



The Hidden Life of Deer

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The root cause of this book was a New Hampshire acorn crop failure. In the Fall of 2007, deer, deprived of one of their principle food staples, were starving. Taking pity, author and naturalist Elizabeth Marshall Thomas (*The Hidden Life of Dogs*) began leaving food around her farmhouse. Within days, a herd of deer was tiptoeing through her fields towards the piles of vittles. Being an avid nature watcher, Thomas paid close attention to their curious behavior. What could explain their synchronized arrivals; their alternating patterns of cooperation and competitiveness? Over the rough winter and the more gentle seasons that followed, she literally tracked these quiet visitors as they followed evolutionary rhythms that had been established over millions of years.

The Hidden Life of Deer Details

Date : Published August 27th 2009 by HarperCollins e-books (first published 2009)

ISBN :

Author : Elizabeth Marshall Thomas

Format : Kindle Edition 260 pages

Genre : Animals, Environment, Nature, Nonfiction, Science, Self Help, Autobiography, Memoir

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From Reader Review The Hidden Life of Deer for online ebook

The Ol' Rattlesnake says

"She phones the Audubon Society (to which she gave generous contributions) and asked how much food a city pigeon should eat. The response shocked and upset her. The ROTTWEILER who took her call berated her so fiercely that my POISED AND WORLDLY mother gasped and became a little shaky. Before this, I also had contributed to the Audubon Society, but their attack on my mother distressed me. After that, their appeals for funds evoked the needless pain they had caused a kind, caring woman. I threw away the appeals unopened, and in time, the Society stopped entreating me."

On that note I slammed this crap book shut and chucked it across towards the couch.
??????

James says

This book, unfortunately, is equal parts genuinely interesting information and (from my perspective) holier-than-thou op-ed against the uninformed, unsympathetic average citizen.

In order: I loved the pieces of the book which actually described deer behavior, as well as the ecosystem surrounding, and influencing them. The author did an excellent job with those pieces.

The more opinionated aspects were at first very relatable, general conservationist sentiments. As he book wore on, though, I came to understand just how hard a line she takes with respect to not viewing humans as "above" other species. Again, I can agree with that perspective, but she laments things like fumigating a colony of flies, she feeds and shelters house rats, then laments having a significant rat problem, and other similarly inexplicable dilemmas. Reading it, I couldn't grasp exactly which aspects of human influence in the natural order she was ok with, and which she thinks are crimes against nature.

I'd still recommend a skim of the book for the neat bits about deer culture and the other various anecdotes, but in a second pass, I would literally skip passages, personally.

Diane says

I was drawn to this title as I was always curious about the deer that show up in our yard. Would I like to learn about their "hidden life"? You bet! But this book was a little "all over the place." The author is pretty well-intentioned but she didn't really tell me much I didn't know. She rambles a bit and went on for pages about rats in her house and a random milkweed in her fields. She calls herself a naturalist and I was reminded of some of Diane Ackerman's writings about nature. Ackerman also goes off on tangents but Thomas lacks Diane Ackerman's poetic bent so I found my mind wandering.

Just a so-so read.

Jason says

The last hundred years, in the eastern United States, have seen a recovery almost unimagined of various mammal species. The Whitetail Deer was down to about half a million around the year 1900. Today, due to a variety of factors, including Resource Game management, the population of this variety of deer has grown to over 20 million. As a result, lots of Americans are seeing more and more deer crossing through and stopping on their property, and people are trying to understand the ecology of these quiet animals. *The Hidden Life of Deer* is not the book for the interested laymen, who are curious about the life of deer. It is a rambling account of one naturalist's observations, philosophies, and attempts to understand her role in the local ecosystem.

Thomas has made a career of studying the social systems of dogs, cats, elephants and other animals. In this book of about 200 pages, she attempts to bring that same level of observation and analysis to the wildlife on her wooded family property in New Hampshire. The hook, or crisis of this book is her awareness that the acorn crop in the fall of 2006, was far below normal, and that the deer in the area would suffer from hunger as the New England winter came on. Her naturalist instinct would be to just watch what would happen as the wild deer struggle to find other food sources. Instead, Thomas began a corn feeding program on her property. For the rest of the book, she attempts to justify why she began this feeding program, while decrying how mankind, locally and historically, has intervened in the lives of wild animals, to the animals' detriment.

Unfortunately, the actual hidden life of deer, as observed by a trained naturalist, takes up far less of this book than it should. The author rambles on about mice, bears, Indian primates, local birds and insects and takes a lot of inconsistent stands on a host of issues. While observing a hunt with someone she hails as a great animal tracker, she ends up lying to state game officials about killing an animal she did not kill, so her hunter friend could chase a larger buck. The last chapter is a rambling account of her guilt over poisoning rodents that ended up in her home, murders she called them.

In between, Thomas asserts a mixed bag of naturalism philosophy, references to mother earth Gaia and other truth claims that really have no business in a book that should be about educating the uninformed reader about the life of the native mammal in the eastern United States. As a result, a book with an interesting premise rests a lot on the author's guilt, needless philosophical claims and ramblings that have little to do with the point of her main theses. In the end, she really has a hard time justifying why she continues to feed deer, even after a better acorn harvest the following autumn.

Will Byrnes says

Stand very still. Breathe as softly as you can. See that little flicking movement? No, not over there, straight ahead, behind the bush. Keep looking. You will see it. I promise. There. Didn't I tell you? Cool, right? Isn't she beautiful?

One of the foundations on which the study of nature is based is to be still and watch. Yes, there is a lot more to it, but you have to find some inner quiet, clear your mental and sensory palate, stop fidgeting, and allow the images, scents, sounds and feel of the world cross your senses, settle in and register. There is plenty more of course. But watching, noticing, is an excellent place to start. In *The Hidden Life of Deer*, Elizabeth Marshall Thomas has done just that. And she was able to learn a lot without having to look very far beyond her back door in Peterborough, NH.

The author

Usually oak trees spread acorns over the landscape every autumn, but in 2007, in Thomas's neck of the woods, they seemed to be on strike. Reluctant to see the local whitetails endure the particular hardship of cold *plus* starvation, Thomas took it upon herself to provide something that might help, corn. Deer had been visible on her land forever, but the feeding assured that there would be plenty of deer to watch.

There is probably more written about deer than any other animal. I found 1.2 million websites, 80 books in print, many more out of print and about 100 articles on deer. I really think they are the most studied mammals in the world, but nobody cares about their social lives. They care about the bacteria in their gut in winter, and things related to hunting them — but not what they really are or do. I wanted to just watch them and learn who they are.- from the Mother Nature Network interview

Thompson takes us along with her as she struggles with figuring out how to identify individual animals, and observing the dynamics of interactions among deer groups. There are nuggets of information scattered throughout the book, material that will make you smile as you add it to your accumulated knowledge of the world. Why, for example, do deer nibble and move, nibble and move, instead of chomping down a bit farther in a given patch? Why is food that is ok for deer at one time of year, useless in another? How can deer scat help you determine what direction the critter was headed? How dangerous are antlered buck battles? How can you tell a place is a deer resting spot? How have deer adapted to ways in which people hunt them?

...a useful way to look at another life-form is to assume that whatever it may be doing—chewing bark, digging a tiny hole, wrapping itself in a leaf, sending up a sprout, turning its leaves to face the sunlight—it is trying to achieve a goal that you, in your way, would also want to achieve. In fact, you can be sure of that. The closer you are taxonomically to what you are looking at, the more likely you are to recognize what it's goals might be, and the further you are, the less likely. Either way it's fascinating.

Thompson does not fawn solely over deer for the entirety. There is plenty of subsidiary intel here on other forest dwellers. Turkeys come in for a considerable look and you will be thankful, I guarantee it. Bobcat scat (no not a form of feline singing) on a boulder has particular significance, and is not just evidence that the kittie could not make it to the usual dumping ground in time. (see, I managed not to conjure an image of the guy below leaving a deposit in the woods) In fact there is a whole section on varieties of woodland scat that you will not want to wipe from your memory. There is a description of oak behavior, yes *behavior*, that will make you wonder if Tolkien's depiction of ents might have more truth to it than most have suspected.

Not to leave all the consideration to the critters, Thompson offers some observations on human selection and characteristics as well.

suppose we had evolved in the northern forests, rather than simply arriving there as an invasive species. We certainly wouldn't be naked—we'd be permanently covered with dense fur—and when our pineal glands told us that the days were getting short, we'd do a lot more than simply feel gloomy—we'd redouble our efforts to find food, and we'd start breeding so that nine months later our young would be born in the spring. Allegedly we do eat and breed a bit more in the autumn, but if we were truly a northern hemispheric species, we'd do it in grand style...The reason we don't have thick fur and a breeding season is not because we're superior beings, but because we evolved where such things

were not needed.

She also goes into some unusual hunting rituals humans engage in, wondering if the practices in question might extend into pre-history. She refers to such learning, handed down from generation to generation, as *The Old Way*, (a subject she explores in depth in her book of that title) whether it is the passing of information by ungulates or homo sap.

In fact Thomas, an anthropologist, as well as a naturalist, has spent considerable time in Africa, living with and studying the Ju/'hoansi people of the Kalahari, writing about what she learned in *The Harmless People*, *Warrior Herdsman* and *The Old Way: A Story of the First People*. She is best known for *The Hidden Life of Dogs*. She has also written about felines, in *The Tribe of the Tiger: Cats and their Culture*

Thomas is very easy to read. You need not be concerned with getting lost in scientific jargon. She is very down to earth, and very accessible. There is a spare beauty to her prose. She has also written several novels, (Reindeer Moon and The Animal Wife most prominently) so she knows how to frame and tell a story.

For most of us, city-dwellers by and large, opportunities for wildlife observation are much more limited than they are for those living so much closer to actual wilderness. But we need not be starved for information, insight, lore and wisdom about the natural world. Just as Thompson provided corn for deer to help get them from one year to another, so she has offered, in *The Hidden Life of Deer*, knowledge and nourishment for the mind and the soul. You will learn a lot reading this, some of it very surprising. The book has been found by many readers since its publication in 2009. Do yourself a favor and hunt down a copy, then sit somewhere where no one can see you and read it very quietly. I advise against twitching your ears.

Review posted – 9/5/14

Publication date – 2009

This review has also been posted at Cootsreviews

=====EXTRA STUFF

A PBS Nature Video – The Secret Life of Deer

The Quality Deer Management Association, a hunters site, yes, really has a lot of info on whitetails

A Lovely interview with the author on Mother Nature Network

A Publisher's Weekly profile of Thomas, Rebel with a Cause

An interesting youtube vid of Thomas talking about The Old Way

There are six parts to this Daily Motion interview with Thomas. Here is a link to the first of those.

Petra X says

Unlike the rest of Elizabeth Marshall Thomas's books, this one was very slight both in size and depth. In a way it was a postscript of life at home to *The Old Way: A Story of the First People*. That was a wonderful book of the hunter/gatherers of the Kalahari that the author knew so well as 'home' herself, and written about in such depth. Deer might live the Old Way, but most people don't and this was the author living the 'new' way, in the USA.

It was also a long, well-thought out reply to the local Conservation Department's injunction not to feed deer (EMT likes feeding deer, a lot). I did enjoy it, I didn't learn as much as from her other books, but what I did learn was absolutely fascinating and sometimes quite funny. Her feminist, or at least female, sensibilities often give insights into animal behaviour that other ethologists have not written about, certainly we never see them in popular natural history documentaries.

Female deer, the does, might be chosen for breeding by a buck they don't particularly fancy in which case they will move away. However, if he is insistent, as soon as he's mounted and got his end away, she pushes him off and moves away sharply, leaving the poor, frustrated buck bellowing. But if that isn't successful and she does get bred, she has one trick left. She squats down right in front of the buck and squeezes out the semen. He might have got sex but she isn't letting him breed any babies on her. So much for the big bucks dominating the harem!

Originally reviewed 10 May 2011, rewritten 14 March 2012

Lize says

The author, who lives a short distance from me in New Hampshire, started out with a bird feeder by her back door. Then she noticed wild turkeys on her property, and she put out a little corn for them, and soon she was feeding a whole flock of turkeys during the winter. Then, in 2007, the acorn crop that deer and other animals depend on through the winter failed, and a herd of deer began eating the turkeys' corn, giving the author a fascinating opportunity to observe deer behavior first hand through the window of her home office. This book is about what she discovered, as well as a lot of interesting things about bears, turkeys, coyotes, bobcats, trees (it turns out that oak trees under-produce from time to time on purpose, to cut down on their predators), how to 'read scat' in the forest (something I've already been out trying) and how people fit into it all:

"At least to me, it gave a sense of our place on the planet. I saw that animals were important. I saw that plants are even more important. I was to learn that compared to many of the other species, we weren't important at all except for the damage we do. We do not rule the natural world, despite our conspicuous position in it. On the contrary, it is our lifeline, and we do well to try to understand its rules."

The author is a fierce and formidable force of nature herself, and some of the stories she tells made me chuckle (like ordering a police officer in pursuit of an injured bear off her property—"come back with a warrant—go find a judge," she snapped.) She's lived a very interesting (and to me, enviable) life, starting with spending her late teens and early twenties in the Kalahari Desert in Africa, and she has a lively curiosity and engagement with the natural world that has lasted into her eighties. Fascinating lady, delightful book.

Kim says

Brilliant satire!

The Hidden Life of Deer deftly skewers the vanity of self-styled animal rescuers who prefer to depend upon their own emotions rather than the hard facts of nature and conservation work. In the great tradition of Christopher Buckley, the author sets up her characters in a series of increasingly ridiculous situations, to which insanity they themselves are unconscious. Written from a purportedly autobiographical viewpoint, Thomas begins the story with the conspiracy of trees in the local forest to withhold their acorns, a sort of union strike against the forces of evil corporate fauna greed. Setting out to rescue the deer (though not the squirrels) from the resulting shortage of preferred food, Thomas decides to cross the goddess Gaia's picket lines and throw out buckets and buckets of corn. The resulting encounters with game management, knowledgeable neighbors, and a wounded bear serve to expose the self-contradictory rationalizations and self-congratulatory moral justifications that take primacy over what is actually in the best interest of animal populations. Although the book is primarily about the deer, one of the best stories in the book has to do with the debate over whether to bring her mother's "pet" squirrels and doves along for the move to New Hampshire -- a hysterical discussion that makes a serious point about the consequences of making wild animals dependent upon humans for food. Ultimately, Thomas instead chooses to make pets out of the rats that infest her house and leave their droppings on her desk, having reached the logical extremes of her devotion to Gaia and novel interpretations of the way animals think.

Kelly says

I stumbled upon this book in the rustic and charming Henry Miller library at Big Sur, California. If you have not been there, I highly recommend a visit.

Elizabeth Marshall Thomas's book is not a simple recitation of the behaviors of the deer on her New Hampshire land. The book is significantly more. It is a lesson on "expanded seeing" and a meditation on humans in a shared territory with the "wild other". She takes us on a journey through her own experience and teaches us how to witness and learn from direct observation and the perspective of a "shared intent" to propagate and survive.

Although I felt I came to the book with an already heightened empathy, after completing the book, I have an even more profound respect for the other-than-human and their highly tuned, innate environmental intelligence.

Lily says

I'll never look at the deer that come into our back yard the same way again. Now I'm wondering who is mother, sister, aunt, grandchild, etc. This is a very interesting book.

Brian says

The book a hidden life of deer is a great book that I recommend to anyone who is a fan of animals and how intelligent they are. E.M.T did a amazing job in showing us how deer really think and how society has the wrong idea of them. My favorite part of the book was when she talks about how deer know about microclimates and how they use them for there advantage with hiding and keeping warm. I loved this book and defiantly give it a five star.

Anne Hamilton says

A curious book. While reading it I felt it was a masterpiece of beauty and lyricism. But when I got to the end, I felt deflated rather than uplifted. It was strangely hollow and unsatisfying but I can't quite put my finger on why.

It was nonetheless a book full of small and fascinating details.

I discovered the both haemoglobin and chlorophyll have a complex structure with almost exactly the same formula - the iron of haemoglobin is replaced by magnesium in chlorophyll.

I also discovered that fawns have no odour. And that their mothers take great care to keep them from smelling as well as encouraging them not to move in order to protect them from predators.

Whoof says

I read this book in order to learn something about deer. I still don't know anything about deer! This is a dopey and unscientific book that should be renamed "Why I Ignore Posted Warnings and Feed Deer Corn During Winter." Basically, the author feeds deer because the natural process of nature (some deer dying during the harsh winters) makes her sad.

Mary Robinson says

Found this when I was looking for books to identify deer bones and was very intrigued. But the book turned out to be more about the author and her rational for feeding the deers at her home, dealing with hunting authorities and some other goofier stuff. She certainly knows deers but I would have liked to learn more about them too.

Cynda says

Imhave a friend who had a deer as pet on her land on a Texas river. That deer has moved on with her deer family, and my friend gave me this book.

I learned about protection laws and Nature's laws and inter-species love. Inter-species love allows me to understand does (female deer) as mothers and women and bucks (male deer) as genealogical providers. Inter-species love can lead to being awareNess of our actions affect our relations and others' relations to the Earth.

My friend gifted me with this book.
