



LIVING WITH WILDLIFE

WHITE-TAILED DEER

IN MASSACHUSETTS



White-tailed deer are found throughout Massachusetts and get their iconic name from the white underside of their tail, which they raise and flare when alarmed to warn other deer.

DESCRIPTION

White-tailed deer can reach a total length of approximately 6 feet and a height of approximately 3 feet at the shoulder. Weight depends on the age, sex, and physical condition of the animal, but adult males (bucks) weigh an average of 120–160 pounds, whereas females (does) average 80–120 pounds. In addition to being larger than does, bucks also have antlers (made of bone) that grow each spring and summer and are shed after the breeding season in late winter.

During the summer, the upper coat of the deer is reddish-brown with short, thin, straight, wiry hairs. In winter, the coat changes to a grayish-brown, with long, thick, hollow hairs that are slightly crinkled and provide excellent insulation against the cold. The belly, the throat, the areas around the eyes, the insides of the ears, and the underside of the tail are white year-round. Fawns are chestnut-brown with conspicuous white spots on their back and sides that provide camouflage from predators. These spots fade by 3–4 months of age.

Deer can run 40 mph for short bursts and maintain speeds of 25 mph for longer periods. They are excellent at jumping; capable of clearing obstacles up to 9 feet high or 25 feet wide.

A deer's visual acuity is great at any time of day and their eyes are impressive motion detectors. They have dichromatic vision and can distinguish among most colors (except in the red/orange spectrum). Because their eyes are on the side of their head, they don't have the best depth-perception, but it appears they can gauge distance by moving their head. Their keen senses of smell and hearing help them to detect danger.

FOOD, HABITS, AND HABITAT

White-tailed deer have a four-chambered stomach and no upper incisors. They can swallow a lot of food in a short amount of time, and then move to a safe place to lie down and regurgitate their food and chew it up more. White-tailed deer are herbivores and consume a wide variety of herbaceous and woody plants. Food preferences depend on the taste of the plants growing in an area and the season. Year-round, they prefer areas of young regenerating forest, dense brushy habitat, agricultural areas, and other areas with reachable browse. Typically, deer eat green leaves, herbaceous plants, and new growth on woody plants in the spring and summer. In late summer, fall, and early winter, hard mast such as acorns, beech nuts, and hickory nuts, and soft fruits such as apples are a major part of their diet. In winter, the deer feed on hard browse (twigs, shoots, hardy leaves, and buds) and can spend time in evergreen and conifer cover to seek shelter from the wind and deep snow.

LIFE HISTORY

White-tailed deer are crepuscular (most active at dawn and dusk) and tend to be more active at night than during the day, often venturing into areas they would avoid during the day, like backyards. Deer can live over 10 years in the wild, with females typically living longer than males.

Most females do not breed until they are 1.5 years old. After a gestation period of about 28 weeks or 200 days, fawns are born, sometime between late May and early July. Depending on her age and physical condition, a doe may produce one to three fawns, but the average is two, each one weighing about 4–6 pounds and able to walk within an hour of birth. Typically, an adult doe, her fawns, and in some cases female offspring from the previous year will all stay together on the maternal range, in a familiar habitat from 0.5 to 2 square miles in size. Most males will leave the maternal range as a 1–1.5 year old (yearling) to establish a new home range, which is called a dispersal. Dispersal is an evolved response that limits inbreeding. Yearling males can travel anywhere from a few miles to over 20 miles while dispersing, and this typically occurs in the spring when their mother is fawning or in the fall when they are seeking out their own breeding opportunities. Bucks tend to use a larger home range (1–4 square miles) than females and their movements increase quite dramatically during the breeding season. Outside of the breeding season, it is common to see bucks in “bachelor groups” usually consisting of 2–5 individuals.

TIPS FOR RESIDENTS

To be sure crop or plant damage was caused by deer, look at the vegetation. Deer lack upper incisors, so twigs browsed by deer look as though they were partially clipped, with a trailing, ragged edge. A twig that is neatly snipped off, with a clean, smooth cut, was probably eaten by a rabbit or woodchuck. Residents may prevent deer damage using scare tactics, fencing, and repellants. There is no provision in state law or regulation for compensation to landowners for deer damage so landowners should try to prevent damage before a significant problem develops.

SCARE TACTICS: Scaring deer away from your property can make them wary and uncomfortable, but deer tend to come back at night. A motion activated sprinkler seems to be the most promising deterrent to keep deer away.

FENCING: Fencing is the most effective long-term solution for managing deer damage at a small scale. A variety of different fence materials can be used. Fencing should be at least 8 feet high. Electric fencing is also an option, as deer quickly change their behavior to avoid the fence.

REPELLANTS: Commercial repellent sprays, human or animal hair, and urine may be placed directly on plants to repel deer; however, these repellents may not eliminate deer damage and are often temporary.

DRIVE CAREFULLY: In Massachusetts, breeding takes place between late October and early December. At this time, bucks are more active throughout the day than usual. Bucks often chase does across roads without hesitation, so drivers should be extra cautious and slow down during the fall.

LEAVE FAWNS ALONE: Fawns are left alone by their mothers to not draw the attention of predators and are nursed every 2–6 hours during the first few weeks of life. Once old enough to outrun predators (about 6 weeks), they will spend more time with their mother. If you see a fawn, leave it alone. The mother will return when you leave.

HUNTING: White-tailed deer are an important and valuable wildlife species in Massachusetts for which a regulated hunting season (fall/winter) and management program have been established. Removing deer using safe, legal, regulated hunting is the best large-scale option to reduce deer numbers and reduce property damage. MassWildlife encourages landowners not interested in hunting to allow others to hunt on their property during the deer season.

IF YOU ARE EXPERIENCING PROBLEMS WITH DEER OR HAVE QUESTIONS, VISIT MASS.GOV/MASSWILDLIFE OR CONTACT YOUR NEAREST MASSWILDLIFE OFFICE:

Central Wildlife District, West Boylston: (508) 835-3607
Connecticut Valley Wildlife District, Belchertown: (413) 323-7632
Northeast Wildlife District, Ayer: (978) 772-2145
Southeast Wildlife District, Bourne: (508) 759-3406
Western Wildlife District, Dalton: (413) 684-1646
Field Headquarters, Westborough: (508) 389-6300

Photos courtesy of MassWildlife/Bill Byrne