

Good Intentions GONE BAD

Feeding Deer in Winter Can Cause More Harm than Good

by Donald Wharton

Editor's Note:

As the truck crept along the road through the dimly lit hemlock forest, the crunch of snow under the tires gave this place an almost otherworldly appearance. “Come along; I’ll show you,” then wildlife bureau chief Gary Parsons had said to me earlier that day.

On a trip back to Albany from a meeting up north, Gary turned his truck onto a back road near Long Lake, if several miles away could be considered “near.” It was winter. Winter in all its north-country glory. The snow was deep; the temperature deeper.

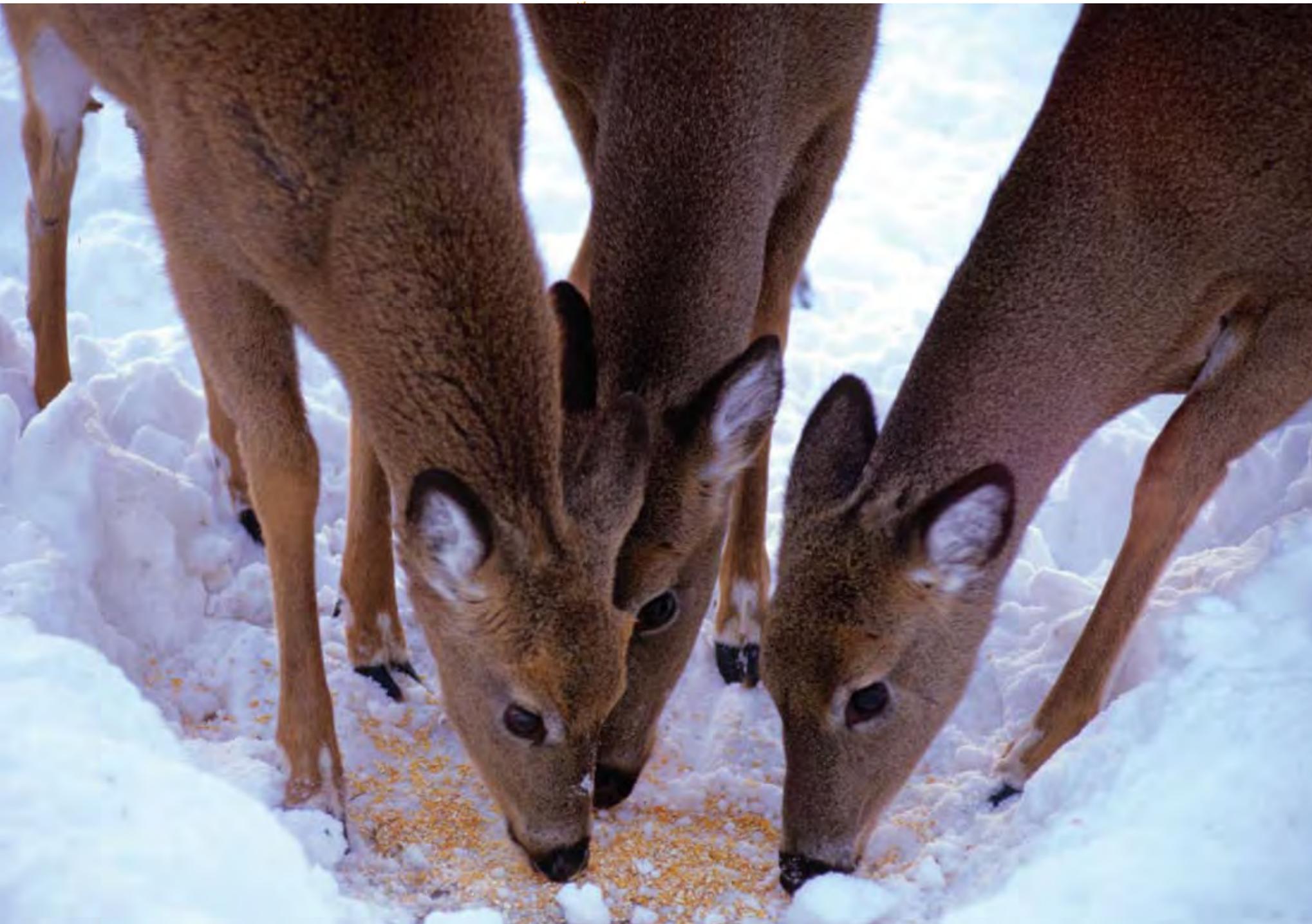
Old trucks carrying older men had arrived ahead of us. Clad in the red-and-black buffalo plaid that is the near uniform of the north-country sportsman, they carried 5-gallon pails of feed—corn, I presumed—and tipped them a bit every few feet along the roadway.

As if someone had rung a dinner bell (in fact, they almost had), deer began to materialize, ghostlike, from the dark woods. First one, then another, now four, no, a dozen, then a dozen more. Where had they been just minutes before? How could so many seemingly appear out of the thin, frozen, Adirondack air?

We moved slowly along, largely unnoticed. Gary’s extra-cab, four-wheel-drive pickup fit nicely into the central Adirondack setting. We were witnessing a north-country scene that has been played out for generations—in a sense, we were watching tradition in action.

It was obvious to me that these men were genuinely concerned about the deer they were feeding; that they held strong convictions about what they were doing. Their intent was pure, but did their actions have the intended effect?

—Dave Nelson, Editor



I'll always remember one deer I saw on the East Branch of the Sacandaga River some years ago. Every time he took a jump he disappeared, with only his head and back visible above the deep snow. He stopped after just a few jumps; it was simply too exhausting for him to move. On another occasion, this time in Saratoga County, I saw where deer were eating the bark off young hemlock trees; surely the deer were nearing starvation.

Scenes like these can evoke strong feelings among even the most seasoned outdoor observers, who feel something must be done to help the deer, or they will soon succumb to the elements.

People are inclined to feed deer for a variety of reasons. Some believe that deer need supplemental food to survive harsh northern winters. Hunters have fed deer for generations, to "get them through the winter," and to improve

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deer populations on lands they hunt. Other folks feed deer to attract customers to commercial enterprises.

I believe many people feed deer for the same reason they feed birds—they enjoy seeing deer up close, an opportunity that doesn't usually present itself at other times of the year. And it is difficult to fault people for that; white-tailed deer are beautiful and fascinating animals. But people often feed deer within feet of a dwelling, and when there is little snow on the ground. Some people feel so strongly about this practice they are willing

to risk getting a ticket from an Environmental Conservation Officer and a potential fine.

In 2002, DEC banned the supplemental feeding of white-tailed deer in New York State. Although biologists have long opposed deer feeding, the feeding ban was prompted largely in response to the recent discovery and threat posed by chronic wasting disease (CWD), a rare, fatal, neurological disease found in members of the deer family. The practice of supplemental feeding can increase the incidence of many diseases, including CWD, which can be transmitted through saliva and waste. But the practice has other, less obvious, deleterious effects.

Deer will travel many miles to reach supplemental feeding areas and this disrupts their natural migration to normal winter "yards." Deer feeding in and around settled areas, and traveling

When deer are in close proximity to each other and their food, the possibilities of disease and conflict arise—this deer, standing in the feed, shows the effects of aggression by other deer.



NYS DEC Jeremy Hurst



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to and from them, are exposed to motor vehicle collisions, dogs, legal and illegal shooting, domestication and competition with other deer.

In the late fall, deer's digestive systems become conditioned to handle woody vegetation. When other foods are offered it can take time for their systems to adapt, during which they may eat but receive little or no nutrition. This occurs at a critical time of year when deer can't afford that to happen.

When driving through an Adirondack village a few years ago, I saw two young deer plodding down a driveway in the direction of the main road. They looked little like the wild, alert deer I'd recently seen while hunting in the backwoods nearby. I would be surprised if they survived the next hunting season; their wild instincts were gone. And first they'd have to survive the winter without getting hit by a car or truck.

A study by state biologists in the 1960s following what was described

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as one of the easiest winters on record found problems with artificial feeding. In an examination of 54 wintering areas, both natural and artificial, mortality was negligible or absent in all areas with the exception of supplemental feeding locations.

Because deer will travel such great distances to reach food, hundreds of deer can congregate near supplemental feeding areas. Imagine what could happen if supplemental feeding were condoned. With the exception of a few places in the Adirondacks, much of the

state's deer herd could end up at just a handful of feeding areas. Diseases could spread very quickly. But how? Let's take a look.

In natural yarding areas, deer are spread out over considerable distances, occasionally even several square miles. In supplemental feeding areas they are usually concentrated around piles of food, whether corn, apples or some manufactured product.

When a deer feeds in the wild, it nips off a twig or picks up an acorn. The food item is soon gone and there is little chance that another deer could come into contact with the original deer's saliva or waste. In contrast, when a deer eats from a pile of food, there is a good possibility that deer could ingest the saliva or waste of another deer that preceded it. In addition, some manufactured feed contains animal protein that can harbor the prions that cause CWD.

Unlike the crowded conditions found at artificial feeding locations, natural wintering areas usually



Edward Jakubowski



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Artificial feeding grounds like this are sometimes very open, causing deer to become vulnerable to the cold, dogs, legal and illegal shooting, disease, and competition with other deer.

contain numerous trails deer can use as escape routes. Another problem with artificial feeding areas, according to big game biologist Jeremy Hurst, is that they are occasionally located in areas of poor winter cover, where deer are forced to expend valuable energy reserves to stay warm.

Furthermore, concentrations of deer near feeding sites can seriously damage browse in the surrounding areas. They can also set back the regeneration of valuable forest tree species by excessive browsing. In some areas, woods subject to excessive browsing take on a park-like appearance, with little desirable vegetation on the ground.

People who watch deer at feeding sites sometimes change their perceptions of deer. They're likely to see deer more as pets than wild animals. It would be very easy for people to conclude that deer are dependent on humans, when if left alone, the deer would likely manage just fine. I remember seeing a sign on a deer feeder's lawn years ago that read, "Please help feed our babies." Good intentions, but the wrong idea.

Some people like to blame forest stand characteristics in the State Forest Preserve for deer problems in the Adirondacks and use that as an excuse to feed deer. From my forestry background and experience hunting in the Adirondacks, I know that two things are happening on state land which will benefit deer in the long run. The first

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is the return of conifers like spruce, balsam and hemlock that were logged and cleared 100 years ago for pulp and paper. In many instances those conifers were deer wintering areas.

The other thing is that the forest canopy is beginning to open up as it ages. Older, mature trees are subject to blowdown, insects and diseases. When large trees die, and when beaver or ice storms take their toll, small, open patches of forest are created where the sun hits the forest floor. Deer use the resulting low growth of vegetation for food and cover. Both of these processes will continue indefinitely in the Forest Preserve.

The "patchwork" pattern of state and private ownership in the Adirondacks also benefits deer. Depending on conditions, deer will prefer state land at times, and private timberland at others. For example, deer will often travel miles from winter cover on state land to feed on the tops of felled trees and walk the skidways created by logging operations on private lands.

There are a number of things that individuals can do on their own land to enhance winter deer habitat and

improve deer's natural food. Winter thinnings and logging provide food in the form of cut tree tops, and later, sprout growth. Spreading such practices out over a couple of winters will help deer even more. Managing your stand to selectively benefit conifers will provide winter cover. Removing vegetation that competes with overgrown apple trees is beneficial to deer and other wildlife. Snowshoe and snowmobile trails can also help deer navigate deep snow.

White-tailed deer are some of the most adaptable wildlife on the planet. One hundred years ago there were 500,000 deer in the entire country; today, we have almost twice that number in this state alone. Make no mistake about it, when the snow piles up and temperatures plummet to near zero degrees, white-tails will have their problems, whether they live near Long Lake, in the Catskills or Western New York. Nevertheless, as much as we'd like to feed them, deer are usually better off left to their own devices to handle what Mother Nature deals them.

Author and lifelong New Yorker **Donald Wharton** lives in South Glens Falls. Over the years, he has contributed articles on otter, fisher, log drives, bush pilots and deer hunting to the *Conservationist*.