

Backyard Briefs

A weekly column

By Judy Jessop, A Nature Conservancy Volunteer

The “rut” (breeding season) for deer, is a time of turmoil and aggressive behavior in bucks, which are otherwise quiet and social animals. High testosterone levels cause these male deer to move about in constant search of does (female deer), while engaging in skirmishes with the same bucks they companionably grazed with just weeks before.

Once rut is over white-tailed deer settle back into the quiet, elusive mammals that are so well camouflaged they are seemingly invisible. In Wild Animals of North America, published by National Geographic, there is the story of a test that was run to determine how effective white-tailed deer are at hiding. Six veteran hunters searched a one square mile fenced-in wooded area in which there were 39 deer. It took them four days to spot the first deer.

Camouflage is of particular importance to does when they reproduce and must protect their newborn fawns. In spring the pregnant doe separates from the herd, moving to a separate fawning territory to give birth and remain secluded while raising young ones. Typically white-tail deer give birth to twins (and sometimes have triplets) though young does in their first year of motherhood often have a single fawn. For the first several weeks fawns remain hidden (twin fawns separated for added protection); their mother may leave them unattended for hours at a time, returning to nurse several times a day. Fawns have almost no scent in the first months of their lives; this and the camouflage of their coat effectively protects them from predators while mom is off foraging for food. Fawns withhold body wastes until their mother returns and she ingests whatever they void, denying predators any scent of the fawn’s presence. Doe’s milk, with three times as much protein as cow’s milk, comprises the fawns entire diet for the first month of life. They then begin to follow their mother, quickly learning to supplement a milk diet with vegetation.

Young ones will remain with their mother for one to two years, or until she is once again ready to give birth. Young doe fawns often remain in the area and may rejoin their mother in mid to late summer. Buck fawns however most often leave their home territory and travel elsewhere to establish a new home range.