

WHITE-TAILED DEER

The Species

White-tailed deer are found throughout our continent and beyond, ranging from southern Canada across North America to South America. California, Nevada, Utah and several other western states are the only areas within the lower 48 U.S. states where these deer are not found or are found only in isolated locations.

White-tailed deer are a great success story when considering how they have rebounded from past population lows. Historically, the deer population was estimated to be around 15 million when Europeans first arrived on our continent. The clearing of pristine eastern forests led to slight population increases throughout the early to mid-1800s, but this was followed by tremendous exploitation from year-round harvest and market hunting. Early 1900 population estimates placed white-tailed deer numbers as low as 1 million nationwide. The initiation of game laws and sound management practices led to a period of recovery in which numbers quickly rebounded.

Louisiana initiated its first doe season in 1959 on several game management areas. Current white-tailed deer population nationwide is estimated in excess of 30 million, with Louisiana populations estimated between 750,000 and 1 million individuals.

The reason deer have rebounded so successfully is their ability to live in close proximity to humans in a variety of early successional habitats. In Louisiana, most white-tailed deer breed from September to mid-January, depending on the geographic location within the state.

This date of "peak rut" is an important management tool in setting season dates throughout Louisiana. The nature of the estrus cycle in female deer make some populations with high doe-to-buck sex ratios experience much later births because of females failing to successfully breed in their first cycle. Herds



The deer population in Louisiana is estimated to be about 1 million.

are monitored to ensure the proper numbers of does are harvested to lower this occurrence.

Gestation in white-tailed deer averages 202 days – after which young females (1½ years of age) usually will produce a single fawn. Older individuals in good condition often can give birth to twins. Under good habitat conditions, fawns (6 months of age) occasionally will successfully breed.

The size of white-tailed deer varies with sex, age and habitat conditions. Bucks 1½ years of age will weigh less than 100 pounds in many coastal marsh habitats. In high-quality bottomland hardwood habitats, however, weights will average closer to 150 pounds.

Quality of native forage is the biggest factor regarding body condition of deer at any specific age. Agricultural areas of soybeans and corn, along with mast-producing red and white oaks, tend to produce the heaviest animals. Managers often use food plots to mimic these agricultural areas, but often these plantings are too small to affect the nutritional needs of a herd. Managing native habitat to provide preferred browsing plants often is the key to improving quality.

To better manage the deer herd in Louisiana, the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries has initiated a more liberal harvest of antlerless deer throughout all of the deer hunting season while also lowering the allowable harvest of antlered bucks. The desired results of these management decisions are to bring deer numbers more in line with the carrying capacity of their available habitat and to allow for older bucks to enter the population structure.

The deer season in Louisiana extends from early October through most of January, making it a recreational activity that people have ample opportunity to enjoy.

The Problem and Control Measures

When deer numbers begin to exceed their carrying capacity or when certain crops are present, deer can become very problematic in their eating habits. These large herbivores will browse extensively on fruit trees, soybeans, corn, tomatoes and many other agricultural and garden crops.



Even young fawns can cause damage when they begin to feed. The high profile nature of white-tailed deer as a game species in our state limits the use of herd reduction techniques outside of established deer hunting seasons.

In many residential and urban areas, certain ornamentals that are planted for landscaping purposes often end up being consumed by deer, much to the dismay and frustration of the homeowner. The degree of tolerance any ornamental plant possesses with regard to deer browsing depends on two main factors: 1) the level of preference for the ornamental in question and 2) the alternative food sources.

Deer are less attracted to drought-stricken native plants and seek out the more succulent plants around our homes and gardens that often are irrigated and fertilized. While little can be done to improve the native habitat during a drought, planting the correct plants around our homes will greatly reduce the effects of deer browsing.

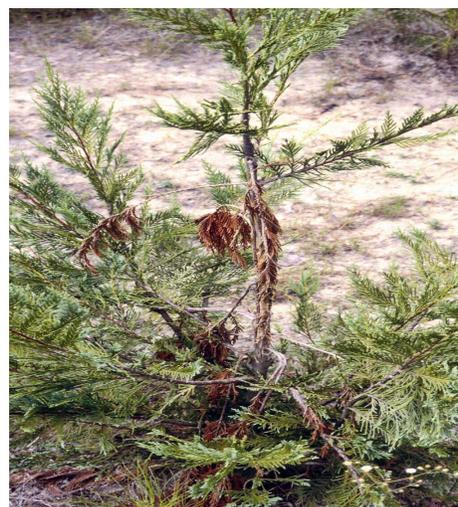
Even during years when native habitat is in prime condition, there are some ornamentals deer find so palatable that they will seek these plants out no matter what. Daylilies, roses, tulips and camellias are plants that are almost impossible

to grow without being affected by deer. Conversely, herbaceous perennials such as Amaryllis, coneflowers, irises and lantanas tend to hold no attraction to a browsing deer. The dislike deer have for some of these, such as lantana, is to the point that I have seen homeowners prepare a slurry of water and lantana fruit, spraying the solution on other plants to prevent deer from browsing on them. Other home remedy repellents, such as human hair and bars of soap, have had mixed results, depending on what plant was being afforded the protection and what the alternative food sources were. Repellents, whether "home brewed," as in these cases, or purchased as a commercial product, all have one major drawback. Time and weather conditions reduce their effectiveness and reapplication becomes more frequent and necessary after any rainfall event.

No ornamental plantings are totally "browse proof" when it comes to white-tailed deer, primarily because deer have such a wide range of plants they will eat. Choosing plants that are less palatable, however, certainly will increase the chances of success.

The white-tailed deer is firmly established as the premier big game animal in Louisiana. Any control measures to remove individuals that are causing problems due to their feeding habits must be done during the established hunting seasons.

Deer damage many ornamentals such as this young Leyland cypress tree. This occurs most often in the fall when bucks shed the velvet from their antlers or engage in mock fighting sessions as a precursor to the breeding season.



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Deer damage on row crops and vegetables, such as these tomato plants, often is indicated by bite marks and rough tears at the tips of each plant where bites have taken place.

Trees

Pond cypress *Taxodium ascendens*
Baldcypress *Taxodium distichum*
Cherry laurel *Prunus caroliniana*
Crape myrtle *Lagerstroemia indica*
Deodar cedar *Cedrus deodara*
Ginkgo *Ginkgo biloba*
Leyland cypress *Cupressocyparis x leylandii*
Pines *Pinus* spp.

Shrubs

Florida anise *Illicium floridanum*
Red buckeye *Aesculus pavia*
Sumac *Rhus glabra* or *Rhus copallinum*
Banana shrub *Michelia figo*
Winterberry *Ilex verticillata*
Boxwood *Buxus* spp.
Silverthorn *Elaeagnus pungens*
Pyracantha *Pyracantha coccinea*
Gardenia *Gardenia jasminoides*
Nandina *Nandina domestica*
Oleander *Nerium oleander*

Herbaceous Plants

Lantana *Lantana camara* or
Lantana montevidensis
Cast iron plant *Aspidistra elatior*
Mexican sage *Salvia leucantha*
Threadleaf coreopsis *Coreopsis verticillata*
Yarrow *Achillea millefolium*