

## **White-tailed deer**

### Introduction

The white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) is the most common of all of North America's large mammals. The deer is an herbivore, and is remarkably adaptable to a wide variety of environments and diets. It is best known for its tail, which it raises in a signal known as "flagging" in order to warn other deer about impending danger. It can be found in southeastern British Columbia - east of the Rocky Mountains, and as far north as Prince George.

### Characteristics

While the white-tailed deer derives its name from its distinctly white tail, the deer's throat, eyes, nose, and stomach are also coloured white. The coats of young white-tailed fawns are speckled white, which helps to camouflage them and protect them from predators. As adults, they shed their speckled coat and transform colour with the seasons, from a tan or reddish brown hue during the summer months to a grayish-brown one in winter. Male deer, or bucks, grow antlers, and tend to be heavier than female does – males normally weigh from 150-300 pounds, while females weigh between 90-200 pounds. Both bucks and does are "ruminants", having stomachs with four compartments which facilitate digestion of diverse types of foods. As a result, the white-tailed deer can adapt easily to different environments – a fact which may explain its incredibly broad distribution throughout many regions of the world.

### Lifecycle

The white-tailed deer has a lifespan of approximately six to fourteen years in captivity. The mating season for these deer is usually in November, or January or February, depending on their location. Females conceive one to three fawns, which are weaned at about six months old. Fawns may spend considerable amounts of time alone, and conceal themselves from predators by assuming a squatting position on the ground while their mothers leave them for periods to feed on their own. After about a year or two, fawns will leave their parents and mature into independent adults.

### Habitat

Deer of all kinds are typically perceived as inhabitants of forest environments. However, the white-tailed deer is a “generalist”, and can flexibly adapt to a wide variety of habitats, including open prairie, savanna woodlands, and sage communities. In British Columbia, many white-tailed deer thrive in agricultural land adjacent to the Northern Rockies, where coniferous trees have been clear-cut. When white-tailed deer do live in forests, they tend to prefer young, regenerating forests since it is difficult for them to obtain food in mature or climax forests, where buds are often inaccessible.

### Behavior

Deer are nocturnal animals, usually at their most active during the night. They are characteristically shy and reclusive, and often spend summer months in isolation. During the winter, large groups of deer tend to “yard”, or congregate in a single location, which is usually well protected by conifer foliage, and provides sufficient food supplies to ensure the survival of the yarding deer. This is done with a strategic intent, usually to establish a safe space where they can defend each other against predators. Interestingly, the deer do not frequently leave the location they have chosen to yard in, even if they are threatened by attacking predators. Like their habits and appearance, the white-tailed deer’s diet shifts with the seasons. During spring and summer, they feed on foliage, tree buds, nuts and green plants; during fall, they eat corn, acorns and other nuts; during winter, their diet is more restricted, normally consisting of needles of conifers and wood vegetation.

White-tailed deer communicate with each other in many ways, using sounds, scents, body language and markings to express themselves. Each animal can emit their own unique noises, and usually these vary depending on age and gender. For instance, fawns may bleat to their mothers, does may grunt maternally, and does and bucks often snort to each other to signal danger. Alarmed deer often stomp their hooves and snort in order to warn each other, or “flag”, by raising their tail and revealing the tail’s white underside. Flagging is also a common form of communication between does and fawns; mother deer raise their tails in order to help guide and direct fawns.

### Distribution

The white-tailed deer is the most widely distributed of all North America's large mammals. It can be found as far east as New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, and as far west as southeastern British Columbia. Commonly spotted east of the Rocky Mountains, the white-tailed deer has, in recent years, been pushing its distribution farther and farther north, owing to agricultural development near the Northern Rockies. Today it can be found as far north as Prince George, British Columbia.

### Status

According to the International Union for the Conservation of Nature, the white-tailed deer is ranked as an animal of "Least Concern", which means that it is not currently endangered or threatened. This is partly due to the deer's success at adapting to different environments, and also due to the fact that it has few natural predators.

### Threats facing the White-Tailed Deer

There are few major threats facing the white-tailed deer today. A century ago, the white-tailed deer was seriously threatened by such factors as commercial exploitation, unregulated hunting practices, and irresponsible land use decisions involving deforestation. However, since then, conservation ecologists and hunters have co-operated to ensure that commercial exploitation of the white-tailed deer became illegal and that conservation programs were introduced. Today, the white-tailed deer faces threats from several natural predators, including gray wolves, cougars, bobcats, lynxes, bears and coyotes. However, humans and dogs pose the most substantial threat to the white-tailed deer today. Because humans and deer often share habitats, as a result of rapidly developing urban and suburban settlements, deer face the risk of being struck by cars when crossing roads. Motor vehicle collisions involving deer frequently occur at night, when deer tend to be most active, and during rutting season. White-tailed deer become particularly easy prey for dogs during the winter, when ice and snow restrict their ability to move rapidly and freely. During winter, they are also weaker and more prone to falling ill from diseases or parasites such as lice, mites and roundworms. Another threat facing the deer comes not from an external source, but rather from the species itself: deer populations sometimes risk becoming too large for their environment, and exceeding the carrying capacity of their ecosystem. Deer may starve to death as a result, especially in urban or suburban areas where populations can become uncontrollable due to strict hunting regulations.

### What we can do to help

In order to help the white-tailed deer, people must be cautious when driving in regions which belong to the deer's range. Wildlife corridors, which are being created in some parts of the province to help wildlife cross roads and highways easier, may prove to be an ideal way for deer to thrive in environments closer to humans.

### Other Interesting Facts

→ Each year, hunters of the white-tailed deer spend millions of dollars on their sport and play an important role in the Canadian economy

→ White-tailed deer are great swimmers

→ They can run quickly and reach speeds of up to 60 km/hr

→ They can make vertical leaps of two and a half metres, and horizontal leaps of nine metres (almost as long as a school bus)

### Bibliography

#### Web Resources

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