

A Story About a Deer in Winter

A deer spent a long time in the corner of this fence wishing it could cross.

The young deer that made these tracks was so exhausted it could not lift its feet to clear an inch of snow.

I had driven out to check the buffalo herd shortly after sun-up.

It was clear, crisp, and 20 below.

The bison do not need my checking, I just like to do that.

I took the pasture road from the farmstead, over the river, through the pines to the township road.

When I got to the town road, I stopped to open the gates to the south 140 acres.

The bison are in that pasture, on the far end, behind two more fence lines.

I like to have more than one fence between the bison and a clear run to South Dakota.

Even before I stopped the pick-up, I noticed a lot of fresh tracks in the snow on the other side of the gate.

I always read tracks. Tracks can tell a farmer a lot.

A rabbit, a squirrel, and a fox passed through.

But most of the tracks were from the one small deer.

I could see by the track size that it was a fawn from last spring.

I could also see that the deer was not injured.

An injured deer will favor a leg or leave other signs.

These tracks were balanced and symmetrical.

But this deer was extremely weak.

The poor creature did not have energy to lift its hooves.

It dragged its feet as it walked.

It left tracks in the shallow snow like a sled with two runners.



It was a local deer.

I could tell that because it kept walking into the same corner. The corner closest to the river and the brushy land to the northwest.

That swampy area of river bottom has been a safe haven for deer as long as I know.

This fawn was separated from its herd and exhausted.

It just wanted to go home.

It was too exhausted to jump the fence and too frightened to find a better place to escape.

From the number of tracks, it was apparent that the deer

spent a long time, perhaps an hour or more milling about, unable to cross the fence.

Normally, deer cross our fences with ease.

Gail helps with that.

Every time I finish a fence, Gail wants to know where the deer can cross.

Most of the fences are low enough for a deer to leap. If not, I space the wires so they can jump through the fence.

That might sound tricky but if you are a deer, it is not that hard.

The deer that left these tracks was too fatigued to jump and too unnerved to find a better crossing.

I wondered how it came to be in this fix.

The deer's trail came out of our wooded pasture, south, and west of the gate.

I backtracked on the trail for about ½ mile.

The evidence was all there in the snow.

Two dogs had chased the deer herd through the woods.
This fawn veered off and crossed a couple of fences.
The dogs did not. They chose to follow the main group of five into the swamp.
Unfortunately, this deer was now alone, worn out and confused.
The rest of the deer almost certainly made it to the river.
They can lose dogs there. I have seen deer evade dogs several times by simply crossing the river.
Our Snake River is a small stream that never freezes.
When chased, deer just plunge in and splash to the other side.
Dogs never do that.
These are domestic dogs with warm homes.
The icy water is a barrier to them.
The deer are running for their lives.
The dogs are just having fun.
Motivation matters.
Even though the deer normally escape from the dogs, it is not a fair fight.
In the chase, the deer give up precious energy.
Energy they need to survive until spring.
The dogs go home for breakfast and a warm nap.
Several times this winter I have seen the tracks of an unusually large dog on our farmstead.
It snoops around the chicken coup at night. The coup is locked at night.
By the signs in the woods, I can tell that big dog, and another have now teamed up.
Loose dogs form packs and hunt naturally.
It does not happen every winter, but it has happened many times in the 45 years I have been on this farm.
Our farm has a perimeter fence of woven wire all the way around. Four miles in length.
Deer can jump over, coyotes sneak under, foxes and anything smaller can walk through, but domestic dogs do not easily cross woven wire.
I built that woven wire fence primarily to keep dogs from hunting through the farm.
The fences have not totally eliminated the problem, but they made a big difference.
I walked back to my pick-up, drove through the gate, and resumed driving the pasture road toward the bison.
The deer's tracks showed that it had walked the same way I was going.
There was a thick row of trees ahead.
I turned a sharp corner and startled the deer, dozing under a cedar.
It was a yearling doe. In decent condition for this late in the winter.
I was only a few feet away.
It panicked and ran wildly into the fence, twice.
Both times falling to the ground.
Normally it could have cleared that fence easily.
I was walking toward it thinking I might grab it and fling it over the fence when it frantically jumped again.
This time the doe made it over, but she left a lot of belly hair on the barbs.
I doubt that she noticed.
The deer was finally free to find her herd.
She slowly loped away toward the river bottom.
She will be fine.
Spring or at least warmer weather is on the way.

Tom.

