



Be careful what you wish for...

EVER WISH for a snow day? I sure did. What is better than waking up to the stillness and beauty of fresh snow? Not having to go to school! A free day to play in the snow, drink hot chocolate, and drive your mother crazy. I couldn't get enough of them. That is until June rolled around and the sun was shining and the grass was green and I was cooped up in a classroom making up those gems of winter.

At the turn of the 20th century everybody wanted more deer. And why not? Seeing the track of one was enough to call off school. But that was about to change. In as little as 10 years, Pennsylvania had gone from having few deer to too many in some areas. I told you that habitat was fantastic.

Joseph Kalbfus, the first executive director of the Game Commission, saw the problem as clear as day. In his 1916 annual report he wrote, "In many sections of the state female deer have increased exceedingly, and because of the law giving them absolute protection, have apparently come to believe they belong in a privileged class that can do as they please . . ." Director Kalbfus had a sense of humor — heaven knows you need it in this line of work.

While the chestnut blight was wiping out more of Pennsylvania's forests, the deer were picking up the slack everywhere else. Director Kalbfus noted the gathering clouds on the horizon. But the storm would gain strength and pound the landscape for decades. 1915 – Crop damage complaints; 1922 – forest regeneration problems; 1925-26 – investigations revealing deer overstocked the forests and laurel and rhododendron were destroyed in many places; 1931 – the Department of Forests and Waters publishes *The Deer Problem in the Forests of Pennsylvania*, documenting the extensive damage caused by deer.

The deer herd in 1931 was estimated at 800,000, while the carrying capacity of the range was 250,000. Yet the deer herd continued to increase, even as the forests began to change. While the "brush stage" of Pennsylvania forests was maintained for longer than normal because of fires, it only delayed the inevitable. Forests were reaching pole stage. For a deer, this means less food because trees are too big to eat and shrubs are shaded out. Everyone wanted more deer. Well, their wish came true. But remember having to go to school in June stinks.

*By J.T. Fleegle
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