

MY YEAR OF THE

DEER

Born into the Baby Boom and raised during the housing boom, I grew up in a fresh new tract of suburbia that bordered an undeveloped state park. While boys my age played baseball and imagined batting themselves into major league stardom, I played in the park and fantasized seeing deer.

Later, as an early teen bird-watching in that woodland park, I kept ever vigilant for deer. I envisioned that they lurked just around the bend, just inside the next clearing, just beyond the forest edge. Same as a child on Christmas Eve anticipating the arrival of Santa and his reindeer, I hoped to see deer. Despite my vigil, I never did see a single one residing inside my park.

The pivotal day of my life was my 39th birthday. For most people, their primary rite of passage is their first wedding, the birth of their first child or death of their last remaining parent. Mine was more singular and solitary. Sober but celebratory, I dived off a footbridge into a river and emerged awaiting a wheelchair. I shattered a vertebra, which injured the fragile bundle of



nerves of my spinal cord, paralyzing me just below the waist. Not forever, just for the rest of my life.

After rehab I resumed most of my previous activities, including nature photography. But the world I now photograph has narrowed in focus. In a wheelchair, I more conveniently photograph mostly my present backyard, an expansive nature preserve.

Every night, wildlife plunder my compost heap for its kitchen scraps. Among my many nocturnal visitors are deer. Yet for many years I rarely saw any, just their tracks in the mud or snow. Feeding wild animals is a thorny issue, but ultimately we do so for our own entertainment. Birdwatchers feed birds to behold them at their windows, and I seized upon a late-season blizzard as an excuse to feed and commune with deer at my door. So with the aid of a cornucopia of cracked corn, I initiated my Year of the Deer.

I plotted to lure the deer with bait, and then to shoot them — with a camera. Initially, if I merely appeared at a window, the

deer would spook and head for the hills. But slowly, their well-founded fears were allayed, and they began to accept the sight of me from behind a window. The sweet temptation of cracked corn provided them with a powerful incentive. My judicious offerings continued for two months while I viewed them from behind a closed window. Then one day early in May, one very pregnant and hungry doe lingered long enough for me to shoot from my opened window the first of her family photos.

While puttering around outside in my wheelchair, I happened upon two fawns. They stood transfixed, and I sat spellbound. They were the first fawns I had ever beheld so closely, and I surely was their first human. Then I blinked, and they disappeared.

We observe relatively little of their waking hours, as deer are primarily nocturnal. When we do see them during daylight, they are merely grabbing quick snacks between long naps. Just after sunset, they begin their workday in earnest. So picture one doe and her two fawns in early evening making their rounds to my

DEER

BY MARK MATHEW BRAUNSTEIN



Since Mark Braunstein was seated in his wheelchair, rather than standing tall above the deer he wanted to befriend, he gained their trust relatively easily.

yard, expectant of their daily allowance of cracked corn. And picture one lone human, crouched in a wheelchair, hunkered over a camera mounted on a tripod, day after day wheeling a bit closer to the ever-wary deer.

Finding My Family

In wheelchairs, humans interact with animals somewhat differently than do humans afoot. I constantly fear running over a dog's paws, as dogs rarely back away far enough from my tires. And the first time I wheeled onto a pile of dog poop, embedding it on my tires and then getting it on my hands, I wanted to strangle the first dog I saw. Fortunately for the dog, it was a German shepherd. Dogs in turn respond to me in my wheelchair either with suspicion or affection. Many attempt to display their fondness by jumping upon my lap, while others never stop barking at me until I wheel away in retreat.

Wild animals, too, respond differently to our modes of transport than to us. As a wildlife photographer, I know that inside a

car I can get closer to animals than I could outside the car. But I must open my side window before I approach, else they flee when I lower it. A wheelchair seems to serve as a blind comparable to a car, and in a wheelchair the windows always are down.

Seated in my wheelchair, I won the confidence of the doe's family — and was able to document their lives from spring through fall. With patience and fortitude, in late May I proceeded outdoors to the landing of my wheelchair ramp, barricaded behind handrails, shooting from 150 feet away. Testing their tolerance, day by day I wheeled forward a bit more until they backed away. The next week, I rolled down the ramp, still behind its handrails. The week after that, I exited the ramp, and proceeded into open view. The next week again, I wheeled along the driveway, one foot closer per day. In July I wheeled onto the lawn, then into the field, shooting from 100 feet away. Three times in July and August, I witnessed the doe suckling her young, a very vulnerable position for both parties, and so seldom seen or photographed.

No matter how well-nursed or well-fed, deer retain an appetite for cracked corn, a dessert for which my human presence was worth tolerating. Deer find corn so irresistible that they raid cornfields despite the threat of being gunned down by farmers and hunters.

One September day, sensing that my unwieldy tripod and long-lens camera intimidated them more than I did, I left behind my camera and tripod. I wheeled forward, a bucket of cracked corn on my lap. I harbored no ulterior motives; instead I simply sat and watched and waited. I dispensed a line of corn onto the ground, wheeled back barely 20 feet, and in a few minutes my familiar family of deer appeared and began to eat, as though they had invited me to join them at their dinner table. So there I sat, bucket on lap, my arms outstretched, and to assure them I had nothing to hide, I turned my palms upward. Renaissance painters

posed St. Francis receiving the stigmata in this very position.

Halfway through their meal, my deer family was joined by another neighboring family of deer, a doe who also had two fawns. I had learned to differentiate mature deer, usually by the distinct scars or wounds they acquired from earning a living in the wild. Fawns, however, with no such injuries yet, prove harder to identify. I did recognize this second doe as an infrequent visitor. I dispensed a second line of cracked corn for her family, and then again sat perfectly still in my wheelchair.

The neighboring doe hesitated, and looked to my own neighborhood doe, as though to ask her, “What’s with this human?” Mine must have answered, “He’s OK, he’s with us.” So the neighbors stepped forward and began to eat, while I sat solemnly still.

Then things got hairy.

A buck antlered in full regalia, whom I saw only twice before — briefly before dawn — emerged with an entourage of four yearlings, none whom I recognized. I dispensed a third and longer line of cracked corn, and then again I sat still, while I took a head count. Three plus three plus one plus four. That’s 11 locals —and one closely watched intruder, a solitary member of the human horde. In the middle of a deer herd, I was surrounded. No exit, nor did I seek one.

Soon the corn vanished, and too soon, so did the deer. “Wait! Take me with you!” I wanted to implore. But I just sat in silence, in contemplation of what I sensed would rank as one of my life’s most enriching and exciting moments, exceeding my excitement the first time a chickadee, winter hungry for my sunflower seeds, perched upon my hand.

Shedding My Human Skin

In early October, from 40 feet away, I attained my goal of idealized family photos amid classic fall foliage. So I discontinued regular feedings, and during winter doled out corn only when our paths crossed, maybe twice a month. Though they continued to plunder my compost heap, Jane Doe and her two fawns survived the ensuing winter mostly without my intervention, as is meant to be.

The next spring, the fawns grew into yearlings. By March I could sit within 15 feet of the yearlings, both bridging a generation gap and surmounting a species barrier. A year for a deer often is half a lifetime. I declared my photo project completed, thankful for the photos I had gotten.

In May, in preparation for her next cycle of newborn fawns, the again-pregnant doe drove off her yearlings. Growing up in my presence, the yearlings were far more tolerant of me than was the doe, so I, too, sent them away simply by my no longer dispensing corn. Thereafter, they did not flee me, but neither did they invite me into their family or into their world.

The peaceful evenings I had shared seated among the deer remain in my memory as more spiritually enriching than any other experience of my life. I had shed being merely human, and while seated among them I entered into their world. The endeavor needed much planning and patience. It also required several bushels of cracked corn and exactly one wheelchair.

The wheelchair is crucial. Deer recognize it and me from a mile away. Seated, I’m their height, and less intimidating. Indeed, I could not have entered into this communion afoot. I could attain it only in a wheelchair.

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Photo by Mark Braunstein

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FINDING HIS ROLE

What makes Dr. Gabriel Fife a winning character on ABC's *Private Practice* is not only his role, it is the actor who plays him, Michael Patrick Thornton. At 24, Thornton's acting career was derailed by a spinal stroke, adjusting to the wheeling life, and fear — for a period he found it difficult to leave home. Now, eight years later, he is back on track and gaining steam. MIKE ERVIN spins his story.

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