

“White-tailed Deer” by Sally Cureton

It won't be long and we will be seeing newborn fawns out browsing the wood sides with their moms. White-tailed deer are quite familiar to those of us who live in Massanutten. Because they were first discovered in Virginia, their scientific name is *odocoileus virginianus*. These deer are actually quite widespread and can be found from southern Canada to northern South America. Their keen hearing guarantees that they know where you are before you know where they are. Frequently the first we realize these deer are around is by seeing their white tails up in the air as they run away.

Deer are a member of the Cervidae family which includes moose, elk and caribou. The characteristic feature of this family is that the males (and female caribou) have antlers that are solid bone which fall off and regenerate each year. Shed antlers provide a ready source of calcium for small animals, which is why we rarely find them in the woods.

Whitetail deer typically live for about 10 years and produce one or two fawns annually. After mating, which lasts from October to December, the doe will give birth in about 7 months. The fawns can walk within a few hours of birth and they will be weaned by six weeks. Initially, mom will leave them hidden in the woods during the day while she forages. Many a little fawn has been brought to an animal shelter after someone found it alone and assumed that it had been abandoned. As adults their coats are a grayish color in the winter and then turn more reddish brown in the summer. These animals carry their own winter insulation on their backs as each hair is actually a hollow tube that fills with heat from their bodies and keeps them warm. Males can weigh up to 400 pounds and females from 70 to 200 pounds.

White-tailed deer are mostly active at night and generally feed just before dawn for several hours and again from late afternoon until dusk on a wide variety of vegetation. They typically eat twigs, leaves, and bark in the forest and will consume about 7 pounds of vegetation a day. Their favorite natural foods are acorns, poison ivy, green briar, honeysuckle and young tree seedlings. Because of their four-chambered stomach, they can digest almost anything. Bulbs and tubers the white-tail deer do not eat are the allium, amaryllis, daffodil, elephant ear, iris and peony. Other plants they are not fond of are astilbe, eupatorium, hellebores, lambs ear, lantana, marigold, mum, yarrow, dwarf Chinese holly, nandina and spirea.

I am sure everyone has seen all of the tent caterpillars this spring. They seem to prefer the wild black cherry trees and many are just emerging from their tents as I write this. There seems to be a cyclical pattern to

their appearances and the trees will suffer no permanent damage, taking it all in stride. The caterpillars timing is particularly good news for the many birds trying to feed nestlings right now. This is all part of the cycle of nature - something that is interesting to observe and contemplate as the seasons pass.