

FROM THE WOODS

# White-Tailed Deer



PennState Extension

PHOTOS: GINO D'ANGELO

AN EDUCATIONAL SERIES ABOUT FORESTRY FOR YOUTH

**T**he white-tailed deer is Pennsylvania's state animal. Deer play an important role in our forests, and everyone admires their graceful beauty. "Whitetails" have been a part of Penn's Woods for many centuries. Native Americans depended on white-tailed deer as a source of food, clothing, shelter, and goods for trading. It is estimated that Pennsylvania had 8 to 10 deer per square mile during those times. Deer were in balance with their forest habitat. Deer populations were kept in check by large predators, such as mountain lions and wolves, and by people.

The Europeans who settled in Pennsylvania also valued deer. Deer meat was a staple in their diet, and meat and hides were shipped to Europe as well. In Europe, wildlife was "owned" by landowners. Landowners controlled who



PHOTO: GINO D'ANGELO

**Newborn fawns weigh between 4 and 8 pounds, and are not much bigger than a human hand. They instinctively stay very still when their mother is away. The spots on their coat help them to hide from predators.**

hunted and the number of animals killed. American settlers changed this system. In the United States, all citizens, not just landowners, owned the wildlife. Wildlife became a common property all citizens could use.

**MAKING A COMEBACK**

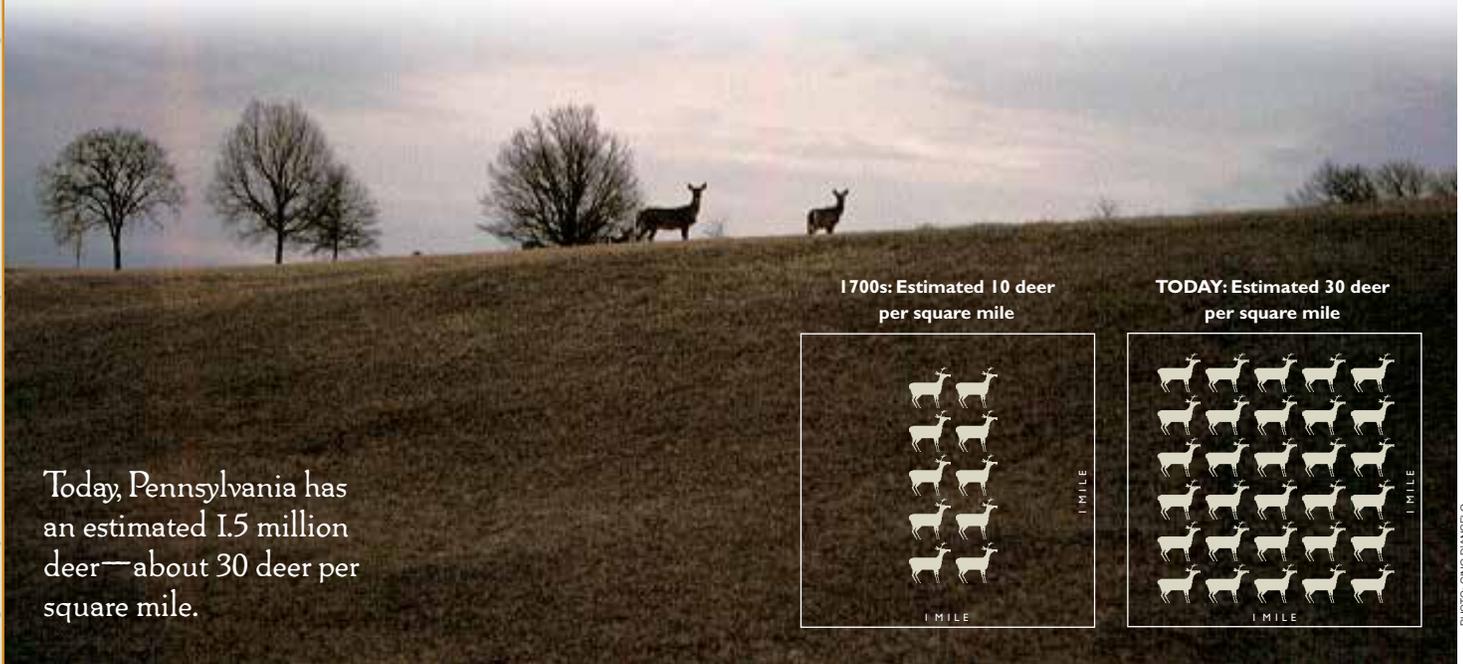
Lack of control over the way people used and hunted wildlife became a serious problem

in many states. By the end of the 1800s, very few deer remained in Pennsylvania. Extensive hunting to feed the country's growing population and the lack of enforcement of wildlife regulations were largely to blame. In 1895, the Pennsylvania Game Commission was formed to protect the state's wildlife resources. The commission established "game lands" to help restore

wildlife populations. It also brought deer from other states, such as Michigan and Kentucky, to restock Pennsylvania. Additionally, the state government enacted a law to protect does (female or "antlerless" deer).

These actions, combined with the habitat found in Pennsylvania in the early 1900s, created ideal conditions for deer. During the 1800s, most of the state's forests had been cleared to produce lumber or grow crops. Much of this cleared area grew back on its own into new forestland. The thick stands of young trees and shrubs provided perfect food and cover for deer, and Pennsylvania's deer population grew rapidly in the early 1900s.

Deer are a very productive species. In good habitat, adult females often produce twins and triplets each year. In a Michigan study, 10 deer were



Today, Pennsylvania has an estimated 1.5 million deer—about 30 deer per square mile.

PHOTO: GINO D'ANGELO



PHOTO: HOWARD INDERBERGER

enclosed in a 1,100-acre preserve. After five years without hunting or predators, the population grew to over 200 deer. In 2001, Pennsylvania had an estimated 1.5 million deer—about 30 deer per square mile. That’s more than three times what the state had before European settlement.

### **BIODIVERSITY**

A healthy forest has *biological diversity*. This means it has a wide variety of flowers, shrubs, trees, and wildlife species. The various plants and trees create layers, from the forest floor to the treetops. Each layer, or level, provides special conditions for different wildlife and plant species.

The large number of deer in Pennsylvania has significantly changed our forests over the

last 50 years. Today, many of our forests *look* nice, with large trees and a lush, green

carpet of ferns, but there are few young trees to be found and very limited biodiversity.

Deer are “browsers.” They primarily eat the leaves, twigs, and shoots of young trees, shrubs, and wildflowers. In many areas, deer have over-eaten the forest, and the diverse layers are gone. In some forests, the diversity of plant species that grew in Penn’s Woods for centuries has been replaced by a few species that deer do not prefer to eat.

### **Deer tracks**



PHOTOS: GINO D'ANGELO

**Whitetails have hooved feet. Scent-producing glands between their toes leave a scent wherever they walk. Whitetails have several scent glands that are important for deer communications.**

### **KEEPING A BALANCE**

Many things control deer populations. Harsh winters with deep snow can cause deer to starve, but recent Pennsylvania winters have been milder than in the past. In colonial times, large predators helped keep deer herds in

balance, but humans eliminated large predators by the late 1800s. Many deer are killed by cars each year, and coyotes, dogs, and bears kill some deer, but these do not make a large impact on the deer population. Some people have suggested using chemical birth control methods to reduce deer populations, but these have proven impractical. Hunting is the single most important way to keep the deer herd in balance.

Deer management has not been entirely effective in our state. Politics and tradition have worked against good management. Buck (male or “antlered” deer) hunting in the state has been part of Pennsylvania’s heritage for

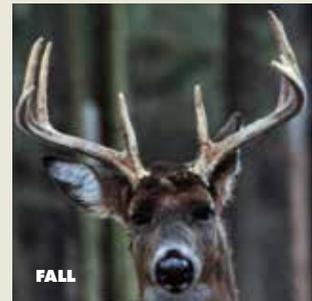
## Stages of antler growth



SPRING



SUMMER



FALL

PHOTOS: HOWARD NIJENBERGER

**Buck antlers are actually fast-growing bone tissue. They begin growing in the spring and go through several stages before they are shed in the winter months. Antlers increase in size with a deer’s age. Good health and nutrition also play a role in antler size.**

generations. For decades, hunters resisted killing does. It went against tradition, and hunters believed killing does would harm next year’s buck population. But research shows that the only way to control the overall deer population is to prop-

erly reduce the number of does through hunting.

White-tailed deer are graceful and beautiful animals, and they play an important role in the future of Penn’s Woods. To ensure the health of our forests, deer herds must be kept in bal-

ance with their habitat. The number of deer taken each year through hunting should be based on the habitat, the deer population, and the values of the citizens who own this wildlife resource. The future of our deer herd depends upon us.

## Hunting safety is a priority.



PHOTO: HOWARD NIJENBERGER

**Each year almost 1 million hunters in Pennsylvania take to the field in pursuit of whitetails. Fluorescent orange apparel makes hunters more visible to each other.**

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