

Backyard Briefs

A weekly column

By Judy Jessop, A Nature Conservancy Volunteer

One by one the five white-tailed deer vaulted a barbed fence. Then, with effortless grace they sailed over the creek and finally reached the edge of the field, vaporizing into the deep shadows of the forest. The large population of deer in this region provides many of us the opportunity to witness such scenes. Deer have some impressive abilities; they are able to leap more than eight feet high, hurdle widths of 30 feet and reach speeds exceeding 35 miles-per-hour. They are also excellent swimmers. Their winter coats have hollow hair shafts that aid them to stay afloat while swimming. The hollow hairs, filled with air, make their coat so buoyant that, even if a deer gets tired, it is unlikely to sink below the water's surface. Because of its buoyancy, deer hair is sought after by fly fishermen. They use it in their fishing lures because it can remain afloat for long periods, teasing the surface, seeming much like a mayfly to hungry fish.

Deer eat a wide range of vegetation. In summer, they dine on green plants, agricultural crops, grasses, and aquatic plants. In fall, they incorporate berries, acorns, and other nuts into their diet. Then, as winter progresses they switch to woody vegetation such as twigs, young trees, and buds. Deer have a four-chambered stomach, which is better able to breakdown difficult-to-digest foods, and it provides the added advantage of allowing the animals to quickly consume a variety of edibles that can be chewed later. This bulk of food is held in the first chamber of the stomach where digestive juices begin to work. When the deer is at rest the food is brought back up to the mouth, chewed and eventually processed through the other chambers of the stomach, completing digestion. Such ability to forage quickly reduces the time the animals must spend away from the protection of cover. The additional ability to eat difficult-to-digest, woody vegetation allows deer alternative food in winter when green vegetation is dormant.

The deer's excellent vision, through eyes that are placed on the side of the head, allow them to see almost all the way around them as they forage. This in combination with acute senses of smell and hearing gives the deer excellent survival skills. It also most often leaves us far behind them to watch the beauty of their movement with a white flag raised in departure—they are indeed appropriately named.