

'Chronic wasting disease' poses threat to deer herd

It hasn't been in the headlines much so far, but I'd guess it will be in the near future.

It's called "chronic wasting disease," a fatal ailment that affects deer and elk. First identified in Colorado in the late 1960s, it cropped up recently in whitetail deer near Madison, Wis. The DNR there is so concerned it plans to eradicate the disease by shooting every deer in the 287-square-mile infected area.



Phil Power

Nobody knows for sure just how the disease got from Colorado to Wisconsin; many blame animals shipped in to "high fence" shooting preserves. But Michigan is much closer to Wisconsin than Colorado and it's easier walking, even for an infected deer.

The Michigan DNR is plenty worried. Dr. Stanley O'Brien, a DNR veterinarian, told me that if the disease — a neurological, progressive ailment hard to diagnose at the outset and always fatal to infected animals — gets into the Michigan deer herd, "the consequences could be horrible."

So far as the scientists know, the disease only affects so-called cervids, i.e. whitetail deer, mule deer and elk.

At a meeting earlier this month, the Michigan Natural Resources Commission banned supplemental feeding of deer in the four Upper Peninsula counties bordering Wisconsin.

The NRC will likely ban deer feeding in the entire UP next year, while the Michigan Department of Agriculture has temporarily halted all imports of captive deer and elk.

Scientists think the disease is transmitted when deer come into close contact with each other, either as they gather at feeding or baiting sites or in densely populated private hunting preserves.

The disease is caused by a mutation in something called a prion, a very primitive form of virus, that also caused the "mad cow disease" that terrorized England and Europe a couple of years ago.

In England, mad cow disease jumped the species barrier from cattle to humans, causing fatal brain lesions in around 100 people. Mad cow disease has not appeared in the U.S.

According to DNR scientists, there is no current evidence that chronic wasting disease can infect humans or, for that matter, cattle or other non-cervid species. But so little is known about the disease, its spread and its consequences that

Michigan authorities are dead right to move promptly and firmly.

It's important not to sensationalize all this. Thinking in terms of a gradient from good to bad might help.

The best outcome would be that the deer herd, already at historic highs sufficient to turn deer into nuisances in some areas, will be somewhat reduced if the disease spreads to Michigan. In that case, the authorities will probably try to kill infected animals, almost surely ban deer feeding and baiting and place restrictions on game preserves where the risk of infection is especially high. Deer hunting, especially in infected areas, will deteriorate.

A bad outcome would be that chronic wasting disease gets into the deer herd and lots of people quit hunting and eating deer because they're scared of getting infected.

This is not trivial, given the importance the deer hunting industry has in the Michigan economy. According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife 2002 survey, just about to be published, something like 90 percent of all hunting licenses issued in Michigan are for deer and the deer hunt generates more than \$1 billion annually in our economy.

The worst case would be for that disease to cross the species barrier from deer to cattle and gets into the food chain, infecting humans and causing mad cow-like panic among ordinary folks. I repeat: So far there is no evidence that this can happen, but the possibility cannot be ruled out arbitrarily.

And a lot of people are very concerned. The board of the Michigan United Conservation Clubs, representing nearly 100,000 members, in April unanimously passed a resolution aimed at preventing chronic wasting disease from reaching the whitetail deer herd. MUCC called on the DNR to ban importing all deer, elk and exotic game species into the state, halt permits for all new private cervid game farms and require existing big game facilities to put up double fences to separate captive and wild animals.

Michigan is better off in facing this problem than other states. State government already has a disease-fighting plan in place as a result of trying to eradicate bovine tuberculosis, which broke out among the northeast Lower Peninsula deer herd in the mid 1990s and has been largely confined to that region ever since.

But folks like the DNR and MUCC, already engaged in figuring out how to deal with this unexpected threat, need the support of a well informed public that is neither panicky nor blasé.

Phil Power is the Chairman of the Board of the company that owns this newspaper. He would be pleased to get your reactions to this column either at (734) 953-2206 or at ppower@homecomm.net.



Joni Hubred

Evening events are a chance to get out under the stars

The stars are distant and unobtrusive, but bright and enduring as our fairest and most memorable experiences. —Henry David Thoreau

The sky was clear and still blue, but streaked with the pale colors of sunset, and the sun had disappeared somewhere beneath the hills at Heritage Park.

It was a warm night in late July — or August, perhaps — that I was introduced to the Farmington Hills Cultural Arts Division's "Music Under the Stars" concerts. Tonight I'll return for this season's premiere, provided that 20 percent chance of rain stays in our favor, because once just wasn't enough.

Many nights of wonderful music carried on a soft breeze under the stars is what this program is all about. In a world where everything we do is never enough and road construction pushes our 15-minute commute to 30, events like "Music Under the Stars" remind us how to relax.

The Blue Circle's "Cafe on the Porch" held on Tuesday nights at the Longacre House accomplishes the same calming end. You don't have to do anything at either event.

It's not a Sunday picnic, where Dad has to fire up the grill and Mom has to rush to the store right after church. It's not a family reunion, where everyone plays "catch up" after having gone too long without seeing one another.

These events, and the Downtown Development Authority's summer concert series held Friday nights at the Pergola Gazebo, give us all a chance to just sit still and remember a time when we had nowhere to go on a summer evening and nothing to do, when we could lay on the damp grass in the backyard and study the constellations and imagine what it might be like to cruise among the stars.

The DDA's concerts have drawn families with young children, and we've heard a complaint or two about the kids making too much noise. We hope parents take that into account when they bring children to these events, and we hope those who attend find it in their hearts to be tolerant.

Children, I think, are part of the music, part of the experience of being together with others who enjoy the atmosphere and appreciate spending an evening out of the house.

We become more a community when we share in these experiences. They draw us together with people we may never have known had we stayed indoors. Too often, we rise before dawn and spend our days at work, then close the garage door

behind us at the end of the day and never venture out to meet the people who live next door.

When I was growing up, not only did we know our neighbors, but we were part of their lives. The couple who lived next door to us owned the hardware store downtown, and they were like family. Bill died some time ago; Evelyn is in a nursing home. She and my mother still keep in

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touch, even after more than 40 years.

It was a small town, but there's really no reason people can't be neighbors like that these days. Yes, we're a transient society, but while we're here, shouldn't we at least say "hello?"

Sometimes, it's hard to do that when you're mowing the grass and trimming the hedge and painting the eaves. There may not be a chance between trips to Home Depot and youth baseball games and soccer tournaments.

But three times a week, you have the opportunity to venture out and share an experience with the people who live and work in your community, people who share your love of jazz or swing music or Top 40 hits or board games and conversation.

Three times a week, you can walk away from the house and into a night filled with fresh air and the sounds of nature. You can explore three of this community's most relaxing and interesting spots — Heritage Park, the Longacre House and downtown Farmington.

Take an evening. Meet new friends. Share a romantic moment with someone you love. It's all out there waiting for you, under the stars.

Joni Hubred is editor of the Farmington Observer. She welcomes your comments at 33411 Grand River, Farmington MI 48335; by fax, (248) 477-9722; or by email at jhubred@oe.homecomm.net

"REVVIN' WITH FORD" WALK OF FAME

JUNE 20, 2002 6:00 P.M. - 9:00 P.M.

THE DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM RETAILERS IN ASSOCIATION WITH FORD MOTOR COMPANY AND THE CHILDREN'S CHARITIES COALITION WILL BE HOSTING A PROGRESSION OF PARTIES IN DOWNTOWN BIRMINGHAM PREVIEWING "REVVIN' WITH FORD" AND THE WOODWARD DREAM CRUISE

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