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Oh, Doe! Oh, Buck!



A Ball State University field researcher applies a blindfold to a deer so the animal will remain calm while a tracking collar is secured.

Courtesy photo

The plumber got out of his van, opened the back doors, stopped, stared down the street, reached into his truck to get some equipment, and then stopped and stared some more.

I didn't even need to ask him why when he got to my front door. "Get a close-up look at some deer?" I asked.

"Four of 'em!" he exclaimed. "They almost walked right up to me." A Greene County resident, he said he'd gone hunting the previous weekend and had the bad luck of not seeing a single deer. On a long-settled street in the center of Bloomington, he found himself looking at four of a kind.

"Oh, I've got a buck buddy who hangs around that you'd love. Looks like an eight-pointer," I said.

"I saw him, too," the plumber said. "I thought I counted 10."

I call my deer buddy Buck. "Hey, Buck," I say to him, as if I'm the character Scout from the film version of *To Kill A Mockingbird* and Buck is Boo Radley. I'm not sure how to approach him.

A lot of Bloomington residents will read this and say, "Tell me something I don't know. My neighborhood's the same way."

Whether it's a problem or a blessing depends on the individual and his or her devotion to flower or vegetable gardens. Either way, it's a situation of scientific interest that a team of wildlife researchers at Ball State University has lassoed onto.

Bloomington is a small urban core surrounded by rural land and then state and national forests — an ideal place to study various aspects of deer movement, size, and health. "It's pretty unique that you can have such a large population of deer in such a small urban community," says Garrett

Clevinger, a graduate student at Ball State. "What we are doing is simply collecting data. What the city does with the data is up to the city."

The first phase of the Ball State study from 2013–15 was to physically examine, collar, and track fawns. Phase 2.0, as the researchers like to call it, involves using the same procedures to identify, track, and evaluate the health of deer more than a year old. They drop nets on most of them within the city and the researchers take great pains to explain how only they can trigger the nets and how safe and cruelty-free the anesthetic is that enables them to subdue and examine the deer. They use two types of tracking devices: one that is a radio collar that a truck with an antenna can follow, and another that a GPS can follow in the way that Garmin can locate your car.

The Ball State researchers are out again this winter, hoping to tag 15 males and 15 females for their study, which should take two to three years to complete.

They weren't at all surprised when I told them about my plumber's deer encounter or my relationship with Buck. "Oh, deer become accustomed to people, no doubt," researcher Jonathan Trudeau said. "Habituation is the term we use. When animals lose their fear of humans and start to interact, they don't act like wild deer in rural areas. If you see a deer in the Morgan-Monroe State Forest, you couldn't get within 50 yards of it."

We really don't need to be overly careful with the deer unless it's spring, the researchers say, when does are territorial and protective of their fawns. Or fall, when the bucks are testosterone-fueled and looking to mate.

That last aspect is pretty normal for a university town, actually. Except it's always fall for the college bucks. ✧