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Deer jaw déjà vu

JUNE IS A GREAT time of year. Winter memories are starting to fade, the days are long, the birds are singing, and tiny deer with creamy white spots pepper the landscape.

While life is bursting around us, my colleagues and I are poring over the remains of those that did not look both ways before crossing the road. To monitor deer health — one of the goals of the deer management plan — female roadkilled deer are examined each spring to see if they were pregnant and how many fawns they would have had.

With more than 120,000 miles of roads in Pennsylvania, we enlist the help of many agency personnel. May 31 marks the end of the fetus collection period.

Eventually, the annual report reads something like “at target – 1.5 embryos/doe.” Clean and nice. It does *not* say “had to deflate doe before cutting into abdomen then poked around ruptured intestines to find the uterus . . . ”

The link between age and reproduction is an indicator of deer health. So, after finding the uterus, counting and sexing the fetuses and recording the information, the lower jaw bone of the doe is cut out, placed in an envelope and sent to us.

Unlike firearms deer season, when we go to the deer jaws, in the spring, the jaws come to us. In June, we handle every blood-smeared, bug-nibbled jaw envelope to age hundreds of deer jaws. Spring jaws are trickier to age; they are collected over a period of four months — a jaw collected in May has been grinding up deer food three months longer than one collected in February. But, experience and a keen eye can determine the appropriate age.

Then the information gets logged into a database with the fetus surveys from each year prior to build a picture of deer health in Pennsylvania.

So as you settle into your summer routine, we are experiencing a bit of winter déjà vu.