



VERMONT'S White-Tailed Deer UNTAMED MAJESTY

Get to know Vermont's wily Whitetail.

Named for the white underside of its long tail, the white-tailed deer is a native of North America.

The white-tailed deer is the most abundant large herbivore, or plant-consuming species, in the state. In the past, wolves, cougars and people were the top predators of deer. Natives and settlers alike relied on the Whitetail for its meat and fur and admired it for its beauty. Over time, the deer's habitat was changed as land was cleared for farming.

This change in habitat, coupled with commercial hunting, caused deer numbers to decline. In 1865, Vermont passed laws that banned hunting to protect the remaining deer. Today, white-tailed deer thrive in Vermont. And natives and visitors alike enjoy having these wily Whitetails in our woods and meadows.

What's up with deer biology? It's a question of digestion.

White-tailed deer are part of the North American deer family. They are related to elk, mule deer and moose. Vermont Whitetails grow to about six feet long and can stand three to four feet high.

Deer have keen senses of hearing and smell that help them survive and avoid predators. They can weigh between 100 and 300 pounds. Whitetails are vegetarian. They eat leaves, twigs, grass, weeds, fruits, and nuts. Vermont Whitetails especially enjoy browsing on maple, ash and birch twigs, as well as apples, acorns and beech nuts. Like cows, deer have four stomachs! And they need every one of them to break down their food.

Whitetail habitat—it's where the deer are.

You can find white-tailed deer from southern Canada to Central America. In Vermont, they live in the mountains and river valleys and can be seen feeding in farmland, along the roadside, or even your backyard. They prefer living along the forest's edge, where they can browse in wood lots, meadows and fields.

In winter, Whitetails live in special habitats, commonly known as deer yards, where large evergreen trees help keep deep snow off the

ground. Evergreens also help protect deer from freezing wind and bitter cold. However, only a small portion of Vermont offers these ideal wintering areas. Deer may walk 10 to 15 miles to find a suitable deer yard to stay in all winter. Protecting such places is important to the future of our Whitetail.

Don't feed the deer!

A deer's stomach contains a host of bacteria that digest many different foods throughout the year. The types of bacteria living within a deer's stomach change as the deer's food supply changes. Because a deer's digestive system is conditioned to feed on woody vegetation during winter, large amounts of grain or other feed can sicken and kill them. Sudden changes in diet are not good for deer. Whitetails have been known to die of starvation with full stomachs when people have tried to rescue starving deer by feeding them hay and other feeds.

Besides stomach problems, feeding deer increases the risk of transmitting disease. The feed causes deer to gather within small areas where they touch noses while eating. Deer also are exposed to the urine and feces of other deer when it becomes mixed with the feed. People often feed deer near homes and roads. This practice draws deer away from their safe winter shelter into areas where domestic dogs, coyotes and cars kill them.

So, do deer a favor. Don't feed them!

Can deer and people get along?

With a bit of understanding and planning, however, humans can help Vermont's Whitetail.

Balancing the deer population with its habitat is important because too many deer can over-eat small trees, bushes and wildflowers. This can harm other wildlife who depend on these plants. An overly large deer population can hurt the general health of the herd, making more deer prone to disease and starvation. Too many deer also can pose a danger on our highways.

In the past, wolves, cougars and humans helped keep the Whitetail population in check. Today, humans remain as the top predators. Regulated deer hunting is an important cultural heritage in Vermont, enjoyed by entire families. And all people can enjoy catching a glimpse or a photo of these majestic animals.

Stay wild about Vermont.

