

## Foreword: Welcome to Deerland

We live in Deerland.

The United States now has over thirty million deer, a hundred times more than just a century ago. They routinely disrupt entire ecosystems. They ravage our gardens and suburban landscaping, and every year they kill and injure hundreds of us on our highways. No wild animal larger than a skunk or raccoon is anywhere near so numerous and widespread.

Still, deer are magical. Their mere existence makes the woods feel wilder. They signify far more to us than just meat, antlers, or a graceful, mysterious creature slipping through the shadows. In our collective imaginations they've become an archetypal symbol of the wilderness experience—or at least of a gentrified country lifestyle.

Love them or hate them, we've all come under their spell. We name suburban housing developments after them. We commute farther and borrow more so that we can live beside them. If money remains, we buy vacation homes where we'll see even more of them. A few of us happily spend two or three years' salary for a small piece of untillable land on which we can hunt them. In much of America, deer are now the single greatest driver of the rural real estate market.

More American hunters pursue deer than any other quarry, and this inevitably makes hunting part of our story. Rest assured, however, that hunting is only one part of a much larger environmental, social, and cultural story. And regardless of how you may feel about hunting, in many parts of America we now have a very real problem with too many deer. In some of those places, hunting is a big part of the solution. It's also, some would argue, a big part of the problem.

All too often we manipulate entire ecosystems in ways that benefit deer. When forced to choose between whitetails and all other wildlife, we almost invariably choose deer. As a result most of us, even if we spend a

fair amount of time in the woods, have never once seen a forest that's not shaped by deer.

Still, for venison-loving hunters and vegan wildlife watchers alike, the very phrase "overabundant deer" can seem a puzzling oxymoron. And by the time we finally comprehend the choices we've made, there's no going back. Yes, it definitely is possible to have too many deer. The only question is: How many is too many?

Deer are one of the most charismatic of the charismatic megafauna. All too often their charisma prevents us from thinking clearly and rationally about questions like this one. Every time that happens, it has consequences for us, our deer, the environment, and the American landscape.

Indeed, our complex relationship with deer makes for a twisted tale of love, obsession, and consequences. First come love and obsession. Then come the consequences. At first glance these might seem like stories for two different books. In one, wildlife watchers lure deer to their backyard feeders, locavore foodies trade gourmet venison recipes, antler-obsessed bowhunters perch in treestands, and millions more hunters spend big bucks in the pursuit of big bucks. In the other are car crashes, Lyme disease, agricultural losses, environmental devastation, and endless hordes of deer invading America's suburbs.

But in the end these two stories are inseparable. They're two sides of the same coin, and it's impossible to tell one story without the other. Indeed, it's impossible to understand either story without fully understanding the other.

You're about to begin a journey through America's forests, farms, and suburbs. We'll peer inside America's deer-industrial complex, explore hidden subcultures, and learn how the effects of a gluttonous deer's dinner echo and reverberate through an entire ecosystem. It's time to take a long, hard look at our love, our obsession, and their unintended but inevitable consequences. By doing so we'll be better able to restore the balance we've disrupted. It's time to tame the charismatic mega-fawn.

Along the way our complex relationship with deer makes for a fascinating story that reveals much about America—and also about Americans. Yes, this is a story about deer. Most of all, however, it's a story about us.

Welcome to Deerland.

# I. Love and Obsession

## CHAPTER 1

# Darwin's Deer

*Let us suppose that the fleetest prey, a deer for instance, had from any change in the country increased in numbers, or that other prey had decreased in numbers, during that season of the year when the wolf was hardest pressed for food. Under such circumstances the swiftest and slimmest wolves would have the best chance of surviving and so be preserved or selected.*

—CHARLES DARWIN IN *THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES*

Today we remember Aldo Leopold and John James Audubon for other reasons. Both, however, were avid deer hunters. Remarkably, so was Charles Darwin.

Now, just a few years past the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth, few remember that he often enjoyed stalking deer at Maer Hall, the country estate owned by his uncle, Josiah Wedgwood II. As a boy, Darwin spent a great deal of time with his cousins at Maer. One of them quite took his fancy, and in 1839 he finally married his cousin Emma.

It was also at Maer Hall that Darwin drafted *The Origin of Species*. As he tentatively advances the ideas for which he'd later become famous, he repeatedly uses deer and deerhounds as examples of natural and unnatural selection. Earlier, in *The Voyage of the Beagle*, Darwin describes at length his excursions ashore to hunt deer in northern Patagonia. Sailors aboard the *Beagle* must have been glad for the fresh venison he brought back to the ship. In one passage he writes:

*If a person crawling close along the ground, slowly advances towards a herd, the deer frequently, out of curiosity, approach to reconnoitre him.*

*I have by this means, killed from one spot, three out of the same herd. Although so tame and inquisitive, yet when approached on horseback, they are exceedingly wary. In this country nobody goes on foot, and the deer knows man as its enemy only when he is mounted and armed with the bolas.<sup>1</sup>*

Today this species of Patagonian deer is far more wary and less abundant. Back home, however, much of Britain is plagued by overabundant deer of six different species: red deer, roe deer, fallow deer, Sika deer, muntjac deer, and Chinese water deer. All but the first two are nonnative invasives that were brought to Britain and then either escaped or were released intentionally.<sup>2</sup>

The area of North Staffordshire near Maer Hall has been especially troubled by overly abundant deer. In the 1980s the area's frequent deer-vehicle crashes led to the formation of the Deer Study & Resource Centre in nearby Stoke-on-Trent. Its mission was to develop educational materials that would help teachers, students, and the public become better informed about deer—and maybe even save a few motorists' lives.<sup>3</sup>

The center's director, Jeanette Lawton, told me these hordes of deer are still a problem locally. Few, however, actually make their home on the grounds of Maer Hall. They're mostly just passing through. That's because Copeland Cottage at Maer is now one of the most popular camps in Britain's Girl Guide (Girl Scout) system. Apparently all those Girl Guides romping through the woods and singing around the campfire were a bit much. The deer have moved on to greener and quieter pastures.

But if there were no calmer estates nearby, the deer of North Staffordshire would have surely adapted to the presence of all those Girl Guides. After all, their close relatives have happily adapted to similar levels of activity in the suburbs of Connecticut, New York, and Pennsylvania. Other deer have adapted and thrived in a wide variety of ecosystems all over the world. Darwin's deer are survivors.

## THE CERVID FAMILY TREE

Within the class Mammalia are twenty-six orders, two of which walk on hooves and are called ungulates. In the odd way these categories sometimes work, horses and rhinos both belong to the order of ungulates