

ESSAY

The pale ghost in the neighborhood

BY KAY MACDONALD

Special to the Record-Eagle

Every day of our lives we are treated to a Northern Michigan free show: the parade of porcupines, mink, rabbits, turkeys, raccoons and the dubious pleasure of skunks.

Best of all are the deer that are neighbors on our trail. We have a steady population of whitetails, many of them acquaintances from year to year. And on certain days like last Tuesday when they ate every inch of my two pampered tomato plants, they are purely pests. Beautiful pests, however, and I would give up a tomato plant any day for the pleasure of a backyard full of deer — an entire garden to see Casper again.

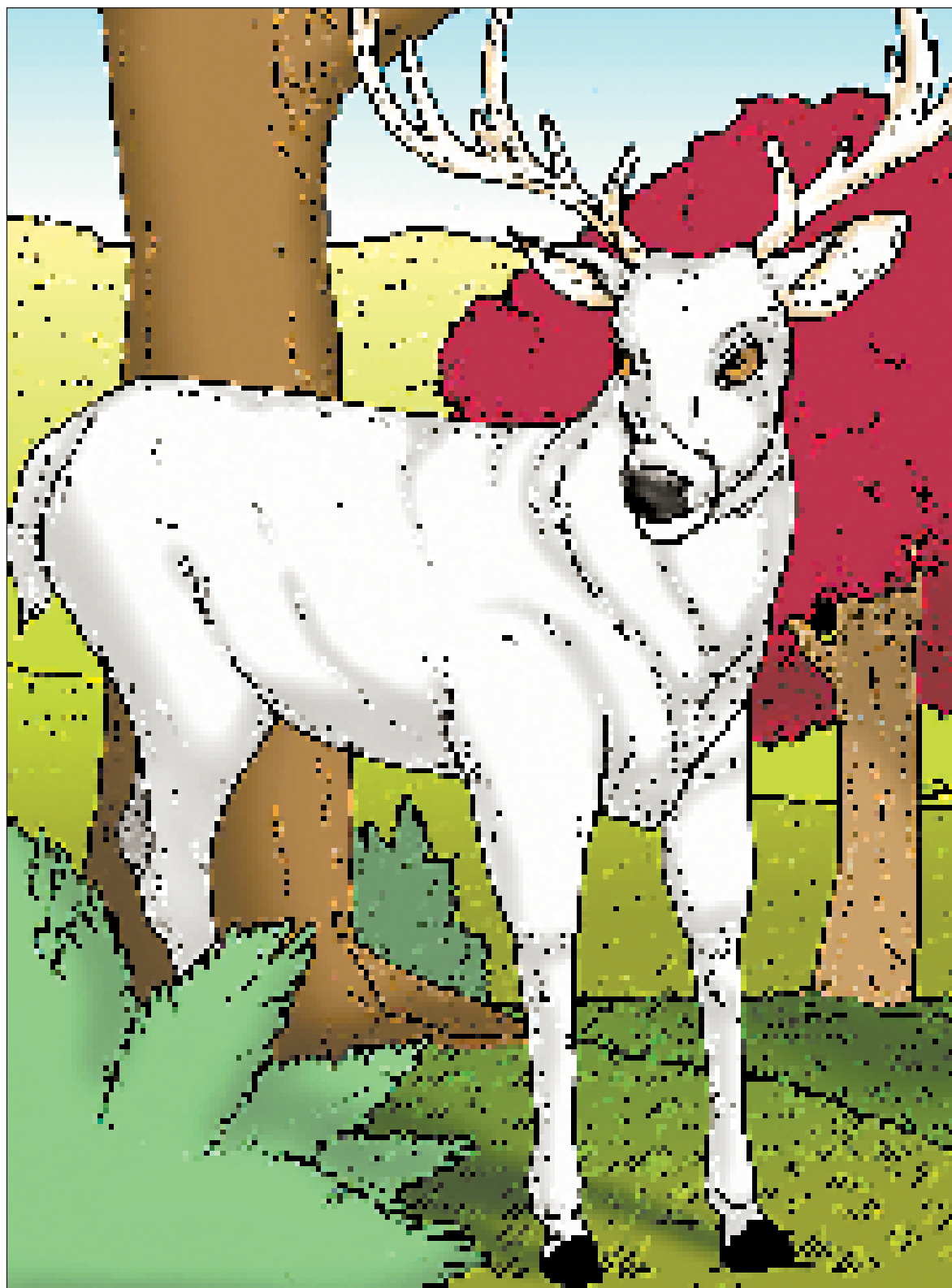
Two years ago this fall I was driving out our trail in the early evening when Casper stepped out of the trees. An enormous buck with a trophy set of antlers, he was pure white.

For a moment I couldn't take him in. Unsure of what I was seeing, I held my breath and my heart was beating hard. I wanted to jump out of the car and touch him to see if he was real.

The very next day I was again in my car on my way out the trail and around a bend there lay the great white buck in a patch of sun not 30 feet from me. I stopped and sat admiring him while he looked back at me serenely. Taking a chance, I backed the car around and drove home for my husband and the camera.

He was still there when we got back, his coat silver in the sun, taking his ease in a pile of leaves. He stayed there while my husband got out slowly and spoke softly to him, snapping picture after picture. Finally, with no sign of fear, he got up and strolled off through the trees.

We were mesmerized. So were our neighbors when we showed the photos. He was immediately named Casper by



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a majority vote, though I opted for Moby Deer.

We all sighted Casper off and on through the fall, but after the hunting season we didn't see him again that winter. We searched and worried as par-

ents with a daughter not home on time from a date and sadly resigned ourselves to having lost Casper to a hunter. It is illegal to shoot white deer, but we all knew there are the macho types out there who

hunt only for bragging rights.

I was raised in a family of hunters and my husband thinks the New Year begins with the opening of the deer season. I understand all of the right reasons for thinning the

deer herd and the men I know are gentlemen sportsmen who never would have considered Casper fair game. But, sure enough, we began to hear tales of hunters in the local grocery and area restaurants bragging about their shots at the white buck. They were all treated to not so veiled threats about being hung by their ears if they made a trophy of our Casper.

Finally, the next spring on the opening day of steelhead season, a neighbor sighted Casper up river — thin, ratty-coated, wary and missing his right foot and ankle. We were all saddened at the news but happy that he had survived. Though we hated to see him frightened, we were hopeful that he had learned better survival instincts.

Two white fawns appeared that spring — tiny, elfin ghosts watching us from amidst the ferns. Casper was videotaped eating at a neighbor's wildlife cafeteria that fall. His rack was less impressive than the year before, but he was again full-bodied and silky-coated. He was watchful though, and nervous, and perhaps we could not have come as close to him as we once had.

No one has reported seeing Casper since last hunting season, nearly a year now. His herd is still close by: the two white fawns who are yearlings now, Grandma who is a three legged older doe with her current baby, and this year, a set of twins — one white, one tan — who along with their mother are at a certain turn in the trail at the same time every evening.

We may have lost our Casper to someone who doesn't know the law or the feeling of awe at the sight of something so beautiful. But now we have his sons and daughters.

And we have a framed portrait hanging on our wall of a creature of beauty who has touched our lives.

Kay MacDonald is a freelance writer living in Irons.