



By fall, does form larger groups including fawns born that year. p/c Cindy Smith

# Seasonal Behaviors of the White Tailed Deer

by Education and Visitor Center Services Coordinator Kim Compton

Deer are interesting animals that change their activity and behaviors throughout the year. They act, look and feed differently depending on the season. As you explore your local conservation areas, you may notice some changes in both the appearance and behavior of our local populations of White tailed deer.

During the summer, several deer gathering, feeding or traveling together can be seen in open fields. White-tailed deer are herbivores. They feed on forbs, leaves, fruits, twigs, tender succulent grasses and lichens. Bucks will hang together in their “bachelor groups,” while the does that just stayed with and cared for their fawns throughout the spring, will join larger groups in the late summer months. Those same fawns now no longer look much different from their mother as their spots have faded, will stay with their mother for a whole year. During summer, the antlers of a male deer or buck look fuzzy from being covered in a “velvet skin” that carries nutrient-rich blood for growing antlers. By August antlers will reach their full potential.



Antlers covered in 'velvet-skin'. p/c Cindy Smith

As deer prepare for the cooler months of fall and mating season they go through quite a few changes. The color of the coats of all the deer will begin to change in the fall from a lighter reddish brown to a grayer or darker brown. To prepare for a lack of green grazing, deer change their diet. In agricultural regions, White-tailed deer may feed heavily upon corn, soy beans and alfalfa. You may also start seeing deer more often in the woods than in the open field, as they feed on fattier foods, like acorns and nuts to “bulk up”.

As fall progresses and there is less daylight hours and fewer leaves on the trees, deer shift their from movement from daylight hours to dusk, dawn and nighttime hours, and travel on more open night trails than covered daytime trails.

Bucks that have been growing antlers all summer long begin to lose the fuzzy protective “velvet” covering. Velvet is rich with blood vessels to nourish the growing bone but is no longer



Deer rub.  
p/c Joseph OBrien, USDA Forest Service,  
Bugwood.org

necessary after a buck's antlers are full grown. You may see bucks with what appear to be clumps of fur hanging from their antlers as they shed their velvet. Look for deer rubs—trees that have had their bark rubbed off by a deer trying to hasten the shedding process and get the itchy fur off their antlers.

Late fall is time for the rut, or mating season. Bucks that once hung in bachelor groups become solitary. Bucks will fight each other with their antlers to prove which is more suitable for the does. Bucks also begin to get much more aggressive in general due to the influx of hormones. Be cautious in the fall and do not approach any buck that appears to be unafraid. Otherwise deer are not generally dangerous and you should have nothing to worry about on your hikes.

Come winter, deer alter their behavior and diet again to survive often harsh cold temperatures. A deer's winter coat is a short, dense undercoat of woolly fur, topped off with stiff, hollow, dark guard hairs that provide an extra layer of warmth. The woolly underfur provides excellent insulation and heat retention. The hollow outer hairs trap body heat that might escape the underfur. As it gets colder deer are generally less active, sometimes dropping their metabolism by half, which allows them to save energy and eat less. During the winters White-tailed deer depend on browsing the twigs and buds of woody shrubs and trees while the supply of higher quality food is scarce. Deer may physically



hunker down, particularly during extreme winter weather and not move or eat—and rely on their fat stores. If forage was good all fall, does go into the winter with large fat reserves, extremely important because they are carrying next spring's crop of fawns.

Blending in while hunkered down and saving energy. p/c Cindy Smith

# Oh Deer! Trivia & Fun Facts

Depending on where you live, chances of seeing a white-tailed deer is high. They are common in the wild, but can also be seen crossing the road or even sighted in your back yard. As seasons change in many ways, so do the deer that live in McHenry County. Check out the activities below and put your deer knowledge to the test! Refer back to the Seasonal Sightings page for clues.

## Deer Trivia

- 1) When male deer start to show dominance with each other, this mating season is called \_\_\_\_\_.
- 2) A baby deer is called a \_\_\_\_\_.
- 3) Male deer grow \_\_\_\_\_ on their antlers each year.
- 4) True or False: As the seasons change, deer fur coats change color.
- 5) True or False: Baby deer will stay with their mother only for a month after they are born.
- 6) A female deer is called a \_\_\_\_\_.
- 7) Most deer are born with \_\_\_\_\_ on their coats. Those markings help the baby \_\_\_\_\_ or hide in the tall grass.
- 8) Deer are considered \_\_\_\_\_ because they mainly eat grass and plants.
- 9) A male deer are called a \_\_\_\_\_.
- 10) Deer gathering in a big group is called a \_\_\_\_\_.



Answer Key: 1-rut; 2-fawn; 3-velvet; 4-true; 5-false; 6-deer; 7-spots/camouflage; 8-herbivores; 9-buck; 10-herd.

## Go explore. How many can you find?



A deer trail going off of the main hiking trail



Deer tracks



Deer scat  
(deer droppings look like coco puffs)



Deer rubs on a tree  
(look for wearing on tree bark)



Deer fur  
(may be caught on bushes or fences)



Deer browse  
(where deer ate edges of shrubs)

**Oh Dear Said The Deer**  
by Sigal Adler

**White-Tailed Deer**  
by Kate Marsico

**The Deer Watch**  
by Pat Lowery Collins



### DID YOU KNOW? White tail deer...

- ...are the largest animals found in Illinois.
- ...can jump over fences 6-9 feet high.
- ...can jump horizontal distances up to 30 feet.
- ...can reach running speeds up to 30 mph.
- ...are good swimmers and will cross lakes and rivers, and can swim as fast as 12 mph.