



# White-Tailed Deer

## North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



### 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.

The five species of deer in North America are: the mule deer, white-tailed deer, elk, caribou and moose. The white-tailed deer is prevalent in North Carolina, and the National Park Service has released elk in the mountains.

#### 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.

Deer are not long-distance runners, but they can run up to 35 or 40 miles per hour. They are also excellent swimmers and strong jumpers. To protect themselves, deer rely mainly on their strong sense of smell, in addition to their keen eyesight and good hearing. Deer feed mostly in the early morning and at twilight, but they may also feed at any other time of the day.

The white-tailed deer is a herbivorous animal. It will eat many green-leaved succulent plants and the tender new growths of stems and fruits. One of their most important food sources is acorns. White-tailed deer also forage on a variety of agricultural crops.

#### 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 1.25 million deer in North Carolina.

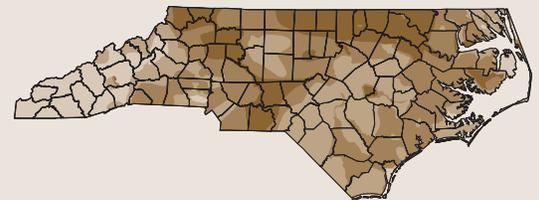
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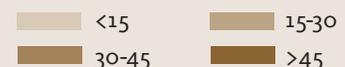
#### Range and Distribution

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 Coastal Plain and Piedmont and fewer deer in the Mountain Region.

#### Range Map



Population density per square mile



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## Habitat and 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.” During mid-October and into November, bucks establish hierarchies among themselves leading up to mating with does. A buck rubs its antlers on trees and limbs, scrapes depressions in the ground and deposits scent to let other deer know its territory. After the breeding season, bucks and does socialize less and the bucks become secretive again. Around the middle of January and early February, the bucks’ antlers drop and in April and May they begin to grow again. The fawns are born in May or June.



## People Interactions

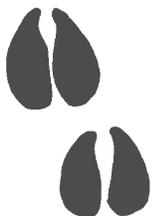
White-tailed deer are often seen at night feeding in fields or on the side of the road. Deer are also the most popular game animal in the state. When properly managed, hunting does not hurt deer populations and is actually a helpful management tool for keeping deer from becoming overpopulated. Before 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.

## Tracks

Right Hind  
(3 inches)



Right Front  
(2 1/2 inches)



## Wild Facts

### Classification

Class: Mammalia  
Order: Artiodactyla

### Average Size

Length: about 3 ft.  
Height: about 36 in. at the shoulder  
Weight: buck 100-200+ lbs;  
doe 80-160 lbs.

### Food

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

### Breeding

Male: buck. Female: doe.  
Promiscuous; males mate with several females and females may mate with one or more males. Mating occurs in autumn. Females breed every year. Gestation period is 196 days.

### Young

Fawns: litter size of 1-3 fawns. Weaned at 4 months. Stay with doe for first year, then yearling bucks leave. Yearling does may stay and form family units, although most yearling does give birth.

### Life Expectancy

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

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Wildlife Profiles—North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission



## NCWRC Interaction: How You Can Help

The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission is imploring people not to approach, touch, feed or move white-tailed fawns. Though the tiny baby deer 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 during the first two or three weeks of its life as 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. If a fawn is in obvious danger, contact the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission at (919) 707-0040 for the telephone number of a local, permitted fawn rehabilitator. It is illegal to remove a fawn from the wild.

## Q&A

### 1. How many species of deer are there in North America?

The mule deer, white-tailed deer, elk, caribou and moose. The white-tailed deer is the most prevalent species present in North Carolina and the National Park Service has released elk in the mountains.

### 2. Do buck deer grow horns or antlers?

They grow antlers. Antelope 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.

### 3. Why are there so many deer in North Carolina?

Once threatened with extinction, white-tailed deer populations have been restored thanks to sound game management. Deer are so adaptable that they are found in almost any type of habitat. They like creek and river bottoms, oak ridges, pine forests and farmlands. They also adapt well to suburban sprawl.

### 4. Why is wildlife management needed?

Deer are the most popular game animal in the state. When properly managed, hunting does not hurt deer populations and is actually a helpful management tool for keeping deer from becoming overpopulated. 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.

## Links

To see a video of white-tailed deer, go to [www.fcps.edu/islandcreekes/ecology/white-tailed\\_deer.htm](http://www.fcps.edu/islandcreekes/ecology/white-tailed_deer.htm).

## References

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Osborne, Scott. *The White-tailed Deer in North Carolina* (N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission).  
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## Credits

Written by Chris Hartigan and Scott Osborne; updated by Evin Stanford, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, June 2009.

Produced by the Division of Conservation Education, Cay Cross—Editor, Carla Osborne—Designer.

Illustrated by J. T. Newman. Photos by NCWRC.

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