



White-Tailed Deer

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Photo by Ken Taylor

White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)

No wild animal in North Carolina is as recognizable as the white-tailed deer. Whether a mature buck with splendid antlers, a graceful doe, or a spotted fawn running with its mother, the white-tailed deer is one of the most popular of animals.

Description

A deer's coat is usually a tannish brown, or some shade of brown, ranging almost to gray. It usually has a white patch on its neck and large prominent ears. Its eyes are circled with white and a white band rings the muzzle. The belly is white, with white running down the inside of the legs. The tail, about 9 to 11 inches long, is mostly brown although the underside is all white. The hooves have two toes covered with a hard fingernail-like material, and another toe, called the dew claw, appears about 3 inches high on the back of each leg.

Buck deer grow antlers, not horns. Antelopes grow horns, as do buffalo and goats. Horns are permanent parts of a skull that grow continuously, while buck deer drop their antlers each year. Antlers range in size from little spikes that protrude from the skin, to larger "racks" that branch out to a variable number of points. An average mature buck typically has eight or more points. Antler size depends on the age of the buck, its nutrition, and its genetics.

While deer can run up to 35 or 40 miles per hour, they cannot run 35+ miles per hour for very long. They are also excellent swimmers and strong jumpers. To protect themselves, deer rely mainly on their strong sense of smell. They also have good hearing, as well as eyesight that enables them to easily detect movement, even in low-light conditions. Deer feed mostly in the early morning and at twilight, but they may also feed at any other time of the day.

History and Status

The white-tailed deer population in North Carolina has made a dramatic turnaround. Deer were plentiful when European settlers first arrived, but the animals were hunted extensively for meat and hide with no thought of conservation or management. Within 100 years, deer were threatened with extirpation in North Carolina, as well as in the entire United States. Deer populations today have risen to approximately one million deer in North Carolina.

For more information on this species, including status and any applicable regulations, visit www.ncwildlife.org/deer.

The white-tailed deer is one of the most popular animals in the country.

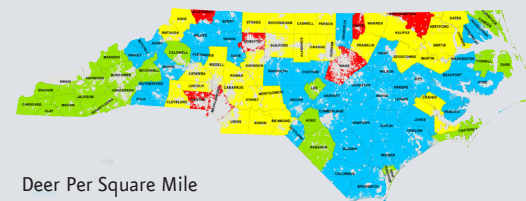


Photo by Elaine Herring

Range and Distribution

In the United States, white-tailed deer are found in all 48 contiguous states. Every county in North Carolina has deer, although they are distributed unevenly, with large numbers in some areas of the Upper Coastal Plain and Piedmont and fewer deer in the Mountain Region.

2015 North Carolina White-Tailed Deer Density



Deer Per Square Mile

- less than 15
- 15-29
- 30-44
- 45 and greater

No Density Estimate

Where harvest data are not available to produce density estimates because hunting is limited or prohibited; includes federal and state parks, municipal boundaries, water bodies and human density greater than 1 person per 2 acres.

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Habitats & Habits

Deer are so adaptable that they are found in almost any type of habitat. They like creek and river bottoms, oak ridges, pine forests, farmlands, or any other type of habitat that offers food, water, and cover. They adapt well to suburban sprawl. In autumn, deer fatten up for the breeding season or “rut”, which peaks from early October on the Coast, to early December in the Mountains. Around the breeding season, a buck rubs its antlers on trees and limbs, scrapes depressions in the ground, and deposits scent as a form of communicating with other deer. Around the middle of January and early February, the bucks’ antlers drop, and in April and May they begin to grow again.

Human Interactions

White-tailed deer are often seen feeding in fields, on the side of the road, and are becoming increasingly common in residential areas. When properly managed, hunting does not hurt deer populations and is a helpful management tool for keeping deer from becoming overpopulated. Before European settlers arrived, deer populations were controlled by year-round hunting by Native Americans and large predators like cougars and wolves. Without some control, deer populations grow larger than their habitat can support, causing mass starvation and disease in deer herds, as well as severe crop depredation and overgrazing of habitat.

People may occasionally find fawns, but it is important that people do not approach, touch, feed, or move them. Though the fawn may look very much alone, most likely they are not abandoned. Whitetails are a “hider” species, which means the female will hide her fawn in vegetation while she feeds. Lacking scent, fawns are well-camouflaged which is effective for avoiding detection by predators. The doe will return to the fawn several times a day to nurse and clean it, staying only a few minutes each time before leaving again to seek food. The fawn is also well-equipped to protect itself. By the time a fawn is 5 days old, it can outrun a human.

For More Information

Elman, R. 1976. All about deer hunting in America. Winchester Press.
Hewitt, D. 2011. Biology and management of white-tailed deer. CRC Press.
Madson, J. The white-tailed deer. Olin Matheson Chemical Corporation.
Osborne, S. The white-tailed deer in North Carolina. N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.
Rue, L. L. III. 1978. The deer of North America. Grolier Book Clubs, Inc., Outdoor Life.

Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Mammalia
Order: Artiodactyla

Average Size

Length: about 3 ft.
Height: about 3 ft. at the shoulder
Weight: buck 100-200+ lbs; doe 80-160 lbs.

Food

Green leaves, succulent plants, tender woody vegetation, grasses, berries, acorns, and agricultural crops.

Breeding/Young

Male deer, called bucks, will mate with several female deer. Female deer, called does, may mate with one or more males. Mating occurs in autumn, and females breed every year. After a gestation period of 196 days, 1-3 fawns are typically born in May or June and weaned at 4 months. Fawns will stay with the doe for the first year, then yearling bucks leave. Yearling does may stay and form family units. Some does breed as fawns, although most begin breeding at 1.5 years-of-age.

Life Expectancy

Typically, 2-5 years for bucks and 3-6 years for does in the wild. Age is determined by examining teeth in the lower jaw bone.



Fawn (Photo by Jeff Hall)

Credits

Written by Chris Hartigan, Scott Osborne, Jonathan Shaw, and Evin Stanford, NCWRC; updated 2017.