

The White-Tailed Deer

By Dr. Leonard Lee Rue III

The deer is a member of the Cervidae family along with the elk, caribou and moose. The white-tailed deer is a distinctly North American mammal, originally found on just this continent.

All members of Cervidae belong to the order Artiodactyla, meaning that they are even-toed. The deer have four toes on each foot. The two center toes are the two main hooves. The digits that correspond to our forefinger and pinkie, shrunk at some point in time, and are no longer walked upon; they are called, dewclaws. The thumb is missing completely.

Deer are also known as ruminants, as are sheep, cattle, antelopes, etc., all having a four chambered stomach. This stomach allows all of these animals to gather a lot of food quickly and then retire to a place of safety where they regurgitate a cud of material and thoroughly chew it before re-swallowing it so it can be digested.

Deer are dimorphic; meaning, that the males are about 1/3 larger in size than the females and weigh about twice as much. The average adult buck will weigh 200 plus pounds. They stand between 36 to 40 inches high at the shoulder and will be six to seven feet in total body length. Although the average life span for a white-tailed deer is twelve years, very few ever reach that age due to hunting.

The comeback of the white-tailed deer is a real conservation success story. In pre-Columbian times, the deer population was estimated at over 30 million. By the end of the 1800s the deer were almost extinct over most of its range. With better game laws and enforcement, and through restocking programs, the deer herd has rebounded to about 25 million.

In many areas deer are considered a nuisance because of crop and shrub damage, and are involved in thousands upon thousands of automobile collisions.

Deer eat over 650 different types of plants and, in most areas, their high populations have wiped out their favored foods. Deer are now living in suburban areas and are steadily increasing their range across the continent as our climate is definitely getting warmer.

Deer are a matriarchal society. Each little group is lead by the oldest does. Bucks come together during the breeding season from October through December, or when they are concentrated at a food source.

The doe's gestation period is about 203 days. Fawns are born in the latter part of May through the first part of June. Does, giving birth for the first time usually have just a single fawn; thereafter, most does give birth to twins. When exceptionally good food is available, a doe may have triplets or quadruplets, but this is rare. Do not pick up or touch fawns that are found alone and seem orphaned. They very seldom are. The mother will leave her young fawns, while she is feeding, but she will return about every five to six hours to nurse them. The fawns, at the age of about 3 weeks, will start to follow their mother and will stay with her for one full year, being chased away when the doe is about to give birth to her new fawns.

Bucks readily live in little fraternal groups, with the largest, strongest buck being dominant. Occasionally, bucks fight, using their antlers, to prove their dominance. All bucks lose their antlers every year, usually in December or January. They have no antlers until the new ones start to grow in April. The new antlers are covered with a network of blood vessels that look and feel like velvet. The antlers grow as much as ¼ inch per day. They are full grown and begin to harden in August. The dried velvet is then rubbed off just prior to the breeding season.

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Abomasum	The fourth part of a ruminant's stomach.
Adaptable	Able to change.
Artiodactyls	A Greek word meaning four toes.
Blood vessels	The tubes by which blood flows through the body.
Browse Line	A visible line showing how high the deer have been feeding on the vegetation.
Camouflage	Protective coloration.
Canine	Member of the dog family.
Carbohydrate	A component of food made up of starch.
Cervidae	Members of the deer, elk, caribou or moose family.
Collision	When two objects crash together.
Concave Socket	Hollowed out.
Cud	Regurgitated food that is chewed a second time. Also called bolus.
Digitigrade	Walking on the toes.
Dominant	The biggest and strongest.
Escape detection	Not being seen.
Extirpated	Wiped out.
Feline	Member of the cat family.
Forbs	Broad-leafed plants.
Gestation Period	The length of time that the female carries her babies, from the time of breeding to birth.
Grazing	Feeding upon grass.
Hard Stare	An aggressive body posture used by a dominant deer to threaten a lesser deer.
Haunt	The area where you live.
Intestine	The long tube below the stomach through which processed food passes and then is absorbed by the body.
Keratin	Material in fingernails and horns.
Magnesium	Mineral needed to make bone.
Matriarchal	A family led by the mother.

Nomadic	Does not have a home, wandering.
Omasum	The third part of a ruminant's stomach.
Overabundant	Too many.
Palmated	Flattened.
Pedicles	The two bony bases on the top front of a deer's forehead on which the antlers grow.
Pheromones	Chemical odors given off by one animal to attract another.
Phosphorous	Mineral needed to make bone.
Photographic-Blind	A structure set up to hide in, to watch or photograph wildlife.
Phragmite	A type of a tall plant that grows in wet areas.
Plantigrade	Walking on the flat portion of the foot.
Predator	A creature that eats another creature.
Regurgitate	When food which has been swallowed, is brought back up again to the mouth.
Reticulum	The second part of a ruminant's stomach.
Rumen	The first, and largest, part of a ruminant's stomach, also called a paunch.
Ruminant	A creature having four parts to its stomach.
Tannic Acid	A bitter plant substance used to tan leather.
Tarsal Gland	A gland located at a deer's ankle.
Tines	The pointy, upright growths of a deer's antler.
Ungulagrade	Walking on the toe nails.
Velvet	The outer, hairy surface of the blood vessels nourishing the growing antler.
Vigorous	Done strongly.
Yearling	An animal between one and two years of age.