounded by the faintest ring of snow.

Their Scratches

One day in mid December I noticed mysterious, new scratches in the bark of a Spruce tree on the edge of a path I often take. The scratches stood out because they revealed the bare tree trunk beneath the bark. They looked alarmingly like claw marks from a large animal. I showed photos of the scratches to members of the naturalists' club that we belong to, and they said all the scratches, even the very narrow ones, were from deer antlers.

I began taking my cell phone on my walks in the



▲ The morning after a fresh snowfall is a good time to see clear tracks. These deer tracks led to what we learned were their beds in the snow.



▲ We couldn't count the number of deer from their tracks but we could count the individual deer-sized round depressions in the snow that were clearly their beds for the night. Astonishingly, these beds are close fairly close to the road, between our own and our neighbours' houses.

hope of getting good photos, even videos, of the gang. But I was always so excited to see them that it was very difficult to get a photo before they moved out of range. Once I got a poor video of a couple of tails waving as they vanished.

Our best photos were of the evidence they left behind, our own private Gang of Five.

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