

Road Hunters

People aren't the only ones working the commonwealth's highways and roads.

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THEY'RE not exactly the road hunters for which you probably thought the title was drawing attention. But many of the denizens of Penn's Woods are nonetheless road hunters. Wildlife works the commonwealth's roads and waysides like they're a critical part of the environment. And for some species, they're just that.

If wildlife is nothing else, it is incredibly adaptable. And although we like to think of our fauna as residents of those remote and magically wild places in which we prefer to be, many of the state's wild birds and mammals eke out a pretty stable existence working our road system. Some of them are seasonal or part-time exploiters. Others are out there daily or nightly to pilfer litter, dine on roadkills or capitalize on mast that falls from trees onto the state's more than 119,000 miles of roads. That's enough roadway to cross our country 33 times tucked into a state that's 38th in geographic size. It represents an almost unimaginable network of asphalt and concrete that fragments, flanks or snakes through some of Pennsylvania's best habitat for both the common critters and species of greatest conservation need; even the 'tweeners.

So it shouldn't be surprising that some of our wild birds and mammals are using those roads—even supporting in-

frastructure — to their advantage; some rather proficiently. Without a doubt, some wildlife simply stumbles into the all-you-can-eat benefits that result when vehicles collide with critters crossing roads. But there are other species that regularly cruise over or sidle along roads and highways looking to clean up roadkills or finish off littered fast-food bag leftovers. Clearly, they're not looking to provide a service, adopt a stretch of highway or play chicken with oncoming cars. Their noses or experience have drawn them to our roads and their easy pickings. Road-killed possum. Deer carcass smorgasbord with a side of maggots. Cold French fries. It's a sweet arrangement for any animal that can get past the traffic thing. Maybe the odor, too.

Many of the furbearers and other animals—particularly young ones—that happen upon roadkills are usually greenhorns at roadkill dining. You





can usually tell by their reaction to traffic. But if you've watched seasoned crows feeding on roadkills hop away from approaching vehicles — even massive semis — at the last second and then back again, you likely concluded they've been playing this game for some time. Their nerve and timing blow you away and represent an amazing circumstantial adaptation. One provided universally and almost exclusively by highways. Instead of working the fields like myriad crows before them, they're on the road, maybe more than ever. They're hunting for roadkills and whatever else the roads will provide.

One hundred years ago, their way of life was vastly different.

A century ago, America likely had fewer vehicles than Pennsylvania has today. So it's pretty safe to conclude that crows, vultures and other opportunists weren't really horning in on roadkills back then. Sure, some predators probably hunted along roads, ambushing young birds and rabbits and rodents and snakes when they crossed or dusted. But they weren't gulping down roadkill. At that time, a three-legged rabbit would have had a hard time getting picked off by an approaching 20-horsepower Model T,



which cruised along noisily at a top speed of 45 mph. Of course, few drivers in those days ever reached that speed on our rural pothole-riddled dirt roads.

So we know that road hunting by wildlife is a relatively new approach to foraging, because motorized vehicles have been with us for only about a quarter of the time since Pennsylvania was colonized by our forefathers. And Gov. Gifford Pinchot didn't get Pennsylvania out of the mud until the 1930s, when he spearheaded an effort to add some 20,000 miles of paved roads to the state. That means our road-hunting critters are part of a growing group of specialists in wild, even semi-wild, Pennsylvania.

It makes perfect sense that perennial scavengers—crows, coyotes, opossums, vultures—would zero in on the carrion roadways serve up. Vehicle strikes ensure the body cavity of most roadkills is compromised, which immediately increases its advertising power. Add warm weather or a nice breeze, and carcasses can draw for hundreds of yards. And they do, especially when you consider

that roads fragment habitat, and some wildlife regularly cruises along highways and roads for meals.

The increasing miles of new roadway and habitat losses caused by Pennsylvania's enduring development ensure a landscape that has more wild birds and mammals crossing roads and more wildlife hunting on and along them. Try to travel 10 miles of interstate highway in Pennsylvania without seeing a perched red-tailed hawk watching the median for rodents, or vultures feeding on carrion. The same applies to white-tails feeding roadside early and late in the day in the northern tier. They are fixtures of our highway system.

For better or worse, roadways have become useful to more wildlife. They provide food, are hunting grounds and ambush sites, and, in some cases, wildlife has figured out how to exploit our use of roads. Take, for example, the shrewdness of crows, which have learned to position and reposition walnuts on roads so passing vehicles drive over and crack them. Deer, too, have learned to clean up the pulp of vehicle-

smashed acorns under oak trees. Birds and other animals scavenge cicadas struck by vehicles along and on our interstates when swarms emerge. Then there are those gray squirrels that spend spring and summer satisfyingly licking road salt from the crevices in asphalt, and robins that hunt worms on our roads after a spring rain. Or what about the way a mulberry tree pulls in birds and mammals to clean up its fallen fruit on road surfaces?

It seems almost obligatory that wildlife would seize whatever roadways serve, because the pavements and macadam ribbons have encroached on their home ground or habitat. Some have made the best of it. For others, it hasn't worked out, particularly when superhighways bisect bedding, nesting or resting areas from hunting or foraging habitat. Roads are unforgiving for young wildlife, those consumed with following a potential mate or prey, or animals that pay more attention to roadkill flapjacks than oncoming traffic. Still, no species is imperiled or in trouble solely because of roads.

Let's face it, roads are not going away; ditto for automobiles. And most of us are ok with that. They make our lives easier. And in some ways, they do the same for a variety of wildlife. From snails and slugs to deer and black bears, roads represent opportunity and the path of least resistance. We all have our uses for roads, and most of us get that they can bring trouble anywhere in the blink of an eye. Still, people and wildlife are drawn to them for one simple reason: convenience.

We all prefer to travel the road of least resistance whether heading home, for food or to visit. It's the same for wildlife, especially when working to

store energy for the rigors of winter. If you've ever spent time along a road that doesn't have traffic, you know it can be pretty peaceful; easy walking; accommodate stealth. In the early and late hours of most days, wildlife feels the same way on and along roads.

Roads provide wildlife fast food, easy access to other areas and an occasional home in their supporting infrastructure. Consequently, some wildlife has come to depend upon roads for some portion of their existence at the risk of their well-being. Convenience matters. Always.

So when you see crows hanging out in a walnut tree, know that they're counting on you to crunch that walnut on the road. And the squirrel in the middle of the road? Cut it some slack and blow your horn. If it's a deer or bear on the road loading up on cracked acorns, flick your lights and slow down. These road hunters are a permanent part of our roadways. So give them a break; hit those brakes! 🦌

Most Road Miles

Allegheny County — 5,840
Lancaster County — 3,895
York County — 3,803
Montgomery County — 3,691
Westmoreland County — 3,665

Least Road Miles

Cameron County — 240
Montour County — 406
Forest County — 492
Sullivan County — 565
Union County — 603