

Ohio's White-tailed Deer

Most Ohioans will recognize the official state mammal—the white-tailed deer. They are found in all 88 Ohio counties, thriving in farm country, forest areas and in suitable habitat near towns and cities. Ideal deer habitat is a mix of forestland, brushland and cropland. Many of the state's wildlife areas, totaling more than 150,000 acres, provide ideal deer habitat and offer excellent hunting and viewing opportunities.

Deer life follows natural cycles each year. Male deer, or bucks, grow antlers in early spring and lose them in winter. Does, or female deer, usually do not grow antlers. In the fall, bucks use their antlers to push and shove other bucks as they compete for mates. About six to seven months after mating, beginning in late spring, does give birth to fawns. Twins and even triplets are common where high quality food and habitat exist. Fawns rest and stay hidden for about one month. During this time, mother does feed and periodically return to nurse their fawns. At about eight weeks of age, fawns begin feeding and bedding with their mothers and siblings. Fawn does that gain enough weight may breed in their first fall. And so the cycle continues.

Deer have acquired several adaptations to help them survive. The spotted coats of newborn deer help them hide from predators in tall grass and weeds. In summer, the adult deer's coat is thin for cooling; in winter it acquires a thicker texture for warmth. The large ears of deer enable them to hear predators and with eyes on the sides of their head, they can see in almost every direction with keen sight. Powerful muscles and long legs enable them to jump well and run fast. They also have a good sense of smell.

Although deer are native to Ohio, they were completely eliminated shortly after 1900 for over a decade. This happened because deer hunting was not regulated and forest areas and brushlands were replaced with farmland, destroying the mixed habitat deer enjoy. Eventually, hunting regulations were enacted and as forested areas increased, deer made a strong comeback. Today, Ohio is home to an estimated 600,000 white-tails, but their growth must be managed for several reasons. When deer become over abundant, they cause damage by browsing (eating) farmer's crops and residential landscaping plants. Over-abundant deer can cause increased automobile accidents. With no natural predators and a very high reproductive rate, deer hunting is necessary to control the size of the herd. In fact, deer are Ohio's most popular big-game animal.

Today, deer herd numbers are managed through laws and regulated hunting designed to harvest more deer in areas where they are overabundant and to protect them where they are vulnerable to over-harvest. It is a complex task to decide what size Ohio's deer herd should be and how long deer hunting season should last. Wildlife biologists annually evaluate the status of deer populations to ensure they have appropriate habitat and to set biologically-based hunting seasons. In this way, human-designed management practices along with natural cycles and acquired adaptations ensure survival of Ohio's deer herd.