



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	Odocoileus
Species	virginianus

Identification Characteristics

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

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

White tailed deer, *Odocoileus virginianus*, are a medium to small deer depending on the sub-species of which there are a number. This deer gets its name from the underside of its tail, which is a bright white. When the deer is running it lifts its tail high in the air so most people may only see flashing white of the tail. The color of deer varies with the area they inhabit and the time of year. Generally they are a soft reddish tan or yellowish brown, with white undersides. The sexes are generally alike in color although at times old bucks get darker.

The size of White-tailed deer varies greatly throughout its very large range. They are generally larger and heavier in Northern latitudes, and males are generally larger than females. Weight varies from 300 lbs in the north to 50 pounds in the Florida Keys. As a rule mature nonpregnant does measure 70% of the bucks. The average St. Croix buck deer weighs about 82 lbs. Height ranges from 24 in the south to 40 inches in the north. Our local White-tailed deer stand about 35 inches tall.

DISTRIBUTION

RANGE - White tailed deer are noted for having a small home range. It is this ability to live and reproduce within a small area that undoubtedly has saved the species from extinction in many places. Their preferred habitat consists of rolling, semi open country interspersed with heavier woodlands. In this type of habitat they can feed and sun themselves while always being near to forest or brush for escape from enemies. When deer have found a place meeting their requirements, it is extremely difficult to chase them out of it. Regardless of the circumstance they will return as soon as the danger is over. Their home ground can be amazingly close to human habitation and activity. Deer quickly learn to recognize danger sounds and signals from those that are harmless to them. A deer's large eyes are an indication of its love of the twilight. While a deer's sight is good, it is greatly over rated and cannot compare with its acute sense of hearing and smell.

NATURAL HISTORY

FOOD/DIET- White tailed deer are not grazers. They are browsing animals and live mainly on

brush, twigs fruits, and the leaves of vegetables, herbs, bushes and trees. Most deer feed during the twilight of early morning or late evening, when like ghost they move through the dawn and evening shadows browsing on young growth. If grass is very young, and there is a scarcity of other foods, then grass blades will be eaten. White tail are not grass eating animals as is erroneously believed by some.

Except for the dry east end of St. Croix, deer seldom face a shortage of food. Various kinds of fruits and many cultivated plants are very attractive to deer. Deer can be very destructive to cultivated plants. Management measures may be required at times to reduce the damage that deer do to private property.

REPRODUCTION - In temperate climates deer must mate at a given time so the fawns are born in early summer when food is available. In the tropics this is not as crucial. Fawns have been observed every month of the year in St. Croix. The rutting (mating) season generally begins in May and June and runs through September. The gestation period of the white tailed doe runs from 205 to 212 days, so fawning commences in November and continues into February. Generally, providing adequate food availability, a mature doe (3 years old) has a pair of fawns every year. Yearling and two year old does having their first young generally have only one fawn. Food availability is the driving factor that decides how many offspring will be born in the following year.

Deer do not make nests. When the doe is about to give birth, she chooses a safe place in heavy brush, high grass or a cane field. This becomes the fawns' home and they stick to this area until they are well developed. Fawns do not lie huddled together like young sheep or goats, but are always a bit apart. Fawns are generally a brightly colored bay or reddish yellow, spotted with white, which they lose at about four months old. Combined with having very little or no scent they are well hidden from possible predators. Mothers rarely stray too far from the fawns, **please do not "rescue" abandoned fawns.** The mother is usually not very far away and is just waiting until it is safe to come back. The mother visits them at least half a dozen times a day. At night the mother may rest with them to keep them warm. Usually her resting area is some distance away, but close enough to hear any squeak they

might make. She will try to avoid endangering her young by saturating them with her own body odor. Only the males exhibit antlers, which are shed annually, during September-November. The new antlers reach maturity about six months later. These new antlers are soft, sensitive and easily damaged. As the antlers develop they are covered with a hairy skin known as "velvet". When the antler has matured the velvet is finally scraped off and the antler is polished. This process can be very destructive to small trees.

Deer are extremely prolific animals. When deer are protected within a suitable habitat there can be a rapid increase in population. It has been roughly estimated that under the most favorable circumstances, deer populations will increase from 25 to 30 percent of their number per year.

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 be cautious when driving in areas with a lot of deer in the fall rutting season.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

1. DO NOT RESCUE ABANDONED

- FAWNS.** The mother is usually not very far away and is just waiting until it is safe to come back.
- Please call the Division of Fish and Wildlife, 340-775-6762 St. Thomas/ St. John and 340-772-1955 St. Croix, if you see any unusual wildlife.
- 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.
- For more information on this and other animals in the Virgin Islands please visit our website at: www.vifishandwildlife.com

By Donna Griffin, William Coles 2003.
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FOR MORE INFORMATION ON
OUR NATIVE ANIMALS CONTACT

DIVISION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE

6291 ESTATE NAZARETH, 101,
ST. THOMAS, VI 00802
PHONE 340-775-6762 FAX 340-775-3972

or
45 MARS HILL, ST. CROIX, VI 00840
PHONE 340-772-1955 FAX 340-772-3227