

White-tailed Deer

A white-tailed deer gracefully leaping, its raised white tail a flashing sign of its identity, is always a captivating sight. In fact, their bounding ability is amazing. A buck was recorded broad jumping 29 feet, clearing a seven foot high windfall in the process! A deer can keep up a cruising speed of thirty miles an hour for three or four miles. However, given good conditions, a white-tailed deer does not roam far. Although it prefers woods for cover, edged with clearings for food, it has adapted to many habitats and can be found in much of the North America.



Most active at dawn and sunset, white-tailed deer traditionally ate green plants in summer, acorns and nuts in fall, and the twigs and buds of woody plants such as buckbrush, wild rose, dogwood, chokecherry and cedars in winter. Now, however, it seems they have developed a taste for agricultural crops, particularly corn.

Deer change color with the seasons, trading their light reddish-brown summer coat for a buff winter one. The air-filled hollow hair shafts of their winter coat not only keep them warm but also provide buoyancy in water. Masters of camouflage, they have excellent senses of hearing, sight and smell. Deer have scent glands on their feet and legs, and the secretions of these glands are used for communication, particularly during rut season.

Each year males grow a set of antlers in spring and shed them in late winter. The number of points in their rack is not an indication of age but rather of health and nutrition. Although normally shy, bucks can get dangerous in the fall during rut season and have been known to injure people and gore other deer to death.

A doe may produce a fawn their first year in spring or summer, and generally has twins after that. While the doe forages for food, fawns lie absolutely still, their white spots blending in with the dappled forest floor. Weaned at 8 to 10 weeks, young males stay with their mother for a year, and the females for two. A deer may live twenty years in captivity, but most do not survive beyond their third year in the wild.

Now common, even troublesome, it is hard to believe that just a hundred years ago white-tailed deer had been hunted almost to extinction. Their exploding populations can become a nuisance in the farmer's field and suburban yard, destroy the understory of woodlands, cause serious auto accidents, and serve as plentiful host in the life cycle of the of ticks that carries Lyme disease bacteria.



The Nature Center has a small herd of captive white-tailed deer, and of course those in the wild. On winter hikes look for their foraging trails and their tracks by the stream.