

DEER



ALMOST EVERYONE IS FAMILIAR with the deer, the most common and widespread of California's big game animals. But few persons, even deer hunters, know that the native deer are all mule deer or that the abundant black-tailed deer are a subspecies of mule deer. Would you believe that the name is derived from the large size of their ears?

Deer are primarily browsing animals that eat the twigs, buds and leaves of shrubs and trees. They also rely on acorns in some areas, and in the spring and fall they graze on green grasses and leafy plants. Deer that summer in mountainous areas migrate to lower elevations in the winter. In other locations, deer are resident to a relatively limited area.

The deer's keenest sense is its hearing. It has rather poor vision for stationary objects but is quick to catch motion—particularly the appearance of a strange silhouette on the skyline.

Both the bucks and the does have reddish coats in the summer which are replaced with gray in the fall as the long hairs grow out to form their winter coats.

Bucks alone have antlers, which are shed each year in midwinter, and are bareheaded until a new set starts to grow in the spring. The antlers grow rapidly and while growing are covered with a velvetlike skin that is rubbed off as soon as the antlers harden in the fall.

Normally a mature buck has four points on each antler. Contrary to some beliefs, the number of points is not an indicator of age, for the quality and quantity of good food govern the number of antler points as well as the size of the antlers. A yearling deer on good feed may have three-point antlers, while a three-year-old on poor feed may have only one point or spike on each side.

Mule deer may interbreed where the ranges of subspecies coincide. Thus, variations in markings and in size may be noted in some deer where ranges overlap.

The breeding season varies with elevation and latitude and occurs from mid-September through January. It is generally timed so that the fawns are born when green, leafy plants will be available for the young deer.

The doe carries the young fawn for about seven months. Fawning season peaks vary throughout the state, from early April in parts of coastal California to the end of July in areas of the Sierra Nevada. Fawns are born with spotted coats but lose their spots at about the time they are weaned, which is usually from 60 to 90 days after birth. However, they continue to run with their mothers until fall.

Early California records show that deer were plentiful in the valleys and foothills in the days of the pioneers. But deer populations, like those of other forms of wildlife, are dynamic, rising and falling with the quality of the habitat.

After the gold rush ran its course, deer populations began to decline. The use of meat and hides by settlers was unrestricted, and free grazing on public lands caused a livestock buildup that resulted in severe overgrazing by domesticated animals. These factors, together with the bitter, cold winters at the turn of the century, brought the deer populations to their lowest numbers.

Then the cycle changed. Protective laws were established, giving the adaptable deer enough security so that they could take advantage of their ability to reproduce.

A healthy doe on good food normally has twin fawns, so a deer herd is capable of doubling itself each year. An abundance of good food became available through the ever-increasing human use of the land, the clearing of foothill and mountain homesteads, the cutting of timber, and the natural and manmade fires that generally opened up the forests and encouraged the spread of palatable browse plants.

All these, coupled with the deer's ability to live close to people, ensured a rapid increase in the overall herd. By 1940, deer populations had grown to more than a million animals. Under an archaic law that permitted the taking of bucks only, the herd had grown past the carrying capacity of its rapidly decreasing range, and the herd once more experienced a cycle of decline.

The demands of a human population of 20 million have seen land use become a major factor in maintaining deer populations. Since 1950, reduction in deer range has continued because of urban development, subdivisions, conversion of wildlands to agriculture, spraying of sagebrush, highway and reservoir construction, and improved techniques in fire suppression, which has allowed brush on large tracts of land to mature past the point of providing nutritious forage for deer. In addition, second growth timber is now maturing and gradually crowding out the much-needed browse plants.

All of these factors have caused a reduction in the quality and quantity of the deer range in California. In some areas the deer are eating up the natural forage faster than it can replenish itself. In these areas malnutrition takes its toll in the form of decreased fawn production and survival and in disheartening winter kills.

Sound deer management practices will still require the removal of deer of either sex to keep the animals in balance with their available food supplies and habitat requirements. But more emphasis is now being directed toward habitat improvements on the remaining deer ranges, instead of relying only on over-protective laws. Programs are now being developed for use in wildfire and controlled burns, chaparral manipulations and logging practices which will improve deer ranges.

Private as well as federally owned lands must be considered in determining the desirable population levels to which herds should be held, and if the land and the deer and the human use of the land are properly managed, there should be enough deer for everyone to enjoy.#