



A publication by:

# NORTHWEST WILDLIFE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

## White-tailed Deer

*Odocoileus virginianus*



Photo Source: <https://randyroberts.wordpress.com/about/>

The white-tailed deer is a medium sized deer that is widely distributed across North America. This species of deer is named for the white underside of its tail, which is raised when a deer senses danger. White-tailed deer are herbivores that are well equipped to consume various types of plant foods. The deer will sprint at high speeds or leap at great heights in order to escape from predators. Due to hunting and human development, its natural predators have greatly declined in number. As a result, white-tailed deer populations have grown to levels that have had a detrimental impact on vegetation in many wildlife habitats.

### Characteristics

It is a small to medium size deer. Its dorsal colour will change seasonally from a reddish brown in the summer to a grayish brown in the winter. The belly, eye rings, nose band, throat, beneath the tail, insides of legs and insides of ears are white. Males have antlers that are shed from January to March. Black spots are found on the sides of their chin. A white-tailed deer's average height is 27-45" (68-114cm). Their average length is 6'2"-7' (1.88-2.13m). A male's weight ranges from 150-310lbs (68-141kg). Females weigh from 90-211lbs (41-96kg). They lack upper incisors. Tracks look like narrow, split hearts with two dots below. White-tailed deer have scent glands on all four feet, and on the outside and inside of each hind leg. Scents from the glands are for intraspecies communication. Fawns are mostly white and weigh between 1.5 and 2.5kg. White-tailed deer have good eyesight and hearing, but mainly rely on their sense of smell to detect danger. Young white-tailed deer have a reddish-brown coat with white spots.

### Life Cycle

Most white-tailed deer mate in their second year. Females may mate earlier. Bucks are polygamous. Mating occurs from October to December. Gestation lasts for about 6 and a half months. In her first year, a doe generally has one fawn. Two or more are born in subsequent years. Does are very protective of offspring. Females leave their offspring in a hiding place while looking for food. At about four weeks old, fawns start to follow their mothers while foraging. Fawns are nursed for eight to ten weeks. Males leave mothers after one year. Females usually stay with mothers for two years. Most white-tailed deer live about 2-3 years. Few will live past ten years.

## Habitat

White-tailed deer reside in a variety of habitats like farmlands, forests, brushy areas, wetlands, and dry deserts. Their range includes most of Southern Canada, and almost the entire mainland United States. It also extends further into Central America. White-tailed deer feed on vegetation in their habitat. Their stomachs allow them to incorporate various plant foods in their diet. They eat acorns, nuts, corn, twigs, buds of maple, birch, and conifers. In desert areas, white-tailed deer will feed on yucca, prickly pear cactus, and other shrubs. They feed mainly before dawn and late in the afternoon. In the summer, they usually reside in fields and meadows. In winter, they prefer living in coniferous forests that provide protection from the elements.

## Behaviour

White-tailed deer are very shy animals. They wave their tails when they are startled. They are very agile and can reach speeds of up to 30miles/hr. They do not migrate to a new habitat during the winter, but will avoid heavy snow. White-tailed deer tend to use the same paths when foraging. They are generally solitary. The basic social unit is a doe and her fawns. Bucks may form groups of two to four but will disband before the mating season. Rutting begins in September. Like other species of deer, male white-tailed deer will fight each other by clashing antlers to gain access to females. White-tailed deer are not usually vocal. They are good swimmers and will enter streams or lakes to escape predators. While does forage for food, fawns will withhold their feces and urine until their mother arrives. White-tailed deer mainly venture out at dawn or dusk.

## Threats

White-tailed deer are preyed on by wolves, bears, mountain lions, jaguars, coyotes, and humans. White-tailed deer are very common in their ranges and are the most numerous of large North American mammals. It is estimated that there are between 8 and 15 million in North America. At the turn of the century, many of their populations were decimated by hunting, but have now reached their highest numbers. The deer are commonly hunted for meat and sport.

## What We Can Do To Help

- The decline in populations of cougars, wolves, and other predators of the deer have allowed numbers of white-tailed deer to grow rapidly. This has led to white-tailed deer consuming more plant species than ecosystems can sustain. The current abundance of white-tailed deer can be lowered to more stable population levels. One way to achieve this is to facilitate the recovery of the white-tailed deer's natural predators who's numbers have declined exponentially across North America.
  - The re-introduction of predators has been met with resistance in multiple states in the U.S. The re-introduction of wolves into Yellowstone Park may be a model for future projects given that wolf populations have brought deer populations to stable levels. The presence of wolves has also benefited many other species and has contributed to a much healthier environment in the area.
- Continually minimize human impact on the environment. A healthy environment is needed for wildlife to flourish, and it is essential for there to be enough vegetation for white-tailed deer and other animal species. This can be done in various ways.
  - Use resources like electricity, oil, wood and other commodities responsibly. Demand for wood and other resources causes destruction of wildlife habitats. Less land available and suitable for wildlife to live in will amplify the white-tailed deers' overconsumption of plant species across North America.
  - Reuse and recycle when possible
  - Do not contribute to pollution by putting hazardous chemicals in the environment. Dispose of them in a safe manner
  - Forest management professionals may propose several methods like contraception and sterilization to control deer populations. The public can learn about these methods online or speak to staff in person to explore the merits of each method.
- Volunteer with or support organizations like the Northwest Wildlife Preservation Society which focus on educating the public about wildlife. Education about our environment can lead people to think about current problems in the environment and potentially reach solutions to problems.

## Other Interesting Facts

- White-tailed deer can sprint up to 30 miles (48 kilometers) per hour. They are able to leap as high as 10 feet (3 meters) and make horizontal leaps of up to 30 feet (9 meters).
- When sensing danger, the deer raise their tails which exposes the white underside of the tails. This behaviour is called flagging. It signals an alarm to other deer and helps fawns follow their mothers.
- The stomach of the white-tailed deer has four compartments. As a result, the deer can digest food more efficiently and feed on things that other mammals cannot digest.
- The spotted coat of fawns is a form of camouflage from predators.
- The white-tailed deer is the most common and most widely distributed of all of North America's large mammals.

## Where & When to view the animal

In BC, provincial parks in the Southeast region are best for viewing white-tailed deer. Purcell Wilderness Conservancy, Goat Range Provincial Park, Kokanee Glacier Provincial Park, and West Arm Provincial Park are good viewing locations for white-tailed deer. The deer can be viewed throughout the year in the above locations, but it will be more difficult to see them in winter. In winter, white-tailed deer will avoid high elevations.

# Bibliography

## ***Book Resources:***

Knopf, Alfred A. 1996 National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mammals ISBN: 0-679-44631-1

## ***Web Resources:***

Odocoileus Virginianus: white-tailed deer

[http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Odocoileus\\_virginianus/](http://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Odocoileus_virginianus/)

National Geographic has high quality photos of white-tailed deer and a map of their range.

<http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/white-tailed-deer/>

Canadian Geographic describes the physiology, behaviours, and range of white-tailed deer. It contains some interesting facts about the deer.

[http://www.canadiangeographic.ca/kids/animal-facts/white-tailed\\_deer.asp](http://www.canadiangeographic.ca/kids/animal-facts/white-tailed_deer.asp)

'Manage White-Tailed Deer to Protect Our Natural Heritage' discusses the detrimental effects of too many deer in the state of Virginia and possible actions to mitigate the problem

<http://vnps.org/manage-white-tailed-deer-to-protect-our-natural-heritage/>