



Department of Planning and Natural Resources
Division of Fish and Wildlife
U.S.V.I. Animal Fact Sheet #11



White Tailed Deer

Odocoileus virginianus



Classification

Kingdom	Animalia
Phylum	Chordata
Subphylum	Vertebrata
Class	Mammalia
Order	Artiodactyla
Family	Cervidae
Genus	<i>Odocoileus</i>
species	<i>virginianus</i>

Identification Characteristics

- ◆ Only deer in the USVI
- ◆ Small two toed prints
- ◆ Skull is similar to a cow, but much smaller.

General Description

The White-tailed Deer, *Odocoileus virginianus*, gets its name from the underside of its tail, which is bright white and exposed when it lifts its tail high in the air while running. The deer's body color varies geographically and seasonally, but is usually a soft reddish tan or yellowish brown with white undersides. The sexes are generally alike in color although older bucks (males) may become darker. The bucks grow antlers that are shed annually. The smaller fawns are speckled with white.

White-tailed deer vary greatly in size, averaging larger and heavier in northern latitudes where the reduced body surface to volume ratio helps prevent heat loss. Their weight varies from 300 pounds in the north to 50 pounds in the Florida Keys. The height and width range from 24 to 40 inches in height and 48 to 95 inches in length. Our local bucks weigh about 90 to 110 pounds and the smaller does weigh 70 to 90 pounds.

Distribution

RANGE – White-tailed Deer range from eastern North America southward through Central

America to northern South America. They are thought to have been introduced to the Virgin Islands from the southern USA in 1790 or possibly earlier. The deer are noted for having a small home range, which has prevented them from becoming exterminated in many places. In the Northern Virgin Islands, deer swim among the smaller offshore cays and the main islands of St. Thomas and St. John. Their preferred habitat comprises rolling, semiopen country interspersed with heavier woodlands into which they flee from enemies. They readily adapt to areas near human habitation and activity, and quickly learn to distinguish the sounds and signals of friends and foes. Although the large eyes of a deer are adapted to twilight, their sense of hearing and smell are even more acute.

Natural History

FOOD/DIET- White tailed deer browse mainly on the leaves, twigs and fruits of vegetables, herbs, bushes and trees. Foraging usually occurs during the twilight of early morning or late evening. Grass is eaten only when there is a scarcity of other foods. Except during periods of severe drought, deer seldom face a shortage of

food and can tolerate dry habitats. Deer can be very destructive to cultivated plants. Management measures may be required at times to reduce the damage incurred on private property.

Small amounts of salt are essential for development and growth, and are readily obtained from salt ponds and “licks.”

REPRODUCTION - In temperate climates reproduction is highly seasonal. Mating is timed so that the fawns are born in early summer when the food supply is optimal. In the tropics, reproduction is less seasonal and tied to patterns of precipitation. Although fawns have been observed every month of the year in St. Croix, the rutting (mating) season generally begins in May and June, after the wet season commences, and runs through September. The gestation period of the doe runs from 205 to 212 days, so fawning commences in November and continues into February. Yearling and two-year-old does having their first young generally have only one fawn. Providing adequate food availability, a mature doe (three years old) has a pair of fawns every year. Food availability is the driving factor that decides how many offspring will be born in the following year.

Deer do not make nests. When a doe is ready to give birth, she chooses a safe place in heavy brush, high grass or a cane field where the fawns remain until they are well developed. Unlike sheep or goats, which huddle together, the fawns are always separated by a short distance. Fawns weigh about 3 to 3-1/2 pounds at birth. They are generally a brightly colored bay or reddish yellow, and spotted with white, which fades away at about four months. Combined with having very little or no scent, they are well hidden from possible predators. Mothers rarely stray far from the fawns, so **please do not “rescue” abandoned fawns.** The mother is usually nearby and is waiting until it is safe to come back. The mother visits them at least half a dozen times a day. Usually she rests some distance from them, apparently to reduce the risk of saturating them with her own body odor, yet close enough to hear any squeak they might make. At night she may rest with them to keep them warm.

Deer may be extremely prolific. When protected within a suitable habitat, there can be a rapid increase in population. Under the most favorable circumstances, deer populations may

increase by as much as 25 to 30 percent of their number per year.

Only the males exhibit antlers, which are shed annually, during September-November. New antlers are soft and sensitive, and are susceptible to damage. When antlers mature, at about six months, they are covered with a hairy skin referred to as “velvet.” To polish the antlers for fighting and rutting, the velvet is scraped off against small trees which are often damaged.

THREATS – Deer have no natural predators in the Virgin Islands, however they are sometimes hunted by humans, especially in the past (hunting deer is now illegal); attacked by dogs; and are occasionally struck by vehicles. They can host ticks that carry cattle fever.

Deer hooves and antlers can be very sharp and cause injury to others. They are also big enough to cause serious damage to you or your car if you accidentally hit one. Please drive with caution when in areas with a lot of deer especially during the fall rutting season.

What you can do to HELP

1. **DO NOT “RESCUE” ABANDONED FAWNS.** The mother is usually nearby and is merely waiting until it is safe to come back.
2. Deer hooves and antlers can be very sharp and can seriously injure to you if you try and assist an injured animal. Please call your local animal shelter for assistance.
3. Remember it is illegal to take, catch, possess, injure, harass, or kill any indigenous species. The only exceptions are for people holding valid permits from the Division of Fish and Wildlife. It is currently illegal to hunt deer in the Virgin Islands.
4. For more information on this and other animals in the Virgin Islands, please visit our website at:

www.vifishandwildlife.com

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