

# WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

## INFORMATIONAL SERIES

### WHITE-TAILED DEER

*Odocoileus virginianus*



**Habitat:** Field and forest edges, woodlands with an understory of herbaceous vegetation.

**Weight:** Males: 150 pounds (average); heavier weights are not uncommon; females: average 110 pounds.

**Length:** 71 inches; 39 inches high at the shoulder. Males are generally larger than females.

**Food:** Spring/summer: grasses and forbs; fall: acorns, other mast items, and apples; winter: twigs and buds from a wide variety of hardwood trees and leaves from conifer trees such as white pine and hemlock.

**Identification:** The white-tailed deer is a stately, graceful animal distinguished by conspicuous ears, long legs, and narrow, pointed hooves. Adult males have spreading, branching antlers. The most noticeable feature is the tail, which is brown above and white underneath. When the animal is alarmed, the tail is raised high, revealing a white "flag" as the deer bounds off through the woods.

White-tailed deer vary seasonally in coloration. Their summer coat is reddish-brown to tan and is composed of short, thin hairs. The winter coat is grayish-brown to gray, with long, thick hairs. Fawns are reddish-brown with white spots, which they lose when they are three to four months old, usually by the end of August in Connecticut.

**Range:** White-tailed deer are found over most of southern Canada and the United States (except for most of California, Nevada, and Utah) and south to Panama.

**Reproduction:** The mating or rutting season starts in late October and extends through early January. In

Connecticut, the peak of the rutting season is the last two weeks in November. Fawns, weighing from four to eight pounds, are usually born in June. They remain under the female's care through September, when they are weaned. The number of young born ranges from one to four, depending upon the age and condition of the doe. In Connecticut, twins are common and triplets and quadruplets have been recorded. Female fawns born early in spring have the potential to breed by the following fall.

**History in Connecticut:** Due to over-harvesting for venison and deerskins, market hunting, and a general loss of deer habitat caused by extensive clearing of the land for farming, white-tailed deer were uncommon in Connecticut from 1700 to approximately 1900. The numerous laws enacted during this period to protect the dwindling deer resource, plus the improvement in deer habitat as farms were abandoned, contributed to a slow but steady rebound in deer numbers. In 1907, legislation

was passed allowing landowners to shoot deer causing crop damage on their land. Since then, harvest regulations have been gradually liberalized to deal with the growing herd and increasing deer damage problems. In 1974, Connecticut passed the Deer Management Act and, in 1975, held its first deer firearms hunting season, changing the status of white-tailed deer from agricultural nuisance to valuable game animal. The deer population continues to increase, as deer benefit from man's land use activities, evidenced by their adaptation to manicured suburban environments and the clearing of forests for timber harvest and cordwood cutting.

**Interesting Facts:** Male white-tailed deer grow and shed antlers annually. The antlers begin to grow in April or May. They are soft and covered with a sensitive tissue known as velvet. By fall, the antlers harden; the deer scrape them against saplings to remove the velvet in preparation for the rut. Antlers are used in sparring during the mating season. They are shed from mid-December to late-January. Antler size is determined by age, genetics, and nutritional value of the deer's diet.

Frequently, well-meaning people find a fawn alone in the woods and bring it home without realizing that the doe was nearby all the time. To divert the attention of predators, female deer only visit their fawns three or four times a day, for about 15 minutes per visit, in order to feed them. Not only is removing a healthy fawn from the wild illegal, but it also reduces the animal's chances of survival. To assist a fawn that has definitely been abandoned or injured, contact the Wildlife Division for the name of a licensed rehabilitator in your area. These trained volunteers are the only people who can legally rehabilitate wildlife in the state.

**Management of Nuisances:** Nuisance deer can be controlled using a number of methods, such as fencing, repellents, and preventive measures.

**Fencing:** Electric high-tensile wire fences such as the 7-strand slant wire, the 6-wire vertical fence, and others have been designed to protect crops from deer damage. Spacing between wires should be about eight to 10 inches and any brush around the fence should be cleared away. The type of fence to construct depends on such factors as terrain, vegetation, location, and deer density. For more detailed information on electric fences, contact the Wildlife Division.

Woven-wire fences may also be used to keep deer out of an area, and cattle fencing or chicken wire fences will

work if constructed eight to 10 feet high. Wire strands strung above the woven wire can add more height if desired. Wire mesh fences may be erected around individual ornamentals or other plants you might wish to protect from deer browsing.

**Repellents:** The use of repellents can be costly because they must be re-applied following rain. In areas of high deer density and limited food resources, repellents have little value. Home remedies such as bone meal or human hair tied in sacks hung from trees have been used with limited success. Soap has recently become a popular home remedy in northeast orchards. Taste and odor repellents have been used with varying degrees of success.

**Preventive Measures:** Plant high-value crops away from woods, shrub rows, or other deer cover. Ornamentals that are unpalatable to deer should be planted in areas subject to deer damage. Persimmon, lilac, boxwood, jasmine, holly, pepper tree, wax myrtle, century plant, and narcissus are just a few of the plants that can be considered.

**Population Reduction:** Farmers who are experiencing deer damage problems would be wise to encourage hunting on their property during the regulated deer seasons. The only practical way to control free-ranging deer herds in the state is by harvesting animals each year to help curb population expansion and maintain the deer herd at a level compatible with the habitat and farming interests.

**Population Management:** Because deer have a high reproductive potential and few natural predators, deer populations have the potential to increase rapidly. In the absence of significant mortality, deer populations can double in size in two years. High deer populations can significantly alter forested habitats reducing plant diversity and habitat suitability for other wildlife species. In addition, deer can impact flower and vegetable gardens, landscape plantings, and pose a threat to motorists on Connecticut roadways. The Wildlife Division recommends the use of regulated and controlled hunts to effectively and efficiently reduce and maintain deer populations in balance with cultural and habitat carrying capacities.

For more information on crop damage and white-tailed deer control, contact the Wildlife Division.



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