

# The White-tailed Deer

by Keith Sutton



**T**he white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) is the most popular game animal, big or small, in Arkansas and probably North America. Over 350,000 people hunt this majestic creature throughout the state each year, far outdistancing squirrel hunting as the most popular hunting activity. Also, millions more people enjoy feeding, watching and photographing whitetails.

## History

When Europeans came to the New World, the plentiful white-tailed deer played an important role in providing food for Native Americans. During 1539-42, the army of Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto found venison and whitetail hides being used by Arkansas Indians. The Caddo Indian tribe of southwestern Arkansas and western Louisiana depended on whitetails as a food source.

By the early 1900s, though, white-tailed deer numbers were declining throughout the state. Unrestricted hunting, accelerated land clearing and the influx of people settling in the state brought about their demise. In 1916, the newly created Game & Fish Commission opened the state's first deer season, and in 1919, the bucks-only law was created. But the herd continued to decrease and in 1926-27, the first deer refuges were established in the state.

It was almost too late. By 1930, only a few hundred deer remained. Things began to turn around when the Game & Fish Commission bought deer from other states and trapped and relocated deer within the state. During the 1940s, the Commission trapped and relocated more

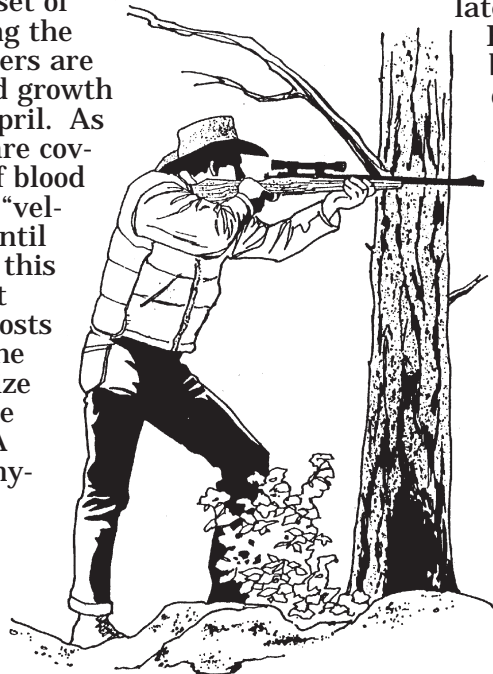
than 1800 deer throughout the state. The restoration effort, along with better public awareness and restrictive regulations, was a complete success, and today's herd numbers almost a million animals.

### **Description & Distribution**

White-tailed deer are beautiful animals. Deer less than a year old, called fawns, are characterized by white spots over a reddish-brown coat. A row of spots runs from each ear to the tail along either side of the backbone and occur randomly on the trunk of the body. They act as camouflage, blending in well with dappled sunlight reaching the forest floor.

Adult deer have a thin, reddish-brown coat in the summer months that is shed during August and September. It is replaced with a thicker brownish-gray winter coat that is shed during April and June. Adult females, called does, attain maximum weight in about four years, averaging 100 lbs. Males, or bucks, take 5-6 years to fill out and average about 150 lbs. Adult deer stand about three feet tall from the ground to shoulder.

Bucks grow their first set of antlers as yearlings during the spring and summer. Antlers are made up of true bone, and growth begins in mid-March to April. As the antlers appear, they are covered with a soft coating of blood vessels and nerves called "velvet." Growth continues until August or September. At this time, bucks rub the velvet off on small trees, fence posts or the ground revealing the hard bone antlers. The size of the rack depends on age and nutritional uptake. A buck's first rack can be anything from spikes to a 10-pointer. Bucks don't keep their antlers year-round, and they are shed during January and February.



Whitetails occur statewide in four physiographic regions. In suitable habitat, the Ozarks average 10-15 whitetails per square mile; the Ouachitas, 5-10 deer; and the Coastal Plain of south Arkansas, 25-30. Overall, the Delta figure is misleading, because much of its whitetail habitat has been cleared for agricultural purposes, but what suitable habitat remains can support many deer.

### **Habitat**

White-tailed deer inhabit open woodlands, brushlands, mixed pine and hardwoods, pine, forest edges and second growth deciduous forest. They favor thick vegetative growth on cutover and burned-over areas which provide a food source of succulent leaves, twigs and shoots from various shrubs and trees. Deer also enjoy the bounties of the agricultural world, eating various grain and bean crops. They are also known to be occasional grazers, dining on grasses and clover.

### **Reproduction**

Arkansas whitetails breed from late September through February with the peak breeding season in the north occurring from October through mid-November and in the south from late October through early December. The pregnancy, or gestation, period takes 6-1/2 to 7 months. Fawns are born from mid-March through June. Twins are the norm for older does, while young does usually give birth to a single fawn. Sexual maturity is reached in 1 to 1-1/2 years.

### **Importance**

Sport hunting for deer provides a valuable recreational opportunity, as

well as pumping important dollars into the state's economy. Hunters take millions of pounds of edible whitetail meat annually in Arkansas. This provides an important food source for many people. Deer are also enjoyed by other wildlife enthusiasts, including photographers.

In areas where their population is high, deer can cause considerable damage to agricultural crops, local gardens, fruit orchards, tree farms and the smaller trees in forested land.

### **Management**

The keys to effective white-tailed deer management are maintaining quality habitat and controlled hunting. The mountainous Ozark/Ouachitas and flatland Delta/Coastal Plains represent two distinctly different areas and must be managed as such. Where habitat is suitable, the flatlands area has a much denser deer population than the mountainous region and can

withstand a greater deer harvest.

Throughout Arkansas's history this area usually has had a more liberal bag limit.

For a number of years now, deer biologists have found that an either-sex harvest is important in managing the herd. In certain areas, it has proved necessary in maintaining sustained and balanced herd productivity.

The best way to effectively manage the white-tailed deer is to have a good knowledge of herd population. Biologists gather important information through use of annual harvest data, browse surveys, crop destruction reports, highway mortality, parasite investigations, spotlight surveys and ovary or fetus counts.

The white-tailed deer symbolizes the reasons why state wildlife agencies were created. For without their help, this noble big game animal would have disappeared a long time ago.



## **Arkansas Game & Fish Commission**

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