Does bearing young for the first time often have a single fawn. Thereafter, they may have up to 4 but rarely more than 2 and sometimes only one. A single litter per ear is produced. Both sexes are capable of breeding at 1-1/2 years of age, but doe fawns receiving adequate nutrition often breed during their first year.

Typically, males slightly outnumber females at birth. They usually weigh 5 to 7 pounds, with males being larger than females. Fawns are able to stand on spindly legs during their first day of life, but do not ordinarily begin following their mother until they are about one month old. During this early period, they are visited frequently by the doe for feeding. Fawns usually are not abandoned, as many people believe when they happen to find them unattended between feeding periods. The doe is almost always browsing or resting nearby. Fawns that are found in the woods should be left alone. Moreover, male deer, in particular, do not make safe pets. Many people have been seriously injured by "domesticated" bucks that had lost their fear of man.

Male fawns have a type of antler growth usually referred to as buttons. Bucks get their first noticeable antlers as yearlings or at the age of 1 to 1-1/2 years. Yearling bucks may have up to 10 or more antler points, depending upon nutrition. Generally, older animals have heavier, better developed antlers than animals of a younger age, if nutrition is comparable.

Bucks normally shed their antlers each year. The time of antler-drop may vary somewhat, but in an average season, some shedding is noticeable in late December, most of it has occurred by the middle of February, and by early March it is unusual to see an antlered buck. People are often bewildered by their inability to locate shed antlers in the woods. This is because antlers have a high amount of calcium phosphate, which is preferred by rodents and quickly eaten.

Once a deer sheds his antlers, new growth starts immediately, though visible antler growth is sometimes not apparent for several weeks. Growth is rapid, and the antlers mature in 3 to 4 months. Throughout the summer, the antlers are equipped with a very rich blood supply and are covered with a hair-like membrane commonly known as velvet. While "in velvet," a deer's antlers are particularly vulnerable to injury, and cuts or bruises suffered at this time often result in freakish or deformed antlers. By late summer or early fall, antler growth is completed and they become solid and hard. The velvet dries and sloughs off or is rubbed off. Healthy bucks maintain polished antlers throughout the breeding season.

Habitat Needs of Deer

White-tailed deer are extremely adaptable animals. Their essential requirements include food, cover and water. Abundant forest land provides suitable cover, except where large acreages are in agricultural production and cover for deer may be limiting. An interspersion of brushland, woodland and non-forested land creates more diversity in the types and amounts of food and cover present. The transition zone between two cover types is often referred to as an "edge." Deer, as well as other wildlife species, utilize such areas heavily. Many timber harvest operations today create an "edge effect" and add diversity to a habitat. Free water is readily available in the South and is rarely a limiting factor to deer populations. The quality and quantity of the natural foods present in an area usually determine, to a large extent, that population's size and health.

Deer have a large and varied diet and eat practically all plant species at one time or another. They were once thought to be exclusively browsers, selecting twigs primarily. However, leaves, bark and herbaceous material such as grasses, weeds and soft-stemmed plants have been found to be important in their diets. Acorns, other nuts, fruits, mushrooms, algae and mosses are also heavily utilized when available.

Deer seem to be able to determine which foods or plants are most nourishing. Foods eaten readily in one area may not be taken in another due to differences in soil types, succulence, deer numbers and other factors. Utilization of specific food items is heavier on burned than on nonburned areas, and also heavier on fertilized than on non-fertilized areas. Well-fertilized agricultural crops or nursery stock are often browsed severely in high deer density areas. Preferences of individual food items are basically a reflection of food availability at a particular time.

Deer prefer a variety of agricultural crops including both grains and vegetables. Damage to commercial agricultural crops, nurseries and orchards is often extensive and severe. Orchard losses are usually greatest to small trees, and they often have to be replaced several times because of severe browsing. Another type of damage often overlooked is the damage to natural or planted trees on forest land. The various forms of deer damage are usually most severe where deer population densities are high and in areas where small agricultural fields, orchard units or regeneration sites are interspersed with forested deer habitat.

The relationship between food supply and population density, and their effects on antler development and reproduction, are often misunderstood. Many people fail to realize that overpopulation can occur when deer numbers are not extremely high. If there are more deer than available food, the herd is overpopulated and the habitat and individuals within the population suffer. Deer on an inadequate plane of nutrition experience a buildup of certain parasite levels, show obvious signs of poor antler development and lowered reproductive rates. Declining body weights of both bucks and does are also a direct result of inadequate nutrition.

As a population continues to increase beyond its food supply, animal quality declines even further and natural mortality becomes more significant. There are usually rising complaints of deer damage to agricultural crops and forest reproduction and increased risks of deer-vehicle accidents. Additionally, the ever present threat of a mass die-off from malnutrition, parasitism or disease becomes imminent.

Habitat Improvements for Deer

Land management practices exert a direct influence upon the value of an area for deer habitat. Habitat manipulation through timber harvest, controlled burning and agricultural or wildlife plantings have been shown to be important in providing a proper combination of food and cover necessary to maintain healthy deer populations. Food plots can be important in providing a proper combination of food necessary to maintain healthy deer populations. Deer habitat is nearly always a by-product of forest management or some other land use.

Forest Management

Pure stands of unmanaged pine timber generally provide poor deer habitat because of the low quality forage and the scarcity of mast-producing hardwoods (e.g. oaks and other fruit-producing trees). Dense stands and closed canopies reduce browse and fruit yields. Management efforts in this forest type should be directed toward increasing browse production. Intermediate thinning of pine stands is recommended to open the overstory and encourage desirable understory vegetation. Thinning should be sufficient to achieve a basal area of 50 to 60 square feet per acre prior to stand regeneration.