

# Wildlife Fence Behavior

## Quick Summary:

- \* Motivation is the driving factor for if and when wildlife jump fences.
- \* Each species exhibit different behaviors and feeding strategies.
- \* Prevention is key - routinely check & maintain fences.



Corner of Schneider fence where deer walked around the 3D portion of the fence and jumped the non 3D portion.

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## Introduction

A large land base and varying weather patterns affect where, when and if wildlife will move into feed stored for livestock. This means not every farmer has their feed protected behind a fence.

Protection of a winter feed supply from damage by wildlife is a primary reason farmers build fences. There are two main types of fences constructed; physical (i.e. woven wire) or psychological (i.e. electric).

## General Wildlife Fence Behavior

Damage levels are determined by how motivated the animal is to penetrate the fence. Motivating factors for wildlife are:

- ⇒ seasonal movement (breeding, migration, etc.)
- ⇒ feed
- ⇒ predators (including people)
- ⇒ response to negative stimulus

In the fall, bull moose and elk cause damage during rut. They are very aggressive towards each other, other animals and infrastructure. In late winter, wildlife pose a threat to fences and stored feed as fat stores and availability of other forages are running low.

Fences higher than the animals head (physical barriers like a woven wire fence) are less likely to be jumped in

Both types of fencing deter wildlife and each have associated pros and cons.

Wildlife respond to each fence differently and some fences may prove to be a temporary or permanent fix. Damage from wildlife most commonly occurs due to feeding or breeding season behaviors. An understanding of each species helps ensure a fence's successfulness and may increase its longevity.

non stress situations. In stressful situations wildlife will attempt to jump out of desperation. Wildlife continually investigate fences looking for any weaknesses where they can successfully gain access.

In electric fencing situations, all wildlife have a hollow hair coat which acts as an insulator against shock. As coats thicken in winter, this increases the inability to feel a shock on the body, especially as snow deepens and has insulating effects of its own. This reinforces the importance of the animal's first contact with the fence to be with their nose. See the last page of *FF 68: Wildlife Electric Exclusion Fencing* for more details on where to shock an animal and electric fencing tips for wildlife.

Peace River Forage Association  
of British Columbia



## Species Behavior & Feeding Strategies

Species	Herd Animal	Sensitivity to Threat	Flight Zone	Feeding Strategies	
				Browser	Grazier
Deer	Yes	Low	Narrow	Year round	Late winter/ early spring
Moose	No	Moderate	Moderate	Year round	Late winter/ early spring
Elk	Yes	High	Wide	Fall & winter	Spring, summer & winter

Deer and elk are **herd animals**. They exhibit “learned behavior” which means if one is deterred or learns how to bypass a fence then it will teach others. Normally the lead animal teaches the rest.

In the table, highly **sensitive** animals receiving negative reinforcement from a fence will avoid it for long periods of time before testing it again. Those with low sensitivity will be testing the fences daily to see if the same threat exists.

An animal's **flight zone** is how close a perceived threat can get before the animal tries to get away. From the table above, elk have a wide flight zone so they are likely gone before you see them.

**Feeding strategies** from table: Elk graze hayfields, pastures and grain fields in spring, summer and winter creating competition with domestic livestock for resources. Deer browse except in late winter/ early spring when snow is deep, fat stores and other food sources are depleting. Agricultural crops deer favor in the Peace are: grains, alfalfa and garden vegetables. Moose primarily browse but may move in on stored feed in late winter/ early spring like deer.

### Summary

As always, prevention is key. If you have a fence, check and do any maintenance before winter hits. If browse/ forage is scarce and you live in a high wildlife pressure area without a fence, consider constructing one that fits your economical situation. Newly installed fences are tested thoroughly in the first few weeks so be sure to check it frequently.

Level of damage incurred comes down to what and how

high the motivation is for wildlife. In cases where wildlife are highly motivated to access stored feed, fences should be checked regularly to ensure there are no weaknesses.

Remember that most wildlife learn from each other and will continually test your fences. Training wildlife to avoid stored feed can be a long and tedious process that can be quickly undone if there is a fence failure.



Moose caught on wildlife camera stopping to check out and avoid the Burton/Kabzems 3D fence.

### Resources:

Craven, Scott R. and Hygnstrom, Scott E., "DEER" (1994). *The Handbook: Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage*. Paper 47.

deCalesta, David S. and Witmer, Gary W., "ELK" (1994). *The Handbook: Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage*. Paper 48.

McKillop, I. G., and R. M. Sibly. 1988. *Animal Behaviour at electric fences and the implications for management*. *Mammal Rev.* 18:91-103.

Stull, D. W., et al. "Comparison of fencing designs for excluding deer from roadways" (2011). *Human-Wildlife Interactions* 5(1):47-57.

VerCauteren, Kurt C.; Lavelle, Michael J.; and Hygnstrom, Scott, "Fences and Deer-Damage Management: A Review of Designs and Efficacy" (2006). *USDA National Wildlife Research Center - Staff Publications*. Paper 99.

*Where to Successfully Shock an Animal and Effective Electric Wildlife Fence - Six Rules from Forage Fact 68.*

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