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NORTHWEST WILDLIFE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Black-tailed Deer

Odocoileus hemionus



By Andrew Wong

Black-tailed deer are the most widely distributed members of the deer family. It is a popular game animal that resides in temperate coniferous forests along the west coast of North America. Although their habitat mainly consists of remote areas, they have ventured into parks and residential areas in the past with few large predators.

Characteristics

A medium-sized deer with a narrow black tipped tail. In summer, their coat is reddish brown or yellowish brown and changes to a gray colour in winter. Black-tailed deer have a dark brown forehead and a white face. Their throat patch, insides of legs, insides of ears, and rump patch are white. Their ears are large at about two third the length of their head. The average height of black-tailed deer ranges from 90 to 105cm. Their length ranges from 1.16 to 1.99m. Males weigh from 50-215kg (110-475lbs). Females' on average weigh 32-73kg (70-160lbs). Tracks look like narrow split hearts with the narrow end forward. Male tracks are 3.25" (80mm), females' tracks are 2.38" (60mm) long. Two year old bucks have small, two point antlers. Bucks that are three years old may have two, three, or four points on each antler. Older bucks have four, five, or more points.

Life Cycle

Black-tailed deer travel alone or in groups. The social system is made up of females that are related by maternal descent. Bucks are not related to clans of females. Mating occurs in late autumn through early winter. Gestation lasts for 6-7 months. Each female gives birth to 1-2 offspring from June to August. In autumn, bucks will display their dominance to compete over does. Bucks will engage in fights with rivals. Bucks are able to breed as yearlings, but older bucks will take part in most of the mating. Does start breeding as yearlings. Females will approach the largest bucks. A dominant buck will keep other bucks away from does until mating has occurred or until he is displaced by another buck. The mating season is called the rut. After this period, bucks will shed their antlers. Antlers are regrown from April to August. Does are responsible for raising fawns. Over 90% of does will give birth every year. Usually 45-70% of fawns die due to predators, hunting, or starvation. Few black-tailed deer live more than 8-10 years.

Habitat

Black-tailed deer have a range that extends from Southern Yukon and Northwest Territories along the west coast up to Southwestern North America. Old growth forests are important to their survival in British Columbia. The forests provide shelter and food that can be foraged. The old growth forests provide protection as black-tailed deer have difficulty moving in snow that is deeper than 30cm. In British Columbia, they remain at higher elevations until December. In Winter and Spring, black-tailed deer feed on red huckleberry, salal, deer fern, and lichens. From late Spring to Fall, they eat grasses, blackberry, fireweed, shrubs, and other plants.

Behaviour

The black-tailed deer has large ears that move continually. They are mainly active in the morning and evening. They will move further up and down to avoid heavy snows in mountainous areas. Herd of both sexes are formed in the winter but usually are not large. The most common social group is a doe with her two fawns. Does often fight when they encounter each other. Fighting makes groups space themselves out more widely so that enough food is available for does and their offspring. Bucks are often solitary but may group together before and after the rutting period. Bucks are polygamous and look for does in estrus. A doe most likely breeds with several males. Threats often prevent conflict from occurring between bucks. When conflict does arise, bucks will fight each other with antlers entangled and heads pushing against each other. Injuries are rare in fights, and the loser usually withdraws. Offspring are concealed during their first month after birth. Does will visit offspring regularly to nurse. Black-tailed deer are good swimmers.

Threats

Black-tailed deer are not an at-risk species in British Columbia. While their populations have remained resilient in the face of increasing human expansion, deer habitat has been destroyed in the parts of Southwest BC. They continue to lose habitat as a result of mining, hydro reservoirs, highways, and agricultural development. The major natural predators of black-tailed deer are mountain lions and wolves. Bobcats and bears are other predators. Coyotes are able to prey on juveniles. Many black-tailed deer are killed by trains and cars on roads. Humans often hunt this species of deer for its flesh or as a trophy.

What We Can Do To Help

- Preserve forest habitats. This can be facilitated by placing less demand on trees. Use paper responsibly without wasting it. Reuse and recycle whenever possible.
- Support wildlife management organizations that are trying to maintain black-tailed deer habitats.
- Leave fallen trees in wooded areas where they fall – a dead tree has more living organisms and wildlife in it than a live tree, and the ground needs the decaying material back to help nurture new trees.
- Do not participate in or encourage the hunting of black-tailed deer
- Support the provision of signs, fences, or other methods that can help prevent the thousands of black-tailed deer deaths on BC's roads and highways
- Donate and/or volunteer to help organizations like the Northwest Wildlife Preservation Society to educate youth about wildlife.

Other Interesting Facts

- Black-tailed deer have scent glands under their eyes that are used to mark territory
- Black-tailed deer syphon calcium from their bones to grow their antlers

Where & When to view the animal.

Black-tailed deer can be viewed in many locations in BC. In the Greater Vancouver area, they can be seen in areas along the North Shore. They can be found in areas like Cypress Provincial Park, Garibaldi Provincial Park, and Lynn Canyon Park. Black-tailed deer can be viewed throughout the year in BC. The best time to view fawns is during the Spring. The Fall is the ideal time to view males with antlers.

