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Mule Deer

Distribution and Abundance

Mule deer can be found throughout the Arizona Strip. Concentrations occur on Black Rock and Poverty Mountains, on Mt. Trumbull, in the Buckskin Mountains and in the Parashant and Kanab Creek areas. Estimates generated by Arizona Game and Fish Department (AGFD) predict an average mule deer population of between 1900 and 2150 animals each year during the early 1990s. The Arizona Strip includes most or all of AGFD Game Management Units 12A, 12B, and 13B.

Mule deer were not common on the Arizona Strip prior to the arrival of settlers in the late 1860s. Following that, deer herds began to increase. The AGFD currently estimates the mule deer population on the Strip at fewer than 2,000 head. This represents a dramatic decline from about 4,600 head in the late 1970s. Changes in habitat quality, over harvest, and an abundance of predators have been implicated as possible reasons for the decline in the deer herds.

Description

Mule deer get their name from their large mule-like ears, usually about one-quarter larger than those of white-tailed deer. They have an obvious white rump patch and a small, rope-like white tail with a black tip. When alarmed, mule deer run with a stiff-legged bounce with the tail held down, a behavior known as stotting. Mule deer shed their hair twice a year, producing a fine textured reddish-brown coat in the summer and a coarser buff to gray in the winter. During winter, bucks display a dark v-shaped area on their forehead and a black to dark brown coloration on their chest. Fawns have a similar reddish brown summer coat with white spots on the back and sides which disappear within three to four months.

Male fawns develop hair-covered bumps at the front of the skull. These bumps or buttons are the beginning of antler growth. Further development starts the following spring, when the buttons enlarge with a velvety covering of skin. The antlers grow with this skin covering, called velvet, until August when a hormonal change



stops the process and the antlers harden to a bone-like consistency. The velvet dries and the buck removes it through vigorous rubbing on small trees and shrubs, which also hardens the antlers. A yearling buck usually has two points on each antler in the form of a "Y", while the adult buck has an additional "Y" at each point, which makes four points on each typical antler. Antlers remain hard and polished until they are shed in late winter. The remarkable process of antler growth is renewed in the spring and the cycle continues throughout the adult buck's life. The buck produces its largest set of antlers when it is about six years old.

Habitat and Home

Mule deer are generally found in association with the more open habitats. Classic mule deer habitat is rough, steep canyons sparsely vegetated with brushy pockets that carve their way down through open grasslands. Mule deer often bed in juniper thickets or other shrubby areas. The Parashant area, with its rolling topography, ponderosa pine forests, and open chained areas is prime habitat on the Strip.

Habitat quality has been changing over the past 20 years. This may be attributed to the removal of domestic sheep, improved livestock management, and aggressive fire suppression. Succulent forage on crucial summer ranges and young nutritious browse on winter ranges are giving way to older browse, trees, and perennial grasses. Numerous waters have been developed to make more habitat accessible to deer.

Habits

Mule deer are most active at dawn and dusk, when they venture from protective cover to feed. In the spring, each doe moves off by herself to select a fawning area. Bucks become solitary or join small bachelor groups as their antlers develop. Most fawns are born in early summer. The fawn's survival strategy is based on its protective coloration, its ability to remain motionless as danger approaches, and its small amount of scent which makes finding it difficult for predators. The doe leaves her fawn unattended while she feeds, but stays in the vicinity, returning only to nurse the fawn. Mating occurs in the fall, with bucks setting up territories based on dominance, and busily trying to locate does. In the fall the buck's antlers are hardened and polished, and he uses them to defend his territory and protect his does. Most mating is concluded by the time winter sets in.

Foods

Mule deer are ruminants and digest their food in much the same way as a cow. This digestive process allows them to utilize a wide range of vegetative food stuffs in their diet. In this area, sagebrush makes up 65 percent of the November diet, and

ponderosa pine comprises 18 percent. In general, woody plants comprise 77 percent of the food. The primary species used are sagebrush (32 percent), cliffrose (28 percent), and antelope bitter brush (13 percent). Grasses make up about 17 percent of the deer's diet and forbs about six percent.

Reproduction

The mule deer's breeding season begins in October and ends in early February, with the peak occurring in mid to late November. This is also referred to as the "rut", a time when the buck's neck swells and he fights other bucks for dominance. A single buck is capable of breeding several does. Does are in heat for about 24 hours, and cycle every 28 days if they are not bred. Fawns are born after a 202 day gestation period, with about half of the young being born between late May and late June. The mule deer's reproductive rate is about XX fawns per 100 does on the Arizona Strip. Sexual maturity is slow in mule deer. Only seven percent of the does breed when they are fawns and only 68 percent of yearling does become pregnant. About 65 percent of pregnant mule deer does carry twins.

By early November a male fawn weighs about 81 pounds and a female fawn about 73 pounds. Yearling bucks average 140 pounds while does weigh about 15 percent less. Older bucks, with good nutrition, can weigh as much as 250 pounds or more.

Importance

The mule deer is a symbol of western heritage. A native of the prairie, it remains conspicuous among wildlife residents. Locals and visitors alike appreciate its graceful beauty and its adaptability to harsh environments. Hunters spend thousands of hours in their pursuit each year, and in doing so contribute to local economies. Legal harvest, through hunting seasons, continues to be the major tool employed by wildlife managers to reduce deer populations to minimize problems suffered by landowners.

Hunting Mule Deer

To be successful the hunter must know the deer's habits and be able to recognize the signs that bucks are in the area. One sure sign is a "rub"- branch or sapling that has been stripped of its bark by a buck knocking the velvet from its antlers. Later in the fall, as the rut approaches, fresh sign of this antlerwork may appear on larger, harder trees, as restless bucks shape up their fighting skills. An even better sign is an active "scrape". This is where a buck has pawed the leaves and grass away, exposing a patch of bare earth from one to three feet in diameter. He generously applies his scent and tracks in the scrape, which serves as a signal to does that he is in the area and available. Scrapes also warn other bucks that the territory is taken and won't be relinquished



without a fight. A buck fully caught up in the fever of the rut may have several scrapes which he checks frequently, or he may post just one and stay nearby. A scrape that is being renewed and maintained is a sure sign that a buck will be along sooner or later, and it merits careful consideration on the part of the hunter.

Of all mule deer signs, tracks are the most obvious and are also the most misused and misunderstood by the novice hunter. A lot of greenhorn deer hunters are likely to latch onto the first set of tracks they find and spend the rest of the day following them, almost invariably without seeing the deer. Tracks are a valuable sign to the hunters, chiefly as an indication of the frequency and direction of travel. They might also give an indication of the size of the deer using an area. Generally, they provide a lot of the same information as do droppings.

Some hunters claim they can distinguish tracks of bucks from those of does, but other experienced hunters discount this. Generally, the tracks of bucks and does look identical, although a hunter tracking a deer might surmise he's on the trail of a buck if it is traveling alone and sticking to more secluded or secretive haunts. Following a set of tracks in hopes of getting a shot at the deer making the tracks is an iffy game, and is a tactic mastered by only a few specialists. Most hunters follow a trail too slowly or make too much noise to be successful. And, a lot of hunters cannot distinguish a really fresh track, and thus may take up on a trail half a day old or more.

Most hunters following deer tracks pay way too much attention to the impressions themselves and almost forget to look for the deer standing in the tracks. Experienced trackers look for the most distant visible sign, giving it just a glance while keeping their eyes on cover ahead, ready for a shot. They also look behind, because deer often double back on their trail to see if they are being pursued.

About the only time most hunters will need to track a deer is after they have taken a shot at one. If the deer doesn't go down, the hunter should check where the deer was standing when the shot was fired, looking for blood, hair, or other signs of a hit. If none is apparent, he should take up the track for a few hundred yards, looking for blood on the ground, bushes and trees the deer may have brushed against, or for signs of staggering, limping or other evidence of a hit.

Venison derived from the mule deer is the reward of the hunt. Whether a buck, doe or fawn is taken, each warrant the hunter's respect and proper care in preparing the meat for the table. Carefully field dressed, cooled and butchered venison provides many delicious meals for the hunter and his family.

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