

White-Tailed Deer

The white-tailed deer is an animal of the woodlands, but extensive forests provide very poor habitat alone. It maintains highest numbers where woodlands are interspersed with farmland and grassy fields and cut over and second growth timber. Intensively farmed areas lacking an interspersed of woodlots and brushy areas will not maintain good deer populations. They can withstand some human disturbance and may become a pest in rural, suburban areas where adequate harvest is difficult.

Breeding season starts about October 15 and lasts until the end of December with the peak in mid-November. A mature buck can adequately serve five or more does. Gestation period is approximately 200 days with fawns born in late May or early June. Fawns will comprise 30 to 40 percent of the deer herd by hunting season. On good deer range a small percentage of the doe fawns will mate at six months and reproduce fawns when one year old. Under poor range conditions they will not produce young until two years old. Adult does usually produce twins, depending mainly on their health, which is influenced by range conditions. Ten well-fed, adult does will produce 16 to 21 fawns, whereas, 10 adult does in poor condition will rarely produce over 12 fawns.

Bucks grow a new set of antlers each summer, shedding the old ones after the breeding season in early winter. Antlers are usually eaten by mice and other animals and consequently are seldom found. Except in rare instances female deer do not grow antlers. Antler development is governed more by the physical condition of the animal than by the age. A healthy population in good habitat, where the carrying capacity is not exceeded, produces few spike bucks, and antlers generally tend to be large with numerous branches. When the population is larger than the habitat can adequately support, spike bucks are numerous and antlers are generally small.

The average size of the home range for a deer in Maryland is about one square mile and may cover less than 160 acres in quality habitat. The size of one's home range is in direct proportion to the abundance, distribution and quality of food, water and cover. Home ranges will overlap to some extent. Fawns will occupy the same home range as their mother until they become yearlings; then they will select a new area, usually close to their birthplace. Adult males will sometimes wander over a great distance during the rutting season, but return to their home range after the rut. Deer will leave their home range when pursued by man or other predators and return only when the danger has passed.

Daily movements of deer will shift with the changing seasons. During the summer when there is an abundance of green vegetation, deer will not move very far in a day. As cold weather approaches and green vegetation dies off, the daily movements will increase in search of nuts, browse, etc. which comprise their food supply. Only during long periods of severe cold and deep snow will deer concentrate into "yarding" areas. In Maryland, this situation only occurs in the western part of the state and then only for a couple of weeks in the hardest part of the winter.