



**DEM**  
RHODE ISLAND



## White-tailed Deer

Due to hunting pressure and habitat loss, white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) nearly disappeared in Rhode Island following European settlement. Wildlife managers were forced to ban deer hunting altogether to save the species from extirpation. Gradually, through restoration efforts, habitat was recovered and deer populations began to increase. In 1957 the first deer archery season was reinstated, eventually followed by muzzleloader and shotgun seasons. The white-tailed deer represents a success story for wildlife restoration management, but in such a densely populated state, human conflict is inevitable. By using the proper management techniques and carefully planning our own backyard habitats, we can appreciate these adaptable and resilient animals without discord.

### LIFE HISTORY

**Range and Habitat:** The white-tailed deer ranges from southern Canada to South America. Deer inhabit virtually all habitats in Rhode Island, from upland hills to the ocean shoreline and most of the islands in Narragansett Bay. White-tailed deer use a wide variety of habitats, including swamps, thickets, mature forest and fields. Suburban development, with a comfortable mix of trees, shrubs and lawns, is used opportunistically by deer and provides undisturbed refuges for deer populations to grow without control.

**Food Habits:** Deer spend most of their active hours feeding on grasses, herbs, fruits and acorns, as well as the leaves, buds and twigs of woody plants. Deer can eat five to nine pounds of food a day. They are ruminants; like cows, they have four-chambered stomach and chew their cud (a mixture of bile and partially digested food). Plant matter is difficult to digest, so deer have microbes in their stomachs to help them break down the tough material. These microbial symbionts not only aid in digestion, but also synthesize nutrients for the deer.

**Behavior:** White-tailed deer are most active at dawn and dusk. When they are not feeding, they spend their time bedded down in brush or other cover. Deer often spend time in social groupings. Fawns will stay with their mother for a year, and occasionally multiple does

will group together with their offspring. Bucks also form bachelor groups, which disband before the mating season in the fall. As a prey species, white-tailed deer are stealthy, agile, and fast. Wolves, bears and mountain lions were once common predators of deer in Rhode Island, but early settlers persecuted them so heavily that they completely disappeared from the state. In their absence, coyotes, bear and bobcats have become the main wild predators of deer, although they mostly prey on fawns and old or sick deer. Humans are another cause of deer mortality, through hunting and automobile strikes. During the Rhode Island 2016-2017 hunting season 1,936 deer were harvested by hunters and 1,072 deer were reported killed or involved in car accidents.



Gabrielle DeMeillon

### FINDING FAWNS

It is not uncommon to find a very young fawn alone during the spring. Mothers will leave their fawns for the first two weeks after birth to forage, only returning occasionally to nurse.

Does do not always leave their fawns in sheltered places and you may come across a lone fawn in your yard or a public place.

#### **Never touch or approach a fawn.**

*If you are concerned for the safety of the animal because it is on a road or injured, call the Wildlife Rehabilitators Association of RI:  
(401) 294-6363*

**Reproduction:** The breeding season, also called the “rut,” can begin as early as September, but peaks during the first two weeks of November when bucks travel far and wide in search of receptive does. During the rut, bucks will rub their antlers on saplings, removing the bark and leaving scent, and create scrapes by thrashing overhanging vegetation with their antlers and scraping the adjacent ground with their front hooves. Early in the rut, bucks establish dominance by sparring with their antlers. Estrus, or breeding receptivity in does, lasts approximately 24 hours, reoccurring after about 28 days if breeding has not taken place.

Once the mating season is completed, deer may again form buck and doe groups. In northern climates, they sometimes form large mixed winter herds in sheltered evergreen forests near food sources. The does separate from their groups in late May or early June, when they give birth to their fawns. Young does typically have one fawn, while older, more experienced females may have twins or even triplets under excellent conditions. The fawn is born covered in fur and stands up within an hour of being born. Fawns are born with natural spotted camouflage to help avoid predators.

**Disease:** Deer are hosts for black-legged ticks (deer ticks), which can carry Lyme Disease and other [tick-borne illnesses](#) that affect humans. [Chronic Wasting Disease \(CWD\)](#) is fatal to deer and highly transmissible between conspecifics. The DEM monitors local populations for CWD and there have been no reports of the disease in Rhode Island.

## LIVING WITH DEER

Deer are overabundant in much of the United States due to a lack of natural predators, an increase in fragmented landscapes, and changing social values of hunting. In western Rhode Island, a population density of approximately 15 to 20 deer per square mile is common, however, densities of twice that number may occur in suburban areas, where landscaping provides excellent forage for deer and hunting is not allowed. Overgrazing by deer degrades habitats, impacting other wildlife and reducing forest diversity. Automobile collisions with deer are an additional problem which costs millions of dollars a year in the United States. These accidents increase where deer have overpopulated, further supporting the need for effective deer management programs. Hunting has proven to be the most cost-effective, efficient, and successful method of controlling deer populations, which in turn ensures that the population remains in balance with ecological and social factors. Hunting deer is a traditional use of this natural resource for meat and hide, and hunters are willing participants in deer management both on state land and when given access to private property.

## TIPS TO PROTECT YARDS & GARDENS

- Remove bird feeders and cover compost.
- Put up 8 ft high wire fencing around gardens.
- For larger areas use electric fencing.
- Fence around individual trees.
- Grow plants that are unpalatable to deer.
- Treat plants with repellents.
- If possible, allow hunting on your property.

For detailed information on reducing deer damage, deer resistant plants, and repellents, click [here](#).

For more information about solving problems with wildlife, visit: [Wildlifehelp.org](http://Wildlifehelp.org)

### Never intentionally feed deer.

It is illegal and causes problems for both humans and wildlife. Feeding deer during the winter can negatively affect their digestive systems, which have adapted to survive the winter. Feeding deer corn or other high carb foods can upset their winter metabolic rate, and can even kill them.



Dean Birch

*Deer provide food and sport for hunters, and hunting permit sales generate funds for state wildlife conservation and management. In addition, revenue from hunting license fees and federal excise taxes on sporting arms and ammunition is distributed back to Rhode Island in the form of grants from the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program. These grants are used for land acquisition, facility maintenance, wildlife management, and all of the programs established for management and hunting in the state.*