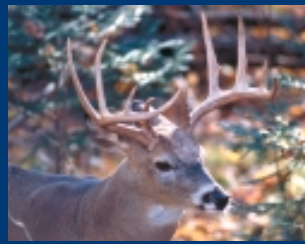


# Whitetail Deer



## Identification

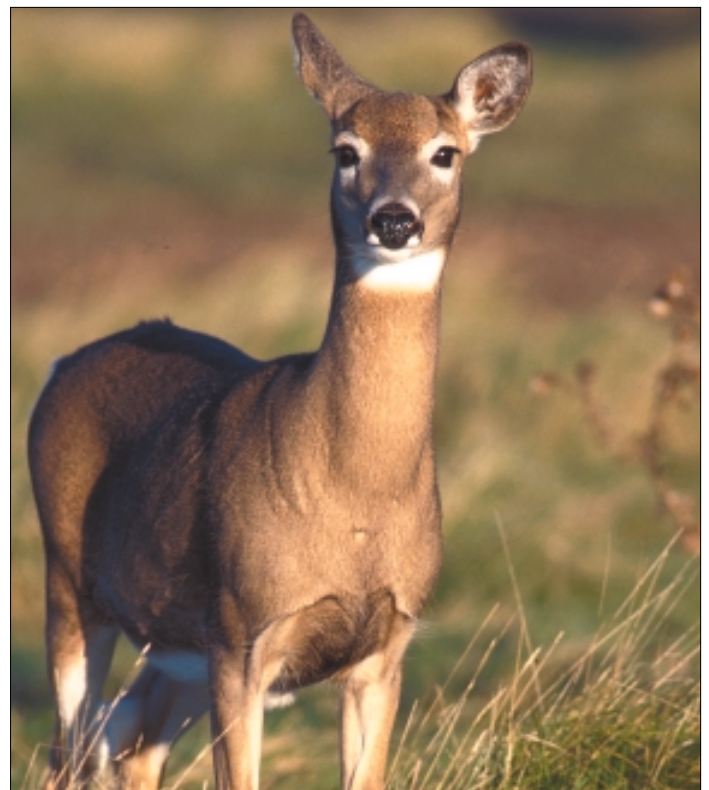
The whitetail deer's most distinctive feature is the white underside of its tail or "flag" that is flashed when the animal is disturbed. Deer are graceful, sleek and have long legs, which make them look taller than their actual height of 35 to 38 inches. Deer grow a lightweight, reddish-brown coat in the summer and a heavy grayish-brown coat in the winter. Fawns have a reddish-brown coat with white spots that helps camouflage them from their enemies. Fawns lose their spots at three to four months of age when they are more mobile and no longer rely on camouflage for protection. Fawns weigh from 4 to 7 pounds at birth and will gain 60 to 80 pounds in their first six months of life. The adult males (bucks) reach an average weight of around 240 to 265 pounds at about four and one-half years of age while adult females (does) average 140 to 160 pounds.



## Background

Whitetail deer were reported to be quite abundant when European settlers arrived in Iowa in the early 1800's. However, uncontrolled hunting for food and hides by early settlers essentially eliminated deer from Iowa by 1900. Deer were slowly re-established in Iowa, in the 1930's-50's, through the escape of animals from captive herds, trapping and transplanting programs by the DNR and the migration of animals from Minnesota, Wisconsin and Missouri. Deer now occur in every county in Iowa, but the highest deer densities are found in the southern third and northeast corner of Iowa.

Although deer may be found in any area that offers food and cover, areas with the largest amounts of timber usually have the highest deer density. Because timber habitat is limited in Iowa, deer numbers are low compared to surrounding states. Good deer habitat in Iowa may support 10 to 25 deer per square mile of land while poorer habitat supports only 1 to 2 deer per square mile. With excellent habitat, a good food source and protection from hunting, deer densities can reach as much as 100 deer per square mile. These high densities are usually only found in a small area such as a state park or refuge.



Iowa DNR photo by Roger Hill, including inset photo above.



## Beneficial Management Practices

- Food Plots
- Grasses and Forbs
- Timber Management
- Trees and Shrubs (Shelterbelts)

### Habitat Requirements

The annual home range of deer varies from one-half to one square mile and is determined mainly by availability of suitable habitat, food and water. Daily movements are smaller in the spring and summer because of fawn rearing and plentiful food supplies. However, movements increase in the fall and winter because of breeding activity and reduced food sources.

Most deer move only 1 to 2 miles from winter cover to the area where they will fawn, but some deer establish new home ranges as far as 100 miles from where they were born. One benefit of this dispersal is that small isolated habitats can be replenished.

Adult does are bred in November, although dominant bucks will breed does and older fawns from October through January. Gestation is about 26 weeks and most adult does will have twin fawns. Fawns are born from late May through mid-June. Does seek seclusion for fawning in brushy fields, heavily vegetated stream bottoms, forest edges, pastures, CRP fields and grasslands.

Fawns are nursed on the rich milk of the doe for the first 16 weeks of life, slowly shifting to a diet of forbs and grasses as summer progresses. Fawns usually remain with the doe until the following spring. During the summer, deer are usually found wherever sufficient food, water and solitude exist. Standing corn is used for food, travel and escape cover in the fall. Crop harvest and snowfall during fall and winter reduce the habitat available for deer, concentrating deer in protected areas such as heavy timber, cattails, tall weeds and brush. Because winter cover is critical, any loss of this habitat will correspondingly produce a decline in population.

Quality and abundance of fall and winter food items are critical because they determine physical and reproductive success of the female. Deer eat a variety of plants, but cultivated crops, mainly corn and soybeans, provide 78 percent of their annual diet. A large portion of the fall and winter diet is limited to waste grains remaining in fields after harvest. Woody browse such as buckbrush, oak and sumac provides 13 percent of the diet and is utilized in the summer, fall and during periods of heavy snowfall in the winter. Various forbs/grasses make up 5 percent of the diet and are utilized heavily in the spring and summer. Timber management that increases the timber's woody understory of brush, shrubs and preferred woody browse plants is beneficial to fawning does as well as providing winter habitat.

The practice of "feathering back" timber edges is also very beneficial to fawning and wintering deer. Annual food plots of corn adjacent to these areas enhance the value of these areas as winter habitat, while green browse food plots of ladino clover and alfalfa enhance the spring and summer value, especially for does and fawns. Diverse native warm season grass/forb fields interspersed with cropland and timber provide additional fawning, loafing and escape habitat.

(Opposite page) Whitetail deer were quite abundant in Iowa in the early 1800's. Uncontrolled hunting for food and hides essentially eliminated deer from Iowa by 1900. (Left) Green browse food plots provide a good source of food for fawns. (Right) Feathering back timber edges is very beneficial to fawning and wintering deer.



Iowa DNR photo by Roger Hill; including inset photo above.



Photo by Missouri Department of Conservation.