

Why, oh why, did that chicken cross the road?

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Oh, how I wish that suicidal critters would quit running, jumping and flying in front of my car! The other day I was driving down a two-lane highway (carefully observing the 55 mph speed limit) when a large white chicken at the side of the road decided to take a test flight across the highway. Chickens, I learned from that experience, take way too long to gain altitude—if they are capable of gaining it at all.

I had only a second to hit the brakes and duck before he (or she, hard to tell) collided with my left headlight. Do you know what happens when a two ton automobile and a seven pound chicken meet? An explosion of feathers, that's what! The denuded chicken bounced around on the hood before falling off and when I looked in the rearview mirror, it appeared that a blizzard had struck that portion of the highway.

Later that evening, I lamented to Ray how traumatic it is to unintentionally slaughter a small mammal, fowl or reptile (thank God that fish stay off the highway). Ray, who has had his own troubles with suicidal creatures, suggested, "Maybe you could keep score like combat pilots and paint tiny critters on the side of the car."

"Well, then," I said acerbically, "I guess we'll have to paint on a deer for you." It was a low blow (truly uncharacteristic of me) because Ray is particularly fond of deer and it was just the worst of luck for him to plow into one at the Grand Canyon many years ago.

Had we not been driving slowly, the deer likely would have come through the windshield and landed in our laps. But Ray was traveling under the 20 mph speed limit because I was perusing the map to see where the next photo opportunity was located. I was startled when Ray, rounding a curve, braked hard and yelled, "Watch out!"

At that point, the deer was standing in the middle of the oncoming traffic lane with a car quickly bearing down on him. Ray feared the other driver would hit the deer and knock him into us. No such luck. The deer saw that car and, in the effort to avoid being struck by it, leapt right in front of us. The damage to our big Buick was slight, the damage to the deer was not. He struggled into the forest that borders the canyon, but his back legs were obviously broken. Ray stopped the car at the side of the road, instructed me to call the park rangers on the CB radio (it really WAS a long time ago) to tell them that they needed to put the deer out of his misery, then he and Greg headed into the trees after the injured animal.

When the ranger arrived and I explained the situation, he said, "They'll never find the deer. He'll hole up somewhere and starve. They'll be back in a few minutes."

"I don't know about that," I said doubtfully, "Ray will keep looking until he finds him or it gets too dark to see." Forty-five minutes later, the ranger decided he'd better go looking for my men. I cooled my heels at the side of the road for an hour or so until who should appear? The ranger, that's who.

“Aren’t they back YET?” he inquired incredulously.

“Nope,” I said, “you’d better call out a search party.”

Twenty minutes later, Greg emerged from the trees and asked the ranger to follow him to the deer. Bad scene. Ray was quite literally petting the deer who was licking his fingers. The ranger dispatched the deer with his revolver and Ray was so despondent about the incident that I finally said, “Do you realize how lucky that deer was that you hit him? Who else would spend that long tracking him down so he didn’t suffer and starve?” Even now, when I think of that deer, I imagine him in some heavenly forest glade grazing on celestial grass with Bambi’s mother.

I am grateful that any critter I have hit and/or flattened has been immediate toast! The chicken never knew what hit him. But a bunny rabbit who hopped in front of my car years ago fared better. Newly licensed, I swerved to miss the rabbit and nursed a cut lip as I watched my car pulled out of a deep ditch. My sister Lesta, who had the bad luck to be my passenger that day, refused for weeks to ride with me until her fear was overcome by the urge to go shopping.

Lesta still enjoys my chauffeuring when we embark on shopping excursions. Even so, I’m glad she wasn’t with me when I toasted the chicken.