

White-Tailed DEER

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Perhaps New York State's most widely recognized large mammal, the white-tailed deer is a familiar sight to most, its famous "white flag" tail often spotted as the animal bounds off. Highly adaptable, the white-tailed deer is found throughout the state in a variety of settings. It is generally a shy, elusive animal that is a favorite of nature observers and sportsmen alike.

Large animals, adult white-tails measure about three to three and one-half feet tall at the shoulder. Bucks (males) can weigh as much as 300 pounds, although most average only half that size. Adult white-tails are usually reddish-brown in color during the summer, and grayish-brown in the winter. Their winter coat is very different from their summer coat—much longer and thicker to keep the animal insulated during our often cold winters. Fawns are reddish-brown with white spots, which are lost when fawns acquire their winter coat at three or four months of age. Occasionally, you may see an all-white or a piebald deer, which are simply color variations of the species.

White-tailed deer seem to prefer border areas between forests and fields, although they can be found in a variety of habitats depending on the season. They thrive in open agricultural areas as well as in dense brushy habitat. Mature hardwood forests provide autumn mast crops and resting areas, while stands of evergreen trees can provide winter food and cover. Interestingly, urban areas, which seem to offer few deer habitat requirements, are increasingly becoming home to deer.

White-tailed deer eat a wide variety of vegetation, including grasses, trees, shrubs, agricultural crops and ornamentals. Considered both browsers and grazers, they eat leaves, stems, buds of woody plants, fruits, vines, mushrooms, grasses, acorns and nuts. Deer seem to have the ability to choose the most nutritious foods, often selecting a particular plant over another. They frequently graze on hay and other crops, sometimes damaging orchards and farms. Deer eat more food in autumn in order to build up fat reserves for winter. During cold months deer are primarily browsers, but will also paw through snow to find acorns and beechnuts. White-tails have four-part stomachs which allow them to eat large amounts of food at one time, and then move to a safe place where they can rest and chew their cud.

The breeding season (or rut) for white-tailed deer in New York runs from October to January, with peak activity occurring in mid-November. Most does (females) breed for their first time at 1½ years of age. After a gestation period of about 200 days, females usually give birth to one or two fawns in late spring. Occasionally, triplets or quadruplets are born. Newborns weigh about seven to eight pounds. Fawns nurse every four to five hours for the first two to three weeks after birth, then less frequently until they are weaned in late summer or early fall. Fawns usually stay with their mother through their first winter but can survive on their own.

Male white-tails grow and shed their antlers annually. Antlers are bony structures that grow out of hard plates (pedicles) on their skull. Antler growth begins in early April, stimulated by the longer hours of daylight. While growing, antlers are covered with soft skin called velvet, which is full of blood vessels that deliver nutrients for antler growth. By September's end, the velvet has normally dried up and is shed—usually aided by the males' rubbing of antlers on bushes and small trees. During the rut, the smooth and sharp-tined antlers are used by the bucks to establish social



rank—bigger antlers, body size and aggressive behavior usually favor breeding success.

Males usually produce their first set of antlers at one year of age. (A “button buck” is a male fawn with hardened antler “buttons” on the top of his skull.) Antler size generally increases with age, although genetics, food quality and health also play important roles. Bucks shed their antlers in the winter following the rut.

Secretive animals, deer are most active in early morning and evening. They tend to travel slowly, browsing along the way. During severe winters deer will only move far enough to locate food and shelter. Sometimes they will concentrate in one place, called a “yard.” Yards are often found

on southern slopes or under thick conifer cover, which protects deer from winds and deep snows. A typical family group often consists of an adult doe, her current fawns and her yearling daughter(s). They will remain together off and on through much of the year. Yearling bucks are normally driven from the group about the time that fawns are born.

Each fall during deer hunting season, DEC biologists examine thousands of deer to gather information on age, sex, physical condition and location of harvest. Biologists use this information to set deer harvest goals for the following hunting season.

For more information on deer in New York State, go to DEC’s website at www.dec.state.ny.us



To determine a deer’s age, biologists look at adult tooth eruption and overall wear.

Managing New York’s Deer

New Yorkers relate to deer in a number of ways. Whether they hunt or just like to watch deer, most people appreciate living in deer country. However, deer often cause problems for farmers, homeowners, foresters and motorists. If not properly managed, deer populations can increase dramatically, especially in areas with low mortality. While coyotes can and do have an effect on local deer populations, they have not demonstrated an ability to keep deer populations from rising across the state.

A burgeoning deer population causes increased problems for people and impairs the condition of individual animals. High deer populations also reduce biodiversity and damage the habitat of other wildlife, such as forest birds that nest in the forest shrub layer. Each year, white-tailed deer cause millions of dollars in damage to crops and personal property in New York, and are involved in tens of thousands of deer/vehicle collisions.

When deer become a nuisance, landowners can use control techniques such as homemade or commercial repellents, scaring devices (shell crackers, fireworks and gunfire) and fencing. DEC also permits shooting nuisance deer in some cases. Call your local DEC or County Cooperative Extension office or visit their websites for more information.

With a deer herd of approximately one million animals statewide, proper management efforts are critical to reducing deer-human conflicts and the long-term health of the deer population. DEC works hard to achieve a balance between deer populations, their habitat, human land uses and recreational interests.

DEC manages white-tailed deer populations through recreational hunting. By carefully controlling the number of female deer that hunters remove from the population during the hunting season, wildlife managers can bring about an increase or decrease in a local deer population.

DEC’s deer management program strives to keep deer herds at levels that are compatible with people’s uses of the land, and in agreement with local people’s interests. Wildlife managers gather input from local citizen task forces to set a deer population level for each wildlife management unit. Task forces reflect the interests of a variety of stakeholders in that area.

Although it may be hard to believe today, deer sightings were once published in local newspapers. Today, deer are quite common in most areas of the state—a testament to their ability to adapt to an ever-changing landscape.