

# Pere David’s Deer



## Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

I have always been mesmerized by the sight of antlers on deer and elk. I can spot an antler of a deer, bedded down in the brush a thousand yards away. What’s more interesting, is that I can walk past, and not see, a note on the counter left by my wife, leaving me specific instructions for some chore or other such nonsense she wants me to do.

I have asked my eye doctor, also an elk hunter, how it can be that I spot deer at great distances but not see notes left by my wife. He said the same thing happens to him occasionally and he has no plausible explanation either. My wife had a theory, but it was just too far-fetched to bear even mentioning here.

A few summers ago, I had to take a trip to a game reserve in Texas, a business thing I am occasionally forced to do involving entertaining clients. I had a few free moments and the ranch manager asked me if I would like to see Pere David’s deer. The first thoughts through my head wondered who this Pere David guy was and why he had his own deer, but since it involved antlers, I was all in. We loaded into the manager’s truck and drove into the brush.

We stopped a hundred yards or so from a water-hole to watch what comes in. A few minutes passed before things started to



Pere David’s deer would be a great addition to Colorado wildlife. These poor animals have battled extinction for centuries. (Courtesy photo/Peter O’Connor of anemone projectors)

happen, and suddenly, the most incredible set of antlers I had ever seen casually strolled into view. I was speechless as I stared in awe at this marvelous creature. I had seen my first ever Pere David’s deer.

The Pere David’s deer, known as milu in china, or *Elaphurus davidianus* in the scientific world, was first introduced to the Western world in 1866 by a priest named Father Armand David. Pere, I later learned, means father in French, hence the name. The Father was working as a missionary in China, where a herd of these beautiful creatures lived in a private estate of

the Chinese emperor. After much begging and pleading, the Father was allowed to view these deer, and he knew he must do more with these deer. I suspect the good Father was an antler addict like me.

In 1895, a flood washed out a wall to the preserve, allowing many of the deer to escape, that left less than 20 animals in the reserve, which were killed and eaten by soldiers during the Boxer Rebellion. The last known deer in the wild was shot in 1939 near the Yellow Sea. The Pere David’s deer was officially declared extinct.

A few of the escaped

animals had been taken illegally to Europe to be put on show in zoos. After the remaining population in China had gone, the remaining 18 deer in Europe were taken to Woburn Abbey, England and bred to save the species. The current population comes from this herd and can now be found in Zoos and on some game farms around the world.

Pere David’s deer have a long tail and wide hooves. Their summer coats are a bright red with a dark dorsal stripe. The coats turn a dark gray during the winter months. An adult will weigh in between 350

and 450 pounds. The does have a 9-month gestation period and 1 or 2 fawns, covered in spots, are born at a time. These fawns are fully mature by 14-months and have a lifespan that reaches past 20 years.

Little is known about this species of deer. We know they like marshland, and think they are native to the subtropics. They live on a diet of mixed grasses and water plants. The Pere David’s deer are good swimmers and spend long times standing in water. The thing that makes this incredible animal stand out from all the other antlered species I have encoun-

tered are the antlers. The branched antlers are very unique in that long times point backward, while the main beam extends almost directly upward. There may be two pairs per year. The summer antlers are the larger set, and are dropped in November, after the rut. The second set, if they appear, are fully grown in January and fall off a few weeks later.

The deer were reintroduced in China, where now 2,825 individuals live again in the wild, and 7,380 in zoos. All of these animals are descendants from the original herd. Around 2,000 of these deer live in the United States. The population is doing well, even though they are still considered extinct. If the Pere David’s deer herd continues to grow, it may receive a new, updated conservation status.

I would love to see this deer introduced into the wild in Colorado. Colorado Parks and Wildlife has made several successful reintroductions, including the lynx, and this hearty deer would be a welcome addition to our state.

Once you see one of these animals in the wild, with those incredible antlers, you will most likely agree. Now, about those notes my wife keeps leaving on the counter. ...

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# The chorus of the Little Brown Bat



## Outdoors

By Paul Zaenger

We are nearly enfolded in darkness as twilight gives way. Eyes are peeled for bats — the little brown bat (*Myotis lucifugus*) in particular — at the rim of Black Canyon. They fly at dusk to eat. Their diet is mostly made up of insects; breakfast is important for them. Their first meal of their day happens to be in the hours right after sunset.

The park lists 16 species of bats, some as confirmed residents. Light fades from the sky, and I have to say that between erratic flight patterns, and speed of flight, I wouldn’t be able to determine one species from another. Bats are social creatures, like people, and communal. They fly and hunt together.

A team of scientists moved out around the country over a 10-year period (starting in 2010) to determine the presence of bat species. They monitored their calls at more than 40 sampling locations at Black



Dusk settles on the rim of Black Canyon of the Gunnison on a summer evening when bats take flight. They need our help. Find ways that you can participate with minimal effort at home. Visit Bat Conservation International at <https://www.batcon.org/>. (Courtesy photo/ Paul Zaenger)

Canyon, from canyon rim to river, to determine that little brown bats are there.

Bats use different vocalizations to communicate, both with each other and for hunting. When they take flight in those twilight hours, they use a process called echolocation. They call out with high-pitched sounds above 20,000 Hz (Hz is a hertz or a unit of frequency cycling once per second). The human ear can detect sounds up to this level, yet bats far exceed that point. Their frequencies are specific to their species.

Usually by using their vocal cords and larynx, almost like shouting out, the sound is emitted and bounces back. Although we can hear echoing sounds, bats have

perfected the skill. Their ultrasonic sounds are more likely to bounce back (as opposed to bending around an object), take less energy to send forth, and dissipate quickly so the individual can send out another call quickly.

Dusk is upon us, but we haven’t seen any little brown bats (or any bats for that matter). We wait for them to take wing from their daytime roosting colony to forage for insects. This species is pretty tiny, weighing less than half an ounce. Light weight is important for flight. Bats are the only true flying mammal using the motion of wings to gain flight, rather than membranes for gliding (flying squir-

rels). Imagine that – flying mammals.

They measure up to 3.5 inches in length, but their wingspan is more than twice that, up to 10.5 inches. They search for clouds of insects, the kind that annoy people during backyard barbecues. They quickly eat as many as possible.

Using ordinary calls to avoid collision, bats hunt together like a gigantic family. Swooping and diving, the bat will call in pulses from 80,000 Hz down to 40,000 Hz. It zeroes in on its prey at specifically 47,000 Hz. Up to 200 calls per second are issued. In great haste it calculates the distance to its prey based on the timing and strength of the return signal.

All of this helps to target the smallest of insects, mosquitoes among them. It quickly chews the food — seven chomps per second. And the bat is ready for another insect. *Myotis lucifugus* will eat half its weight in a night, mostly in those hours after sunset. If we ate that way, we would consume some 75 to 100 pounds of food. Mmmmmm — sounds like we would need a bigger buffet.

Little brown bats are most active in summer. Hibernation starts in the fall when they group into very large communities in caves, abandoned mines and similar shelters. Here they are vulnerable to white-nose syndrome. Entire colonies, hundreds of thousands of

bats, can be wiped out in one winter.

Bats are important. See the Montrose Daily Press for a recent report (5/5/23); insect eating bats contribute \$3 billion to the U.S. agricultural economy annually. It’s hard to see that such small creatures with incredible adaptations can have such an affect. They eat insects we despise and help us grow crops.

Darkness is nearly upon us at Black Canyon’s rim. No sign of bats, but we know they are around. They will call out. If we could hear their sounds, it could be like a deafening chorus; hundreds of bats in a community of song unique among their own. Without special instruments, it’s one we can see but not understand.

Temperatures cool, night breezes rise, an owl hoots nearby. Little brown bats remind us that being part of a community means that we should realize that we may not be able to comprehend all of the messages perfectly. Yet our world works well even if we don’t.

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