

# A lethal wildlife disease is stalking South Carolina: How 'zombie deer' threaten the state

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Tom Hauge, a veteran wildlife biologist in Wisconsin, was told 21 years ago that a deadly disease had shown up in deer that roamed across the

state's southwest corner.

He knew what that meant. Chronic wasting disease one day could spread across Wisconsin and deplete the deer population that had made his state well known as a rich hunting ground. It could even threaten human health.

But as Hauge, one of Wisconsin's top wildlife officials at the time, sought to control the spread, he was blocked by deer hunters and politicians who didn't want interference with the state's hunting tradition. Without aggressive measures to stop the disease, the wildlife sickness worked its way across Wisconsin, showing up in more than half the counties.

"Put simply, it is kicking our butt here in Wisconsin," Hauge said.

Today, with [chronic wasting disease](#) advancing on South Carolina and through other states, pockets of the hunting community still downplay warnings about the dangers of an ailment that scientists say can kill large numbers of deer and possibly threaten people.

Some of those critics, including arch-conservative rock star Ted Nugent, say natural resource agencies are too strident in highlighting the dangers. Nugent and others say the disease, around since the late 1960s, has yet to wipe out large populations of deer.

Yet state agencies are using the disease as a reason to restrict hunting, they say.

It's "an absolute scam," Nugent said.

Meanwhile, some hunters in South Carolina say they haven't heard much about the disease, despite what state officials report are extensive efforts

to let sportsmen know about the threat.

The lack of concern, or ignorance to the threat, worries state wildlife managers, who say even a few hunters who don't heed warnings about the disease could hasten its entry into South Carolina or enhance the spread.

Hauge, now retired from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, and an array of researchers say the public needs to be aware of what can happen.

Eventually, chronic wasting disease will cause problems—and states should do everything they can to keep the disease out, he and others say.

"Of all the disease experts and health experts I have run into, there isn't one of them that has come up to me and said "You know what? I was wrong, this disease is not really that bad," he said.

"It's just the opposite."

Hunters can help by being vigilant, following state rules against importing deer from other states, having suspect deer tested for the disease, and supporting other natural resource agency efforts to control the illness, he and others say.

If the disease is found, South Carolina may take steps like other states. Those steps include restrictions that hunters may not like, including a ban on baiting for deer and bringing in government sharpshooters to reduce the deer herd.

The 2002 discovery in Wisconsin was the first east of the Mississippi and the first involving white-tailed deer, the type found in the eastern United States. All told, the disease has shown up in more than 30 states.

And since 2010, it has been found in all southern states, except South Carolina, Georgia and Kentucky.

"It's pretty obvious, this is not a disease you'd want," said Cory Anderson, a University of Minnesota scientist who studies chronic wasting disease.

Chronic wasting disease is a concern because it could drive down deer populations, which would hurt the economy, say state natural resources officials and key university researchers who have studied the wildlife disease.

Nationally, big game hunting, of which deer hunting is a major part, pumps \$170 billion into the economy each year, according to the U.S Geological Survey. In South Carolina, deer hunting contributes a minimum economic impact of \$190 million, a state DNR report said. The state has more than 700,000 deer.

Scientists like Anderson are also trying to determine if chronic wasting disease can spread to other species, including people. So far, there is no evidence this has occurred, but non-human primates, such as some types of monkeys, have become infected in laboratory tests.

As a precaution, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advises people not to eat deer meat from areas with chronic wasting disease, known as CWD, unless they first have the deer meat tested.

"If CWD could spread to people, it would most likely be through eating of infected deer and elk," the CDC's web page on chronic wasting disease says.

Chronic wasting disease, caused by abnormal proteins in deer, has no known cure. It is similar to mad cow disease, an illness in cattle that

infected consumers of diseased beef in the 1990s, mostly in the United Kingdom, a 2019 University of Minnesota study said.

The fear is that chronic wasting disease will spread and develop into forms that can affect people. The Minnesota study said a national strategy is needed to address the threat of chronic wasting disease.

So far, up to 50% of the bucks tested in parts of southwest Wisconsin have been infected with chronic wasting disease, the U.S. Geological Survey reports.

Similar trends are found in other places that have dealt with the disease.

In part of Wyoming, deer populations were declining by about 10% annually at one point. Deer with chronic wasting disease were 4.5 times more likely to die than deer without the disease, researchers found. Most recently, [federal officials](#) said chronic wasting disease had, for the first time, been confirmed in a deer at Yellowstone National Park.

In Colorado, where the disease was first found in 1967, 45% of the deer population in one part of the state died over two decades, studies show.

Arkansas officials say they have launched a detailed study to verify reports that chronic wasting disease is beginning to kill deer.

## **'Zombie deer'**

Sometimes referred to as "Zombie Deer," animals with chronic wasting disease lose weight, stagger around and drool in the later stages of the illness. The disease sickens deer enough that they are more subject to being hit by cars or killed by predators.

The disease can spread from deer to deer, or it can spread to deer from

carcasses that are left in the woods, from urine or feces, or from deer parts tossed outside at processing plants. Deer also can pick up the disease in areas where hunters set out bait.

Live deer or deer parts imported from one state to the other can spread the disease, as well.

The majority of scientists who study chronic wasting disease agree it is a growing problem that threatens deer herds across the country, according to researchers at the universities of Georgia and Minnesota.

"Chronic wasting disease is very much a real disease," said University of Georgia researcher Mark Ruder. "In my book, it is one of the most potentially impactful and significant disease threats we face in the wildlife community."

The disease is such a concern that state and [federal authorities](#) have taken action against hunters who illegally imported deer parts across state lines.

In Kentucky last May, the Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources sued a Louisville hunter who it says brought a diseased deer head to the state from Wisconsin.

Then in August, a federal grand jury indicted three South Carolina hunters for illegally hauling deer parts to the state from Kansas, where they had gone on a hunting trip about four years ago.

Among the parts brought into South Carolina was a diseased deer head that hunters wanted to mount on the wall as a trophy. The finding raised alarms at the S.C. Department of Natural Resources.

After the indictment in August, the three hunters pled guilty.

## Rock 'n' roll critic

Despite evidence that chronic wasting disease is a threat, some people remain unconvinced, including Nugent.

Nugent, one of the most strident voices of the far right, recently called The State to complain that the three South Carolina hunters who had been taken to court were being treated unfairly.

There isn't clear evidence that chronic wasting disease has hurt deer populations across the country, but state wildlife agencies are pushing an agenda of fear, Nugent said. He said the agencies are filled with "jackbooted" officials.

"My God, what a horrible scam by the feds and the game departments that are ruining people's lives over something that means nothing," Nugent told The State, noting that "it just breaks my heart" that such cases are made.

One of the hunters charged in the federal investigation in South Carolina suggested, after he pled guilty in September to illegally bringing wildlife into the state, that he didn't realize he was doing anything wrong.

Chad Seymore, a Spartanburg County nuclear plant worker, said South Carolina officials need to do a better job of getting the word out about chronic wasting disease.

"They don't post this on the news or on the front page of the paper," Seymore told the newspaper after the guilty plea. His lawyer said a lack of "hunter education" caused Seymore's legal problems.

An internal Department of Natural Resources email said a hunting partner of Seymore's was aware of the problem about two years before

the hunting party ran into trouble. The DNR had warned Seymore's friend about bringing deer parts into South Carolina, but an enforcement case was not made.

Nugent, who grew up in Michigan is increasingly known as an avid hunter who is outspoken in his criticism of state and federal natural resource agencies. He's appeared on television and podcasts complaining about what he considers government ineptitude. In some instances, he has slammed state and federal concerns about chronic wasting disease.

Wildlife agencies in some states have wrongly presided over the targeted killing of deer in areas they identified with infection outbreaks, Nugent told The State. Nugent, who has run afoul of federal authorities over hunting violations, also said captive deer raised on farms have been unnecessarily killed in the name of trying to contain the disease.

Nugent said the disease has had no substantial impact on deer populations. Overall deer populations in Wisconsin, for instance, are at or near all time highs, statistics show.

David Strickland, a sportsman from the South Carolina Lowcountry and sometime critic of state and federal wildlife policies, said natural resource agencies have generated "fear based media campaigns and regulation creation. These regulations are often times draconian and create hardships and hurdles for hunters."

Strickland said he's more concerned about coyotes attacking deer, as well as an ailment known as hemorrhagic disease, than about chronic wasting disease. He is the founder of an outdoors group called the Carolina Wildlife Syndicate,

He and Nugent base some of their arguments on the work of a researcher known as "Dr. Deer." That researcher, James C. Kroll, has challenged



wildlife agencies that have taken steps to limit chronic wasting disease.

After Wisconsin wildlife officials began efforts to reduce deer herds to limit the spread of chronic wasting disease, hunters became upset at the loss of animals. That chilled efforts to control the disease.

Then, Republican Gov. Scott Walker brought in Kroll for advice in 2012. Kroll recommended taking a less aggressive approach, Hauge said.

Ultimately, efforts to reduce deer herds were curtailed. And funding to address chronic wasting disease was slashed, according to a 2018 column in the Green Bay Press Gazette.

Kroll, who has a Ph.D. from Texas A&M, has said the disease is not as contagious as it is made out to be and isn't having much impact on the overall deer population, according to a 2020 column in the Center Daily Times of Pennsylvania.

Efforts to reach Kroll were unsuccessful.

## **South Carolina on watch**

In South Carolina and Georgia, wildlife officials say they are trying to educate hunters and those who process deer about the threats of the disease and what can be done to help.

To inform the public, the S.C. Department of Natural Resources has established a page on its website about the dangers of chronic wasting disease, included notes for hunters with state-issued deer hunting tags, and posted notices on social media.

South Carolina also has adopted rules against bringing in live deer or deer parts that could have been infected in other states. Other states,

including Georgia, have taken similar measures to get the word out and limit the spread of chronic wasting disease.

Recently, South Carolina ramped up testing along the North Carolina border after a diseased deer was found in the eastern part of that state. And the S.C. DNR is working with taxidermists, who process deer heads into trophies, to help collect samples for testing.

Unfortunately, some hunters see efforts to control chronic wasting disease as part of a conspiracy to restrict deer hunting, said Jay Cantrell, the S.C. DNR's assistant big game coordinator

"There is just a minority out there that doesn't want it to be a big deal," Cantrell said. "So they have kind of come up with a narrative, almost of denial."

In states where the disease has shown up, government agencies have tried to reduce deer herds by enacting longer hunting seasons and the use of sharpshooters to kill deer in areas of infection—measures that are sometimes controversial.

Charlie Killmaster, a deer biologist with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, said some of the loudest opposition to chronic-wasting disease control efforts comes from people associated with the captive deer industry.

The industry breeds deer to produce genetically superior animals, often with larger antlers, that later can be hunted on fenced, private game preserves..

Deer produced through captive deer farms are sometimes sold for thousands of dollars and moved to hunting preserves in other states.

"That industry relies on being able to move live animals around," he said. "Unfortunately, moving live animals is one way to move chronic wasting disease from one area to another. It can move through carcass parts, but we know it is more easily transmitted from live animals."

Preserves that allow genetically altered deer to be hunted in fenced areas have been outlawed in some states, including South Carolina, officials said. But there are concerns that deer could be brought in illegally.

That occurred in 2008 in Bamberg County, where deer were being imported from Ohio to a fenced hunting enclosure. South Carolina still has about two dozen fenced deer areas that are left over from before regulation.

## **'Slow moving but lethal'**

Ruder, who studies wildlife diseases at the University of Georgia's College of Veterinary Medicine, said critics may not realize the threat of chronic wasting disease is long-term.

The disease progresses, sometimes, over a period of years without noticeable signs that deer are ill. After infection, it can be 18 to 24 months before deer show visible symptoms. And it can take 20 years or more for it to begin to affect deer populations, as is just now being noticed in some parts of the country, scientists say.

"It is very slow acting and kind of cryptic on the landscape," Ruder said. "Nothing happens fast with chronic wasting disease."

In contrast, some wildlife diseases are easier to spot much sooner, including the deer ailment known as hemorrhagic disease. While it might take months or years to notice [deer](#) sickened by chronic wasting disease, hemorrhagic disease can be obvious within hours of infection.

Unlike chronic wasting disease, hemorrhagic disease spreads from insects that carry the germs. Deer not killed by the disease can build up an immunity to it, as opposed to chronic wasting disease, which is almost always fatal.

Chronic wasting disease is triggered by malformed prions, instead of bacteria or viruses. There is no known cure for it.

Wisconsin's Hauge and Anderson, the chronic wasting disease scientist at the University of Minnesota, said states need to focus aggressively on how to stop the disease, or least limit its spread.

"You want all the tools in the tool box," Hauge said. "You don't want to be locking them in a cabinet someplace where you can never get at them. It is one heck of a tough disease to deal with."

Officials in South Carolina and Georgia say they won't be surprised if chronic wasting [disease](#) eventually is found in their states. It has been discovered in eastern North Carolina not far from the South Carolina border and in northern Florida, not far from the Georgia state line.

But by keeping hunters informed and watching closely, the states may be able to adopt management strategies to prevent wide swaths of the [deer population](#) from being infected, state officials and some scientists say.

"If it's something that is prioritized and managed, there is evidence that we can at least tamp down the prevalence," Minnesota's Anderson said.

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