

Whitetail Deer

Odocoileus virginianus

The graceful white-tailed deer *Odocoileus virginianus* is well known to most North Americans. Hunters and nonhunters alike recognize the animal by its habit of flourishing its tail over its back, revealing a stark white underside and white buttocks. This "flag" of the white-tailed deer is often glimpsed as the high spirited animal dashes away from people. The tail has a broad base and is almost a foot long. When lowered, it is brown with a white fringe.



In summer, the white-tailed deer has a reddish pelage, or fur, on its back and sides and is whitish beneath. In winter the upper parts turn greyish. Full grown male deer frequently exceed 1 m at shoulder height and 110 kg in weight, with exceptional individuals weighing up to 200 kg in the northern part of their range.

The antlers of the mature male white-tail consist of a forward curving main beam from which single points project upward and often slightly inward. Perhaps one of every 1 000 females also bears small, simple antlers.



The white-tailed deer is hard to distinguish from the black-tailed deer. The black-tail has similar antlers and will sometimes show the characteristic "flag" of the white-tail but usually with less flare. Fortunately, for identification purposes, the black-tailed deer occurs only west of the Great Divide (its Canadian range is coastal B.C. and Vancouver Island), where the white-tailed deer is uncommon.

Confusion is less likely between the white-tailed deer and the darker stockier mule deer. The mule deer can be distinguished by a small white tail with a black tip and antlers that divide and redivide into paired beams and points. It also has large ears that are more like those of a mule than those of its more delicate cousin. Unfortunately people in different parts of Canada have given these two types of deer the same nickname, "jumper." In the Prairies the mule deer is dubbed "jumper," in recognition of its stiff-legged bouncing gait. Elsewhere people may mean the white-tail when they use the term, referring to that animal's irregular jumping gallop when alarmed.



Abundant food makes almost any forested or bushy area suitable for white-tailed deer during the summer, but as snow deepens the deer concentrate in "deer yards," or areas that provide food and shelter from storms and deep snow. Sometimes the move from summer to winter range requires travelling many kilometres.

