



Whitetail fawn

Story and Photos by Bill Banaszewski

It is difficult to believe that between 1860 and the early 1900s whitetail deer were essentially eliminated from the region. When settlers came to this area, they slowly but steadily cleared the forests to create farmland. By 1880, approximately 70 percent of the hill country surrounding the lakes was farmland and only 20 percent remained forested. The loss of protective forest habitat, no laws governing the taking of deer, and market hunting had worked in combination to eliminate deer.

After hillside farming began declining around 1880, nature started reclaiming the abandoned farmland. Finding apples in old orchards and new successional plants, deer began migrating north from Pennsylvania. Laws were established to regulate hunting, and “deer sightings” were the talk of the town between 1915 and 1920.

My former neighbor, who lived and farmed his entire life just outside of Naples, saw his first deer in 1918 when he was 17 years old. In 1920, the Naples Record ran a story about people driving from as far as Rochester hoping to see the two deer that frequented fields just outside of Naples.

Today, deer thrive in the Finger Lakes region and have adapted to living in close proximity to people. Newspapers no longer run stories about deer sightings, and although some consider them a nuisance, they are revered by hunters, naturalists and photographers.



Fawns use camouflage to their advantage

Deer populations are always fluctuating due to hunting, predation, car collisions, and starvation during harsh winters. Nevertheless, the cycle of life renews itself each May as each doe gives birth to a single fawn or up to three.

Most deer in the wild are bred during the middle of November and have a gestation period of approximately 200 days. As a result, the week before or after Memorial

Day is the best time to discover newborn fawns.



Getting close to a newborn

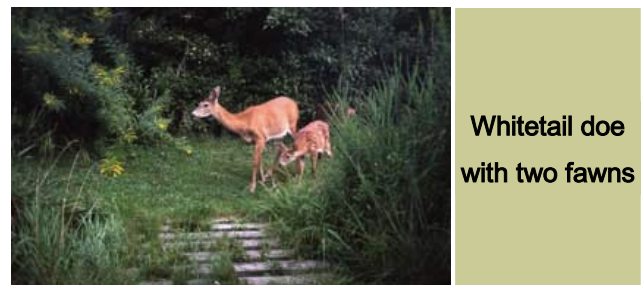
Immediately after a fawn is born, does consume the afterbirth. After being cleaned and milked, fawns will attempt to stand 15 minutes after birth, and can walk within three hours. Once the fawn can walk, the mother moves it from the birthing site and leaves it to sleep. The doe then moves a good distance away, so her scent glands and afterbirth smells will not attract predators. Newborn fawns have only one active scent gland and, once cleaned, are nearly scentless.

During the first week of a fawn's life, most of its time is spent sleeping and milking. The mother returns only five to seven times a day. Occasionally people find a fawn sleeping alone and assume something has happened to its mother. Although efforts to care for the fawn may seem appropriate, it is not necessary or legal.

After one week, fawns can outrun humans and are spending more time with their mothers. At three weeks, does begin the weaning process by introducing fawns to solid food. By the end of June, fawns become playful and curious, often getting themselves in trouble.

Most fawns are weaned by early September, and in a few weeks a darker brown, winter coat covers their spotted tan, summer coat. Small "button" antlers have grown on the heads of males and typically grow less than three inches before they are shed in December.

Within a year, fawns are essentially adults, and they, too, will play their role in renewing the cycle of life.



Whitetail doe with two fawns

Photographer Bill Banaszewski is owner of Finger Lakes Images and professor emeritus of environmental conservation at Finger Lakes Community College. A sample of his photographs can be viewed at www.thefingerlakesimages.com.