

Wildlife Express

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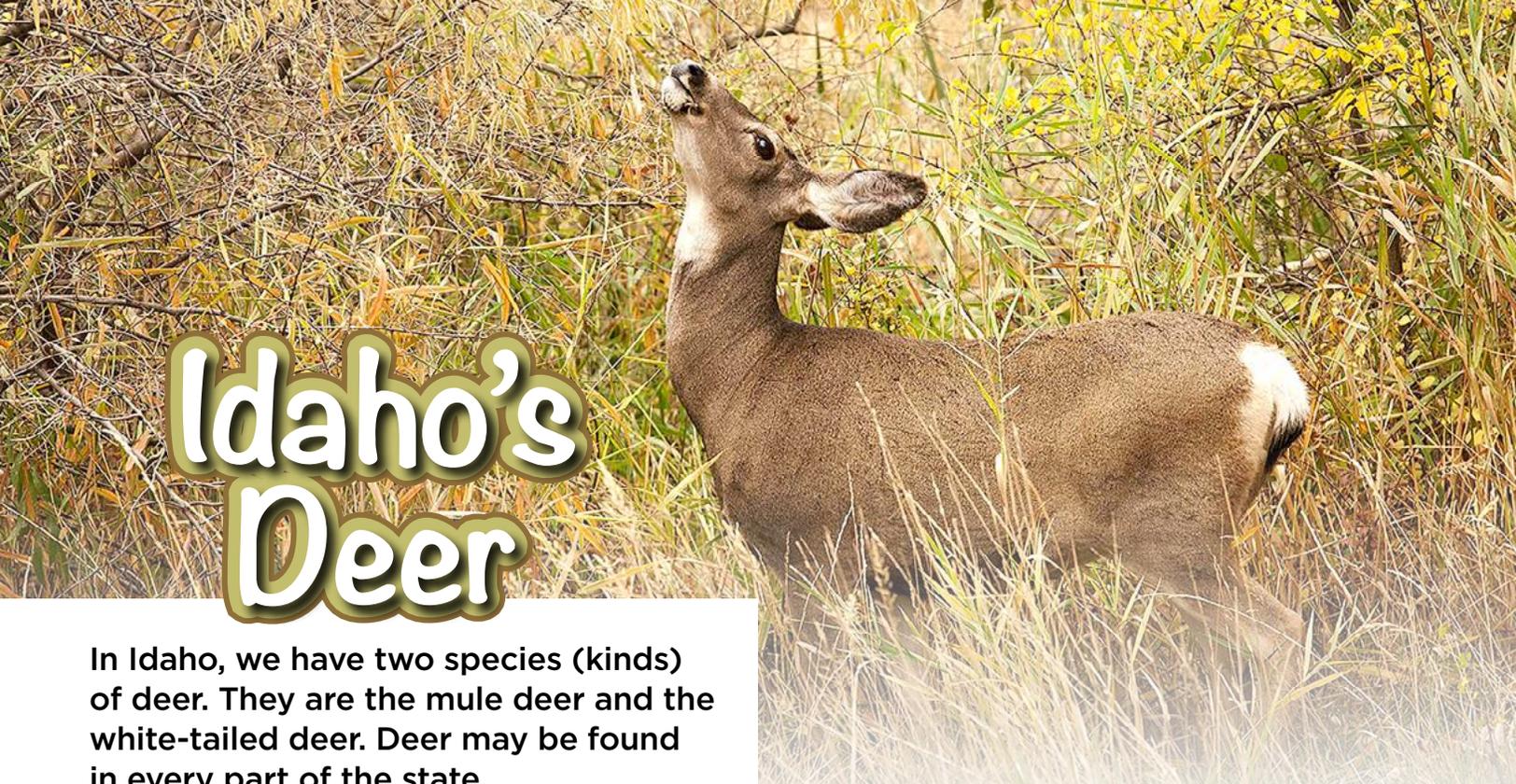
Idaho's Deer

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Idaho's Deer

In Idaho, we have two species (kinds) of deer. They are the mule deer and the white-tailed deer. Deer may be found in every part of the state.

Males are called bucks. Only bucks grow antlers. Females are called does, and babies are called fawns. Both mule deer and white-tailed fawns are covered in spots when they are born. Their spotted coats help to protect them while their mothers are off eating. It may seem strange that the fawns are left alone for long periods of time, but this behavior may save their lives. The spots camouflage the fawns in the patchwork of sun and shade around bushes and tall grasses. If the doe stayed close to her fawn, she may attract the attention of a predator. Young fawns would have a difficult time outrunning a predator. They have little scent, so staying hidden is their best option until they are stronger and can run faster. The spots will gradually fade away as the fawns get older.

Deer are prey for many animals. Mountain lions and wolves eat deer of all ages, from the smallest fawns to the largest adults. Black bears usually eat fawns up to six months old. They rarely kill older fawns and adults. Coyotes commonly eat fawns of all ages but rarely healthy adults. Even bobcats prey on deer fawns.

To avoid being caught by predators, deer listen, look and smell for danger. Deer can move their large ears independently. This helps them catch sounds from many directions. With eyes on each side of their heads, deer have a wide angle of vision to spot an approaching predator. Deer also have an excellent sense of smell. They often lick their noses like dogs. Moist noses improve their sense of smell and help them pick up on the faintest changes in scent.

While each deer species has its own way of responding to and escaping danger, there are a few things they share. They stomp their hooves and make blowing, snorting sounds when they sense things don't seem right. These sounds mean, "be alert, danger coming!" Deer are agile and fast runners. Running is often their best way to get away from a predator. Deer have been clocked running 30 miles-per-hour! If cornered, deer will lash out with their hooves. Hooves are sharp and can injure a predator that gets too close.

Let's take a closer look at mule deer and white-tailed deer.

Mule Deer



Photo: CC-BY Unsplash

What is the most common large animal in Idaho? They jump stiff-legged on all four legs to escape from danger. It's the mule deer! This stiff-legged jump gives mule deer an advantage over predators in rocky, uneven places where it is harder to run.

Scientists call the mule deer *Odocoileus hemionus* (*o-do-koy-LEE-us hem-EE-own-us*). Hemionus means half-mule. By looking at the mule deer's ears, it is easy to see why they were given this name. Mule deer have large ears that look a bit like mules' ears.

Mule deer are the larger of Idaho's two deer. Bucks average about 250 pounds; does average around 150 pounds. Fawns are born in May or June and drink only their mother's milk until they are about five weeks old. Then they

start to nibble on plants. By the time they are 16 weeks old, they are fully weaned and only eat plants.

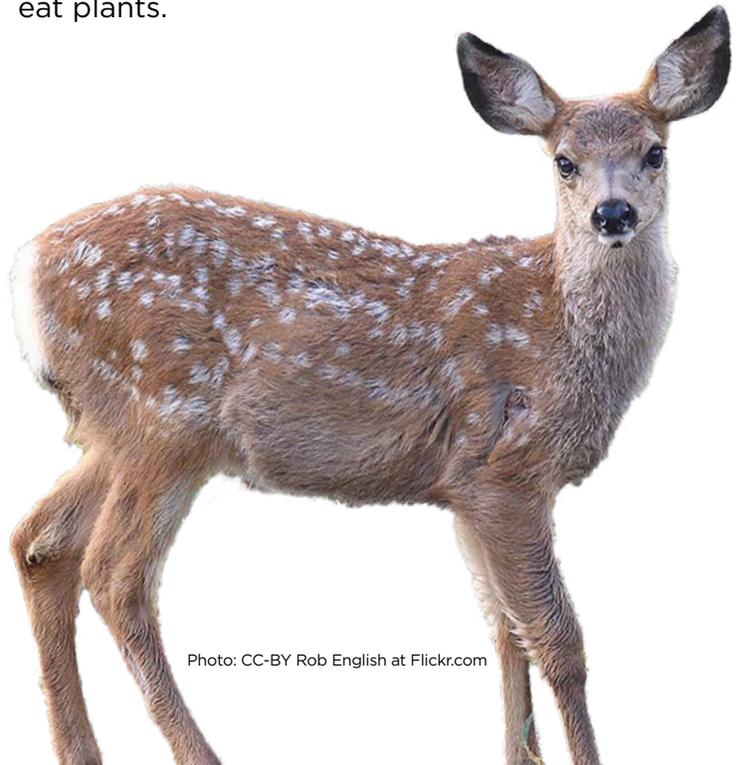


Photo: CC-BY Rob English at Flickr.com

Where to find me?

Mule deer are found in many habitats. They can be found from alpine mountains to deserts. They especially like rocky, brushy areas. Where you find mule deer depends on the time of year.

Mule deer move, or migrate, to find food. During the spring and summer, mule deer are found on mountain slopes where shrubs, flowering plants and grasses grow. Does with fawns are sometimes found around aspen tree groves. Aspen groves have many flowering plants, called forbs. These plants are important for mule deer, especially nursing does. Aspen groves also provide excellent shelter for the fawns. During the winter, deep snow makes it harder for mule deer to get food. So, they move down out of the mountains into valleys and south-facing hillsides. Here snow is not as deep, and food is easier to find. Mule deer may migrate 50 to 75 miles between their summer and winter habitats.



Mule Deer Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game Staff

Sagebrush and bitterbrush are important foods for mule deer, especially in the winter. Mule deer like to eat the soft tips of shrubs and bushes. Animals that mainly eat shrubs and bushes are called browsers. Shrubs are high in protein and have the nutrients mule deer need. Mule deer will also eat soft plants and some grasses. Grasses make up the smallest part of their diet. Grasses do not have as much nutrition and are harder for mule deer to digest.

Mule Deer Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game Staff



Mule deer are beautiful and lots of fun to watch, especially when they are bouncing away from danger!

White-tailed Deer



Top White-tailed Doe Photo: CC-BY Shutterstock, #314967

Have you ever seen a deer running away that looked like it was waving “good-bye” with a white tail? That was a white-tailed deer. When they get startled, they raise their tails and wave them back and forth. The tail looks a bit like a white flag. This is how white-tailed deer warn others that danger is near. The white tail may also help young deer follow their mothers in thick brush and tall grass.

Where will you find white-tailed deer in Idaho? That question depends a lot on where you are



within the state. Get out a map of Idaho and find the Salmon River. A large majority of Idaho’s white-tails are found north of the Salmon River, but they are becoming more common in other parts of the state. In southern Idaho, they may be found in riparian areas. Riparian areas are the green areas along water where willows, grasses and cottonwood trees grow. This is not a deer you are likely to find in the open desert.

White-tailed deer need a patchwork of habitats that offer high-quality summer foods and forests for cover in the winter. They may be found in forests, dense brush, and marshy areas. They especially like the areas where different habitats meet, called edges. In spring, they use areas along waterways or areas



Middle Running Buck Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game Bottom White-tailed Buck Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game

that have been burned or logged. Here they can find newly sprouting grasses and other soft plants. As temperatures rise, leafy shrubs, called browse, are important foods. In winter, white-tails seek cover in dense forests. Here they eat woody branches of shrubs and some evergreens. White-tailed deer usually migrate shorter distances than mule deer between their summer and winter habitats. Willow, dogwood, and chokecherry are some of their favorite things to eat.

White-tailed deer are smaller than mule deer. Bucks average 200 pounds; does average 125 pounds. Fawns, often twins, are born in May or June weighing between five to eight pounds. Fawns are kept hidden for the first week or two after being born and are weaned when about 10 weeks old.



Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game Staff



Look for white-tailed deer when exploring Idaho. They are sleek and graceful animals.

Photo: CC-BY Larry Reis at Flickr.com

Which Deer?

Ever wonder how to tell Idaho's two deer species apart? It is important to know their characteristics, especially if your family hunts. The way to tell them apart is as easy as a **STARE**: startled movement, tail, antlers, rump, and ears.

White-tailed Deer:



S: Startled movement, raise tail and show white "flag"

T: Tail flat and brown with white fringe and white underside

A: Antlers have tines all coming from one large main beam

R: Rump brown

E: Ears small

Mule Deer:

S: Startled movement, jump away on all four legs, called stotting

T: Tail white and skinny with black tip

A: Antlers branch equally, separate beams fork into two tines forming a "V"

R: Rump white

E: Ears large and mule-like





Managing Idaho's Deer

Photos: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game

Fish and Game is responsible for making sure Idaho's deer populations are healthy and survive well into the future. Deer numbers need to be maintained below carrying capacity. Carrying capacity is the maximum number of deer a habitat can sustain. As a population nears carrying capacity, the number of fawns born annually declines. The most productive herds are below that maximum number.

There are two different kinds of carrying capacity, biological and social. Biological carrying capacity refers to the number of deer that can live in a habitat

without causing the habitat damage. The social carrying capacity is the number of deer people will tolerate in an area. If deer start eating crops or moving into towns looking for food, this can cause problems for people. Fish and Game works to find ways to increase, decrease or maintain deer numbers to stay within the biological and social carrying capacities.

Many things affect deer populations. Habitat, diseases, predators, weather, climate, and humans all play a role. Fish and Game has no control over some things, like weather and climate. Deer can be monitored for diseases. If a disease is found, steps can be taken to try and stop the disease from spreading. Fish and Game can plant shrubs to improve deer habitat or remove predators to help populations grow. Hunting seasons can be altered to increase or decrease hunting in an area. Fences can be installed to keep deer from eating haystacks. To make the best decisions, Fish and Game needs information. This means studying deer, gathering data, looking for population changes and talking to people.

To get an idea of the number of deer, Fish and Game goes up in the air. How would you like to buzz over a herd of mule deer in a helicopter? Fish and Game can't fly everywhere, so they pick important wintering grounds to fly over. Deer group together in the winter, so this is the perfect time to count. It is also easier to see brown deer standing on white snow.

This works, but it is expensive and dangerous.



Another way to estimate deer numbers is to set up trail cameras. Cameras are programmed to take photos when triggered by movement or at set times. Cameras work well to establish gender, age, and abundance of deer in an area.

Collars are put on deer to see where they are at different times of the year. When the collar hasn't moved for a long time, it sends out a special signal. This indicates the deer is likely dead. Biologists can go to the site of the collar and get clues about how the deer died. GPS collars use satellites to track deer, so a biologist can see where a deer is located while sitting safely at her desk.

Hunters also supply information to Fish and Game. Hunters are required to stop at check stations even if no animals were harvested. Fish and Game can gather a lot of information at a check station. They can estimate the age



of deer, check the health, and take samples to look for diseases.

By using the best research and management methods available, Idaho's deer will be strong and healthy for many years to come.



How old is that deer?

Have you ever looked at a deer and wondered how old it is? Some people think that you can tell the age of a buck by counting the points on his antlers. You might be able to get a rough estimate of the deer's age, but this is not a good indicator of age. If a buck eats quality food, he will be healthier. The healthier a buck is the larger his antlers will grow. So, you could end up with a young buck that ate well with large antlers, and an older buck with small antlers that ate a poor diet. This also only works for bucks.

A better method is to look at the teeth, and this works on both bucks and does. One way to age a deer is to cut a thin, lateral slice from a molar.



Mule Deer Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game Staff

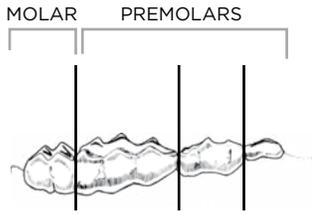
The teeth contain growth rings like a tree. Count the rings and the age of the deer is revealed. This is accurate but doesn't work in the field. It also can be tedious and time consuming. There is an easier way to age deer just by looking at the teeth.

Deer have baby teeth, just like people. Baby teeth are replaced by adult teeth over time. Adult deer have four front teeth and six teeth next to the cheek on each side of the lower jaw. Between the front teeth and the cheek teeth is a big space where no teeth are found. The three teeth right after this empty space are called premolars. Following the premolars are three molars. Premolars and molars are covered with points called cusps. Deer eat some tough foods. Grinding up shrubs wears down the teeth at about 1 millimeter per year. By looking at the number of teeth a deer has and the wear on the teeth, biologists can predict the age of a deer. Here's how it works.

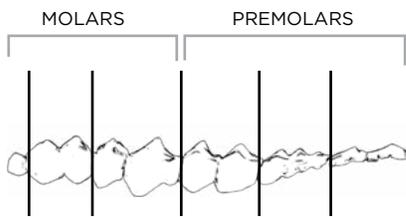


White-tailed Deer Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game Staff

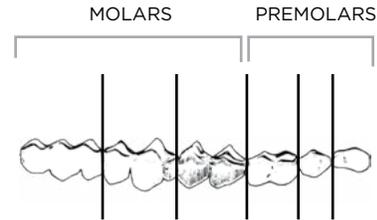
At around six months old, a fawn's two front teeth will start to be replaced by permanent teeth. Along the jaw only four teeth usually show, three premolars and one molar.



At one and one-half years old, a deer will usually have three molars, but the last molar may not be fully seen. Baby premolars remain.



At two and one-half years old, deer have all their adult teeth. Now looking at the wear on the teeth will help age the deer. The first molar is still pointy, but the last molar is starting to show some wear. The last cusp on this molar is blunt.



By three and one-half years, all cusps are becoming blunt, and the last cusp of the third molar is flat. Four and one-half year olds have flat cusps on the first molar and the other teeth cusps are blunt. By the time a deer is five to six, the premolars are looking flatter, and molar cusps are starting to look dishd out or cupped.

At around nine or ten years old, the teeth are cupped and worn nearly to the gums. Eating becomes difficult and painful. Deer cannot grind up their food well enough to get all the nutrition they need. This is the reason why few deer live past this age in the wild.

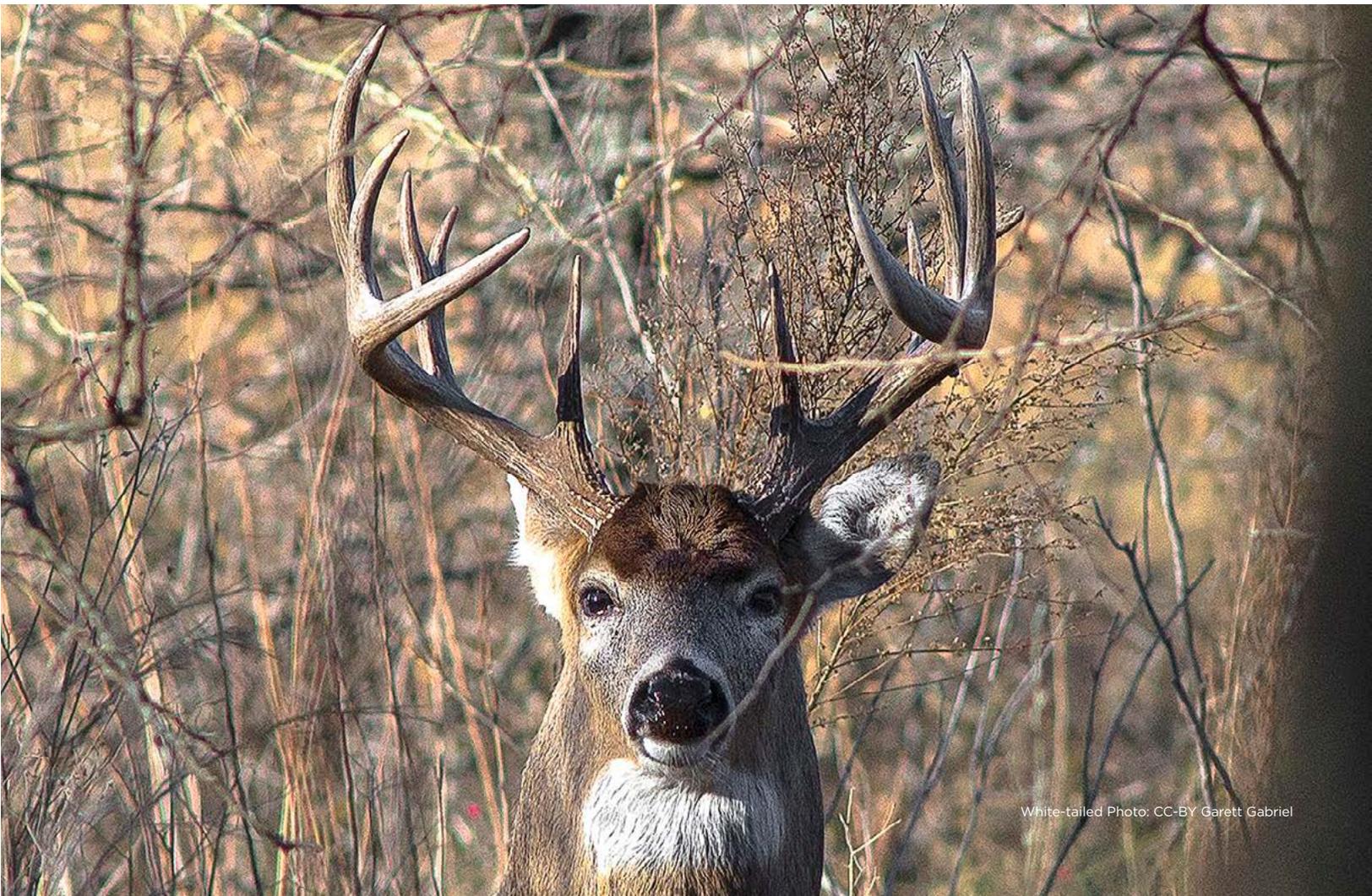


Awesome Antlers

Antlers grow on members of the deer family. They are bones that grow out of the animal's skull. An antler grows faster than any other kind of bone. It can grow up to one inch a day during the summer! Usually only the males grow antlers, but female caribou can grow antlers. There is even a species of deer where neither the male nor female grow antlers, Chinese water deer. They grow something better - tusks that look like big fangs!

Antlers are light and easily damaged until late summer. They are covered with a thin skin called velvet. Velvet is covered with fine, short hairs and contains thousands of blood vessels. The blood vessels carry calcium and

minerals needed for building strong bones. If a deer damages his antlers badly at this point, he could bleed to death! Deer don't do much while their antlers are growing; they stay hidden and are not aggressive. Once the antlers have grown, the blood vessels in the velvet close off. The velvet dries up and starts to fall off. By September or October, the velvet has been completely rubbed off. The antlers are hard and polished - ready to show off for the females, intimidate younger males, and possibly defend against a predator. Deer shed their antlers in early winter and begin to grow another set. Then the process starts all over again!





Chronic Wasting Disease, a Threat to Idaho's Deer

Chronic wasting disease (CWD) was detected in Idaho in 2021. Since then, Idaho Fish and Game has been working to identify how widespread the disease is and how to slow its spread. The good news is that so far, it has only been found in a small area around Slate Creek between Riggins and Grangeville. The bad news is the disease is incurable and cannot be removed from the environment. Fish and Game will have to manage it.

Deer, elk and moose can catch CWD when they contact saliva, urine, feces, and carcasses of infected animals. They can also catch the disease through infected soil. The disease is always fatal. Animals with the disease may not show symptoms for up to two years. They look and act normal, but can still pass the disease to others.

Animals with CWD start to lose weight and may wander away from the herd. In late stages of the disease, they look skinny, their ears droop, and they drool. Deer begin to trip and fall because of a lack of coordination. Sometimes deer, elk and moose never enter the later

stages of the disease. The disease weakens them, and they may die from predators, vehicle collisions or other accidents.

Fish and Game is working to monitor CWD, and hunters play an important role. There are rules about how animal carcasses are handled. In the areas where CWD was found, hunters are required to submit samples and give information about where the animal was harvested. Hunters in other parts of the state may also submit samples. The samples are tested for CWD. This helps Fish and Game track where CWD may be spreading. The samples also help Fish and Game get an idea of the disease's frequency in a population.

It is important that everyone do their part to help keep our deer, elk and moose populations healthy. For more information on CWD, visit Idaho Fish and Game's CWD webpage at

idfg.idaho.gov/cwd

Idahoans are fortunate to have deer, elk and moose in our state. Let's keep them safe and healthy!



Be Outside, It's Hunting Season!

Autumn is the time for cooler weather, colorful leaves, and hunting season! Hunting is a wonderful way to enjoy a crisp fall day. For many people, hunting means more than just harvesting an animal.

Filling a freezer with healthy meat is a great reason to go hunting. Venison is lower in calories and fat than beef. It also is higher in other things our bodies need, like iron and niacin. While all hunters hope to harvest an animal, spending time outside with family and friends is the best part of hunting.

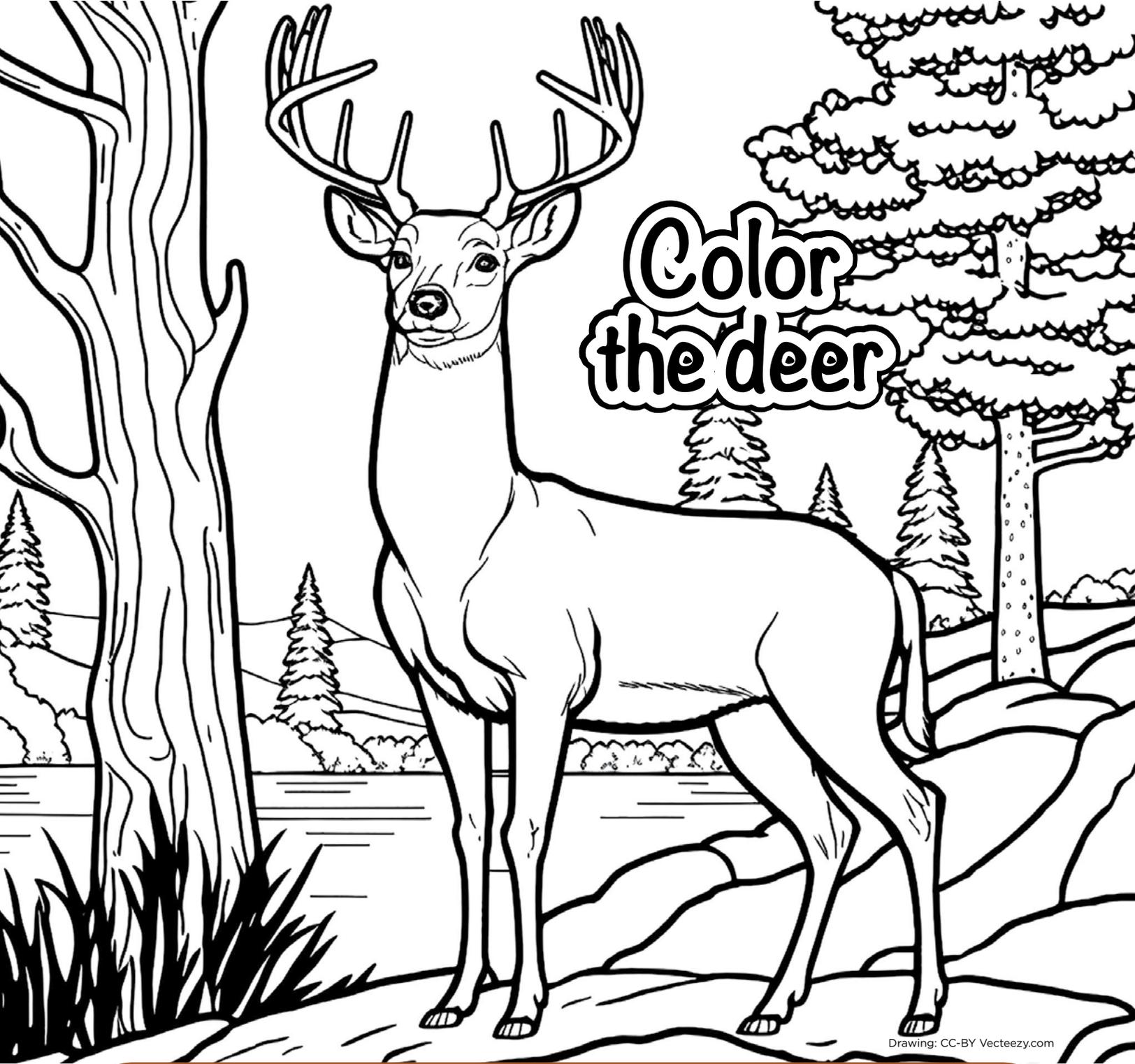
There is nothing quite like an autumn morning sitting in the woods. Many people think of summer as the time to explore outside, but autumn offers experiences summer does not. Being in a forest as it comes alive with the sounds of nature is both calming and exhilarating. If you find yourself sitting in a forest early in the morning, close your eyes and pay close attention to the sounds around you. You may hear birds awaken to the rising sun as red squirrels and chipmunks scurry about looking for breakfast. These tranquil moments might be broken as you feel your heartbeat quicken

with the sound of bugling elk and rattling antlers. For some people, this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. An experience like this is awe-inspiring and made even better when shared with people you care about. It is a special experience that can only happen in autumn.

If you want to hunt, the first step is to take a hunter education class. You must pass this class to buy a hunting license. Anyone nine or older can take hunter education. Hunter education classes teach firearm safety and how to be a safe, responsible hunter. You can find out how to enroll in a hunter education class on Fish and Game's website.

One of the best ways to learn about hunting is by going with family and friends. Even if you are not ready to hunt, you can learn a lot from other hunters. Help look for animals by finding tracks or scan for animals with binoculars. You can help carry equipment and find locations using a map and compass or GPS program. If an animal is harvested, you can help pack it back to your camp. You can even learn to cook what has been harvested.

All these experiences, along with hunter education, will help prepare you for your first hunt.



Color the deer

Drawing: CC-BY Vecteezy.com

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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!
If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express, it may be included in a future issue! Send it to: adare.evans@idfg.idaho.gov or Wildlife Express, Idaho Fish and Game PO Box 25, Boise, ID 83707