

November 2, 2004

Active time for deer

November is one of the best months to see white-tailed deer. Mating activity really stirs things up at this time of year as bucks are tracking does. The net result is that deer are very active and are moving around much more than usual. This can make for increased opportunities to see the animals but also increases the danger of collisions with cars.

Buck white-tails are “in rut” right now - at the peak of their sexual readiness. Preparation for mating has actually been going on since late last winter. Antler growth starts in mid-March, as testosterone levels in the males begin to rise in response to the lengthening days. By September, the antlers stop growing, and the bucks spend many hours rubbing them against branches in order to scrape off the velvet covering. The velvet supplies nourishment to the growing antlers all spring and summer long.

The main function of the rubbing behaviour, however, is to deposit scent. The scent, which originates from glands in the forehead, serves to advertise both the presence and rank of the buck. Only the largest and most dominant males will have the opportunity of mating with the does. In fact, smaller, lower ranking males don't even begin rubbing behaviour until October and are usually only bystanders to the mating game.

Bucks also signal their presence to does and other males by making scrapes. Scrapes are areas where the buck paws away the leaf litter to expose the bare soil beneath. They are almost always located under a lone, overhanging branch that the buck chews, leaving it broken and frayed. Not yet satisfied that the message of his presence and sexual readiness is out, he urinates in such a way that the urine runs over special glands on the inside of the hind legs and carries his scent down to the ground.

The rubs and scrapes are visited by both females and other males throughout the breeding season. When a doe in heat encounters a scrape, she will often urinate on the bare soil to alert the buck of her presence. Bucks visit their scrapes daily for any sign of passing does.

Increasingly absorbed with an intense mix of passion and rage, bucks will also spend time testing their strength and skill against other males. The test usually takes the form of pushing contests which go on until the weaker or more submissive male leaves the area.

When a buck encounters the scent of a doe in heat, he begins to track her, continually inhaling the air to gauge her state of oestrus. Once she has been located, the doe usually leads the buck on a chase, possibly to test his fitness. Following the chase, the pair mates, staying together a day or two. The dominant male in a given area may mate with as many as seven does.

Deer also go through other interesting changes in the fall. Since late September, a gray-brown winter coat has replaced the reddish summer coat. With dense inner fur and long, hollow outer hairs, it is actually ten times thicker than the summer coat. The gray-brown colouration will also offer excellent camouflage in the winter woods. They have also been feeding heavily to build up fat that will supply up to a third of their winter energy needs.

Deer are abundant in the Kawarthas. Watch for them feeding in meadows and along the edges of corn fields and woodlots at dawn and dusk. We have inadvertently created these high population levels by carving up forest habitat into small blocks which increases the amount of grassy edge habitat around the blocks and provides supermarket conditions for deer. We farm most of what is in-between with crops that deer love, especially corn. To top it all off, we have

virtually eliminated the big carnivores that would traditionally keep deer numbers in check.

High deer numbers often have a very negative effect on forest succession. In some areas, Presqu'ile Provincial Park for example, the understory plants have become seriously over browsed. This reduces plant diversity and makes indirect losers out of understory nesting bird species like thrushes and many of our warblers. The regeneration of the forest is also jeopardized. Author Jared Diamond compares the problem to "visiting an apparently thriving country and suddenly realizing that it is inhabited mainly by old people, and that most of the infants and children have died." Because we have created this state of affairs, humans are left with little choice but to control the deer through hunting. The main deer hunt season in the Kawarthas is November 1 to 13. In many areas, there is a veritable "flight to the woods" with businesses shut down and every able-bodied man from 16 to 90 away on the hunt.

I often see deer in the fields on the north side of the 12th Line (Stewart Line), just west of the city. If you are heading north, Northey's Bay Road between Highway 28 and Petroglyph Provincial Park is also excellent. However, caution must be taken at this time of year. More collisions involving deer take place in late October and November than in any other month. When driving after dark, watch for dark shadows along the side of the road and the bright green reflection of the deer's eyes in your headlights. If you do see a deer on or near the road, slow down immediately because there will also certainly be more deer nearby. They become disoriented and unpredictable when confronted with an automobile. Most accidents involving deer occur at dusk.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR THIS WEEK

Northern sparrows and finches are arriving at our feeders. Dark-eyed juncos are already here and American tree sparrows should show up any day. Also watch for purple finches and possibly pine siskins and common redpolls. Lower than average seed crops in northern Ontario this year should result in at least one or two of these species moving south this fall in search of food and therefore coming to feeders. Black oil sunflower seed and nyger seed are the two staple foods to keep the birds happy.

Drew Monkman is a local naturalist, teacher and author of *Nature's Year in the Kawarthas*.