

Understanding Whitetail Deer

Adapted from the Hunting Wisdom Library's volume, "Big Game Wisdom."

The beauty and grace of the elegant whitetail fascinates everyone, whether they hunt or not. Fawns are born in May or June and weigh only 4 to 8 pounds. Their reddish coats are covered with white spots that help to hide them from predators, such as coyotes and free - running dogs. The red coat on both fawns and adult deer is replaced by the grayer, heavier and warmer winter coat as fall approaches.

A mature doe will stand about 30 inches high at the shoulder, a big buck about 40 inches. From nose to tail, the average whitetail will stretch out to about 6 feet, although I've seen big bucks longer than 8 feet. Weight varies considerably from region to region. In the Florida Keys, a buck might weigh only 50 pounds, and I've shot several in the southeast states and in South Texas that weighed just over 100 pounds. At the other extreme, in northern Canada where the whitetail subsist at the very northern edge of their range, I have taken two bucks that each weighed more than 350 pounds on the hoof.

Part of the reason deer have adapted to such a wide range of climates and habitats is the fact that their four - part stomach allows them to eat, digest and live on just about any living vegetation. In South Texas for instance, where other food can be scarce during drought years, deer make do with prickly pear cactus. How they are able to take a bite without getting a mouthful of thorns is beyond me.

A whitetail is built for short bursts of speed, although he or she can trot for miles if need be. When startled, a buck can hit 40 mph for a short distance, and clear an 8 - foot - high fence with ease. While hunting with a muzzleloader once, I slipped up on a dandy 8 - point buck only to have my percussion cap fail to ignite. The buck nailed me when the hammer clicked. When I tried the cap again, the buck exploded as only a whitetail can explode. He covered 27 feet -- measured it--with his first leap. And that was from a standing start. Amazing.

But for all their speed, a whitetail would usually rather slink and skulk than run. Whitetails, especially mature animals (bucks and does alike), have nerves of titanium. For every whitetail which flags its tail and waves good - bye to you, just figure that you have walked right past twice as many. This is because a mature whitetail, doe or buck, has an established home range, and it is within this area that the deer feels most secure. The size of the home range will vary from region to region, depending upon the habitat, but invariably does will have smaller home ranges than mature bucks, and the home range of a mature buck will typically overlap the home areas of four or more doe - family units. The importance of this information will surface when we discuss rut - hunting tactics in this chapter.

Whitetails are creatures of the edge, which is the zone between two types of habitat, or perhaps vegetation of different age. Common examples are the edge created where a crop field meets a woods, the banks of a stream or the boundaries of a clear cut. The conjunction of a wetland and a forest also creates an edge. But less obvious edge is just as important. A fenceline separating pastured forest from the thicker timber (which has not been pastured) is not an obvious edge and most hunters will overlook it, but I guarantee the deer will be traveling along that seam. Look for these "soft" edges too.

The whitetail's senses of sight, hearing and smell have been honed to near perfection as the species has evolved. Hunters commonly complain about a lack of deer in the area they are hunting, but the truth is that usually the deer are there all right, it is just that the deer are doing

what whitetails do best -- using their senses to avoid contact with hunters.

In the vision department, white - tailed deer do not possess the binocular - like orbs of the pronghorn or wild sheep, but then they have no need for long - range optics. Without getting into the scientific jargon, suffice it to say that a whitetail sees much better in darkness and dim light than you and I do and is a master at detecting the slightest movement. Be still and a whitetail will not see you, but move and he will nail you every time.

When it comes to hearing, those big ears are not just for looks. Like twin radar screens, those ears are constantly rotating to pick up sounds from any direction. And because a whitetail can move each ear individually, the animal has the capability to listen to more than one sound at once. A deer pinpoints the source of a sound due to the slight difference in time it takes for the sound to reach each individual ear. In my experience, deer are not quite as good at pinpointing the source of a sound as are predators or wild turkeys, but they ain't too shabby either! Most certainly, their skill here is exceptional enough to pinpoint a clumsy and loud hunter (which is all of us, to a deer!).

But it is that nose which usually beats us hunters. The whitetail's sense of smell cannot even begin to be fathomed by us humans. Consider that one - third of the whitetail's brain is devoted to recognizing various odors and then interpreting each of those odors. And beneath the skin of that black, shiny nose are nasal chambers which allow the whitetail to take the tiniest particle of scent and concentrate that scent so that the brain can better determine what the smell means. Is it food? Is it a predator? Is it man? Or can it be ignored? The answer is quick in coming and the deer reacts accordingly. Oh yes, did I mention that the whitetail can perform this function with six different odors all at once?

Researchers are just beginning to give us an understanding of how the whitetail sense of smell functions. The more I learn about the whitetail's sense of smell (and his other senses), the more I am amazed and the better I understand how the whitetail so easily evades hunters.