

What Do We Know About the *Odocoileus Virginianus*?

Who among us doesn't enjoy casually watching White-tailed deer? The serenity of a doe with fawn, the excitement of viewing an approaching buck, or witnessing the rituals of the pecking order in feed plots attracts our attention and curiosity. Even if your view is from a blind with the intent of a seasonal harvest, the temptation to pause and observe is unyielding, with the primitive instinct of admiration and respect. And while we observe the most popular big game animal for modern-day Texas hunters, even seasoned outdoorsmen and women are inquisitive about the White-tailed Deer.

First of all, what's with that tail? Usually ten inches or more in length, the tail gives the white-tailed deer its common name. This tail, which is held erect when the animal is nervous or frightened, serves as a warning "flag" to other deer nearby. For most of us hunters, the sight of that tail disappearing into the distance is all-too familiar.

Whitetails have restricted home ranges. Studies in Texas have shown that most white-tails spend their entire lives within a mile and a half to three miles of their birth place, traveling farther only during the breeding seasons. An estimated 5.3 million white-tailed deer inhabit 252 of the 254 counties in Texas. (Read on to discover which two counties have no white-tailed deer).

Most white-tails we see out in the open are young, but a deer can live for about ten years in the wild if it avoids diseases, parasites, accidents, predators, and hunters. However, by the time it reaches eight or nine years of age, its teeth may be worn to the gumline, and some may be missing. Old deer without adequate teeth cannot chew well, especially the less desirable food that must be eaten when range conditions are poor. In captivity under controlled conditions, a deer can live for fifteen to twenty years.

Speaking of food, what's for dinner? Browse, forbs, grass, and mast, that's what. Woody vegetation is a basic habitat requirement, and deer eat mostly browse (leaves, twigs, young shoots of woody plants, and vines) and forbs (weeds and other broadleaf flowering plants). They eat very little grass, and usually only when it is green and tender. While acorns ("mast") can be poisonous to livestock, they are an important food for deer when they are available.

Everyone belongs to the "We Love Fawns" Club, and when we see double, we think it is a rarity. Think again! During the first few months of life a fawn usually remains hidden, camouflaged by its spotted coat, and does not wander far from the spot where it was born. The fawn's spotted coat is shed three or four months after birth. Deer have a very high reproductive potential, and most mature females ("does") will breed each year, giving birth seven months later. Most does, when they reach about one and a half years of age, give birth to a single fawn. From then on, if enough food is available, the doe will have twin fawns each year until she is six or seven years old.

Fawns are cute, but we all know it's all about the trophy buck's rack, right?

A deer's antlers are solid bone and are grown only by members of the deer family. Normally only the males grow them; however, female reindeer and caribous are exceptions. White-tailed males primarily use their antlers for fighting each other during the breeding season. The impressive size of some antlers becomes even more amazing when we discover that antlers are shed each year after breeding season and must be replaced with a new set

grown the following year. Shedding takes place from mid-January to mid-April, but most mature bucks in good physical condition have dropped their antlers by the end of February. Young bucks usually are a little slower. Once a buck is full-grown, he will normally establish a pattern of dropping his antlers at the same time each year and growing them back over a three-month period.

What about spikes, an often-misunderstood buck in its youth?

The harvest of spike-antlered bucks is another important aspect of any management program. Spike-antlered bucks are the result of inadequate nutrition, age, and genetics, or combination of these factors. Spikes are generally found in the yearling or 1 ½ year old age class; however, yearling bucks can produce 4 to 8 points if nutrition is adequate. For nutrition to be adequate, deer numbers must be in balance with the habitat, competition with livestock must be minimal, and rainfall adequate. Additionally, research has shown that on average, spike-antlered yearling bucks will remain inferior to fork-antlered yearling bucks when these two groups reach maturity.

In our curiosity about white-tails, we are always looking for rare occurrences. There is no greater rarity in Texas than the Melanistic Whitetails.

Melanistic whitetails are a true gem of whitetail color morphs. With very low odds for this genetic mutation and low reported harvest, viewing a wild melanistic whitetail is a true rarity, even for deer biologists who work where they are most prevalent.

Melanistic deer lack distinct variations in color such as brown or white pelage. Most melanistic whitetails are black across their entire body with the exception of the hair around the ventral area under the tail.

Melanism is a random genetic anomaly. Changes in the coat color of mammals are believed to be mutations in the melanocortin 1 receptor gene (MC1R). Melanistic and normal whitetails do coexist in the same area.

Other than coat color, there is no physical difference between melanistic and normal whitetails. Melanistic whitetails are safe to consume if harvested, and melanism is not a threat to deer populations, even where it occurs more frequently. They are certainly a wonder of the whitetail woods, and if you are fortunate enough to see one, count yourself extremely lucky!

So why do we make such a fuss about deer season anyway? White-tailed deer are important to the state's economy with deer hunting generating an estimated \$1.2 billion in economic output. The only two counties in Texas without white-tails and a hunting season are El Paso and Hudspeth counties.

The most heavily populated area of the state by far is the Edwards Plateau and the Texas Hill Country where there can be as many as 293 deer per 1,000 acres. The Brush Country of South Texas is arguably the best hunting area for trophy white-tail bucks. Llano is known as the "White-tail Capital of Texas" because of the number of deer per acre, the highest density in the state. Native Americans and Spanish explorers identified the Llano Basin as an area with bountiful white-tails. Later, European settlers relied upon the basin's abundant wildlife for survival.

Now we know a bit more about our native *Odocoileus Virginianus*.

Sources: Texas Parks and Wildlife Department; Texas A&M AgriLife Extension; The Houston Chronicle; Realtree; National Deer Association.