

# Incidents involving unleashed dogs chasing deer are causing a dangerous situation in Carpenter's Woods and surrounding area

by Dave Dannenberg (with Linda Goschke), August, 2012

One evening in July, as my wife and I were relaxing in my garden, we heard, from the direction of the front of our property along Wissahickon Avenue, the unmistakable dull smack of a car hitting something. Moments later, an eight-point buck, still in velvet, charged through the yard, head down, running on three legs. Close in pursuit was a little brown dog. The dog had chased the deer out of Carpenter's Woods onto Wissahickon Avenue, where it was hit by a car. The dog continued the chase after the deer regained its footing (3/4 of it anyway) and ran in a limping panic through our yard, towards the main part of the Wissahickon Park. I suspect it was a pretty long chase, as it was at least 15 minutes before the dog reappeared, panting, tags merrily jingling on its collar. Unfortunately, the dog avoided me, so I could not catch it, read its tags, and call its owner—and maybe the Pennsylvania Game Commission.

Several properties on Wissahickon Avenue form a major corridor for deer that travel regularly between Carpenter's Woods and the main part of the Wissahickon Park. At the same time, many people exercise their dogs in Carpenters Woods, and most do so off-leash; a substantive proportion of those owners seem to have little control of their dogs, who tear through the woods willy-nilly, tormenting squirrels, running roughly over ground-nesting bird habitat, and when they are back on the trail, defecating where people walk, and placing their muddy paws on the lower bodies of passers-by. This is not to say that all dogs misbehave, but that some proportion of owners simply do not take responsibility for curtailing their dogs' anti-social and environmentally-destructive behavior. Under these conditions, deer-dog interaction is inevitable, and that interaction is never positive for the deer. Nor is it legal (*more on that below*).

Deer are hit by cars on Wissahickon Avenue with gruesome regularity, especially during the rut. Often they are injured in the collision and, flushed with adrenaline, seek shelter in the Wissahickon or a corner of Carpenter's Woods, where they collapse and die—eventually. I have found several carcasses of deer with compound fractures at least a half mile from the nearest road. Those deer did not stumble and break their legs; they were struck by automobiles. Sometimes, I find the deer still alive, hooves limp, bones sticking through the skin, flies buzzing around the gaping wounds, the animal too weak to even flick its tail.

Sometimes the local Game Officer is called to put such animals out of their misery, but more often they linger for hours or days or weeks (depending on the injuries) before succumbing to death. Their picked-over and rotting carcasses are discovered later.

Years ago, along a quarter mile portion of a single road through the park, in the space of about 15 minutes, I found four deer carcasses in various states of decay. It is unknown the frequency with which this scenario is initiated by dogs chasing the deer, but the incident above is not the first time I have witnessed a dog chasing deer from Carpenter's Woods, across Wissahickon Avenue, through my yard, and into the main portion of the Wissahickon Park. Last time I saw it happen, a single dog was in hot pursuit of a pair of does who happened not to have been hit by cars—that time. So the incident described above is no surprise. Perhaps that is one reason it is so infuriating.

I do not think that the owners of the offending dogs mean harm when they let their dogs run loose through the park. I suspect that some owners are not even aware that their dogs do anything more obnoxious than chase an occasional fleet-footed gray squirrel up a tree. And I suspect that the owners themselves may feel a sense of panic when their dogs disappear into the woods on the other side of a major road, behind private property, and do not return for a long period of time. Some might even be horrified to learn that their affectionate pet has caused agonizing, inhumane death to another animal.

I suspect the owners of these dogs have not considered there is some likelihood their dog that chases a deer across a busy road stands a good chance of being hit by a car, as well. Further, there is a possibility that a deer struck by a car could cause injury or death to the occupant of the car, a passerby on foot or bicycle, or occupants of an oncoming car, should the driver swerve to avoid the deer. These are not mere hypothetical scenarios. Accidents like this happen throughout the US, and Pennsylvania is among the top states for deer-auto collisions.

According to PennDOT records, there were 3,000 car vs. deer collisions last year (2011), resulting in over 600 injuries and 5 deaths.

<http://www.avvo.com/legal-guides/ugc/avoiding-pennsylvania-car-v-deer-accidents>

It is simple fact that when dogs run unchecked and unleashed through the park, they disturb habitat, often exacerbate erosion, often bother humans other than their owners, and sometimes directly harass wildlife, sometimes to death. The dogs cannot be blamed; they are carnivores and pursuit of game is in their nature. Their owners, on the other hand, can—should—be blamed for not taking responsibility for their charges. This is not only just, it is the law.

**Pennsylvania law is very clear on this matter. To wit:**

**Sec. 2381. Dogs pursuing, injuring or killing game or wildlife.**

Except as otherwise provided in this title or by commission regulation, it is unlawful for any person controlling or harboring a dog to permit the dog to chase, pursue, follow upon the track of, injure or kill any game or wildlife at any time.

**Amended June 30, 2007, Act No. 2007-18.**

**Dogs pursuing, injuring or killing big game.**

General rule.—Except as provided in subsection (b), it is unlawful for any person to make use of a dog in any manner to hunt for or to take big game or to permit a dog owned, controlled or harbored by that person to pursue, harass, chase, scatter, injure or kill any big game.

**Sec. 2384. Declaring dogs public nuisances.**

Any dog pursuing or following upon the track of any big game animal in such close pursuit as to endanger the big game animal or to be in the act of attacking the big game animal at any time is hereby declared to be a public nuisance and may be destroyed as provided in this title.

**Sec. 2385. Destruction of dogs declared public nuisances.**

(a) General rule.—A dog declared a public nuisance pursuant to section 2384 (relating to declaring dogs public nuisances) may be killed by any commission officer at any time or by any person when the dog is found to be in the act of attacking a big game animal.

There are, in addition to destruction of the dog, additional penalties to the owner of a nuisance dog as described above. **Note that dogs are not to be permitted to pursue, attack, or kill *any wildlife*, which includes birds, chipmunks, foxes, raccoons, and squirrels, as well as big game like deer.**

See the Pennsylvania Game Commission web site for more information:

<http://www.pgc.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/pgc/9106>

You may wonder why this state agency would legislate so strongly against dogs behaving instinctively and their owners who encourage this wildlife and game harassing behavior. Their task isn't simply to regulate hunting. It is the mission of the Game Commission to manage and protect the health and safety of all our wildlife. I think the simple reason is that running down an animal causes its death by what amounts to torture.

Chased prey in this environment is likely to be:

1. Torn to pieces by a carnivore, if the dog(s) catch it or if it is injured and found by a stray dog, coyote, fox, raptor, or bear
2. Killed by the sudden trauma and/or lingering death by collision with an automobile
3. Run to exhaustion in winter and, sapped of reserves, subsequently starved to death, lacking the energy to forage.

These manners of death are considered inhumane and unimaginably painful. Additionally, as noted above, it is quite possible for a dog to initiate a deer-auto interaction resulting in human death or injury, as well as the injury or death of the uncontrolled dog. If the actions of your dog cause injury or death to humans or

the wildlife, you would be held accountable, with the imposition of fines and other possible legal consequences, while you mourn the destruction of your beloved pet. All for the sake of not using a leash and controlling your dog.

It is safe to assume you, who own dogs, love animals—at least some animals.

Please, for the sake of your dog's safety, for the sake of the safety of people on our roads, the safety and comfort of your neighbors enjoying our beautiful parks, and for the health and safety of the wildlife that call our parks home, control your dog. A dog out of sight and earshot of its owner, running through the park or off-trail cannot be considered to be under control.

Your beloved pet is depending on your better judgment and control to protect it from danger, injury, and death. Your neighbors, our parks, our wildlife, you, and your dog will benefit from your responsibility in controlling your dog's conduct. It really is a matter of life and death.

***Actions you can take:***

- If you own a dog, abide by the law and keep it on a leash while in the woods. This is the best protection for you and your dog.
- Keep your pet safely fenced within your yard when it is on your property.
- If you see any dog chasing a deer or harassing other wildlife, please immediately contact the Park Rangers (Jamie Hazelton: 215-685-0144) and the Game Commission (Jerry Czech: [jczech@pa.gov](mailto:jczech@pa.gov) or the SE Regional Office: 610-926-3136), as well as calling 911 to alert the Police and 311 to alert Animal Control.  
Note any details about the dog (size, coloring, breed, owner, where it first appeared) and specifics about the location of the incident and what you saw.
- If the incident occurs in or near Carpenter's Woods, please also inform FoCW ([info@focw.org](mailto:info@focw.org)) and David Bower ([david.bower@phila.gov](mailto:david.bower@phila.gov)) of Philadelphia Parks & Recreation, so we may further address the problem.  
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