

Virginia White-Tailed Deer

The white-tailed deer is one of the most interesting animals in North America. Because of its importance as a big-game animal, the white-tailed deer is intensively studied throughout its range. A great deal is known about the biology of the deer, yet there is much to learn.

Breeding

Approximately 95 percent of the deer in north Mississippi breed between December 10 and January 6. In south Mississippi, deer breed 3 weeks to a month later. About 95 percent of the does in south Mississippi breed between December 27 and February 4.

The gestation period in deer varies from 195 days to 212 days, with an average of 202 days. Deer breed once a year. A doe may give birth to one, two, or three fawns, and about one-half of the does in Mississippi produce two fawns a year. Most Mississippi does do not breed until they are 1½ years old.

Many hunters believe that old does do not breed, but researchers have found this to be untrue. A deer in the wild seldom lives more than 10 years. By the time it is 10 years old, its teeth are practically worn to the gum line. Wildlife biologists have collected 7-, 8-, 9-, and 10-year old does that were carrying young. Does in Mississippi breed and produce offspring as long as they live.

Another common belief among hunters is that the buck comes in "heat," which is untrue. The adult doe experiences three or possibly four "heat" periods each year, beginning in December. The periods of "heat" last about 24 to 36 hours, and they occur 28 days apart.

Fawning

In north Mississippi, most fawns are born between June 22 and July 22. In south Mississippi, most does give birth between July 17 and August 24. After birth, fawns remain hidden near their birthplace for 2 weeks or more. By the time it is 1 month old, the young fawn may follow his mother. Even then, they begin to nibble on young tender shoots of vegetation. Fawns continue to nurse until they are 3, 4, or even 5 months old, but are able to survive and develop normally if orphaned at 2 months of age.

"Lost fawns" picked up by people in late summer are not really lost. They are simply hidden while the mother browses or rests nearby. Never pick up young fawns to tame as pets.

The buck takes no interest in family responsibilities. He leaves rearing of the young entirely to the doe. Male fawns follow their mother about 1 year. Female fawns usually follow the mother 2 years. Male fawns average 7½ pounds at birth, and female fawns average 6 pounds. Fawns lose their spotted coats when they are about 4 months old.

Food Habits

A deer's diet is chiefly tender shoots, twigs, and leaves (called browse), a wide assortment of herbaceous foodstuffs, mast, and certain fruits. Deer definitely prefer some plants over others. Some preferred deer food plants are listed in [Table 1](#), and [Table 2](#) lists plants Mississippi deer do not seem to prefer.

Deer like acorns, pecans, pods of the honey locust tree, wild grapes, persimmons, and a number of agricultural crops. It is important that the deer manager have a thorough knowledge of plants because the presence or absence of certain key plants is one of the methods used to evaluate deer range.

In Mississippi, deer feed mostly during the late afternoon and night. They spend the day bedded down in some suitable site chewing their cuds, resting, or sleeping. In areas not frequented by humans, deer may feed during daylight hours. An adult deer requires 5 to 10 pounds of green forage each day, depending on body size and season.

Table 1. Some plants PREFERRED by Mississippi deer

Blackberries	Red Maple
Dewberries	Sweetbay
French Mulberry	Soybeans
Greenbriers	Sweetleaf
Hackberry	Titi
Honeysuckle	Trumpet - Creeper
Peas	Willow
Pokeweed	Yellow Poplar
Ragweed	Yellow Jasmine

Table 2. Some plants NOT usually eaten by Mississippi deer

Boxelder	Docks
Buck-vine	Elderberry
Cane	Goldenrods
Cocklebur	Nettle

Cotton
Day-flower

Sumpweed
Waxmyrtle

Deer need water, but they do not necessarily drink from a free water source such as a pond or stream. An adult deer drinks about 3 quarts of water daily, but the amount depends on the type of food eaten. Much of the needed water may be obtained from the foods they eat.

Estimating Age of Deer

The number of points on the antlers is not a reliable indication of age. A 2½-year-old buck will commonly have six to eight points. Tooth examination is the only reliable method for estimating a deer's age.

Most of the bucks killed in Mississippi are between 1½ and 3½ years old. Few bucks live to be older than 3½ years because they are usually killed before their fourth birthday.

Management

Deer management is a wide and complicated field. Habitat management and harvest regulations are necessary requirements for deer management.

In well-protected areas where habitat is good, deer numbers will increase beyond what the habitat can support. The only way to control a deer herd and keep within its food supply is to harvest does and fawns equally with bucks.

It is no more practical to keep all the does on a well-stocked deer range than it is to keep all the heifers in a beef cattle herd. If a farmer sold only his bull calves each year, it would not be too long before his pasture would be overgrazed, and the herd would be in poor condition. The same principle holds true for deer.

A professional deer manager needs to decide when and where to harvest does. Professional assistance is available through the Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP). Contact your county Extension agent for information on the DMAP program.

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