



WILDLIFE NOTES

Mule deer

Odocoileus hemionus hemionus

Although we take deer populations for granted, Rocky Mountain mule deer reached a low point of about 41,000 in New Mexico in 1926. Laws governing game animals and fish were passed by the Territorial Legislature in 1897, but were hard to enforce. No legal hunting for deer, elk, antelope, or mountain sheep was allowed for five years early in this century. State laws and public attitudes regarding wildlife progressed to allow a comeback of deer herds. Today, there are perhaps 300,000 mule deer and the less-common white-tailed deer combined in our state.

An average Rocky Mountain mule deer buck weighs 200 to 250

pounds, and a doe, 140 to 160 pounds.

Their large ears, which give them the 'mule' nickname, are gray outside and whitish inside. The winter coat is brown to gray, with white hair under the jaw and down the throat. There is a white rump patch around the tail, and the tip of the tail is black. Summer coats are reddish, as are the coats of fawns, which also have white spots on the sides and back for the first two or three months. Fawns weigh about six pounds at birth and grow to 65 pounds by their first autumn.

At one year of age, bucks may have forked or spiked antlers. A typical mature pair of antlers

may have two main branches with two points on each branch. Antlers are shed about the middle of March. In April, the new antlers begin to grow again from the skull. First they are covered with a soft covering called "velvet" that carries blood. Velvet dries up and is shed when antlers are grown by September.

Primary homes of Rocky Mountain mule deer include the mountain ranges and mesas of much of New Mexico.

Food, water, and productive cover govern the numbers of deer. Harsh winters may force deer to lower elevations, while mild summers will place them at timberline. Habitat includes

pinon-juniper-oak stands and brushy draws. Forage includes mountain mahogany, Gambel's oak, sagebrush, Fendlerbush, grasses, forbs, and other plant species. A long-range study indicates that weather is the major force governing the health of deer herds. Deer fatten up in the fall to prepare for the winter. Harsh conditions and low availability of food will result in some deaths in a herd.

The necks of buck deer start to swell about mid-October in the north,



and the breeding season reaches its peak in late November. The breeding season occurs as late as January in the south. Bucks will look for receptive does, but do not gather harems as elk do. Bucks will spar and bluff with each other. Does breed at about 1 1/2 years old, and give birth to fawns at the age of two. There is a tendency to deliver twins in healthy does. Fawns are usually hidden near shrubs, logs, or weeds soon after birth. Don't pick up an "abandoned" fawn to "rescue it."

Fawns suffer the highest mortality rate among the different age classes of deer. Those surviving their first year of life have an average life-span of eight years. They seldom live longer than 10 years.

Another variety of mule deer is the desert mule deer, or *Odocoileus hemionus crooki*. In general they are paler in color, and smaller, than the Rocky Mountain mule deer. The antlers of bucks are not as massive on the desert mule deer. The two subspecies may interbreed where their ranges overlap.

Desert mule deer primarily live in the chaparral pinon-juniper woodlands of the southern third of the state, at lower elevations than the Rocky Mountain mule deer. Its home may also be home to the desert bighorn sheep or javelina. Summers and winters are normally spent in the same area, in contrast to the up-and-down migrations of the Rocky Mountain mule deer.

Desert mule deer have a December-January breeding season, with fawns born in July and August. Foods include browse, weeds, and lichens, along with juniper berries, skunkbush and other plants.

There are also two kinds of white-tailed deer in New Mexico: the Coues (or Sonoran) deer of the southwestern quadrant and an eastern subspecies in the Sacramento Mountains, Texas plains, and north-east quadrant. These white-tailed deer exist in small numbers, but their populations are healthy enough to allow hunting.

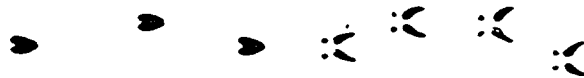
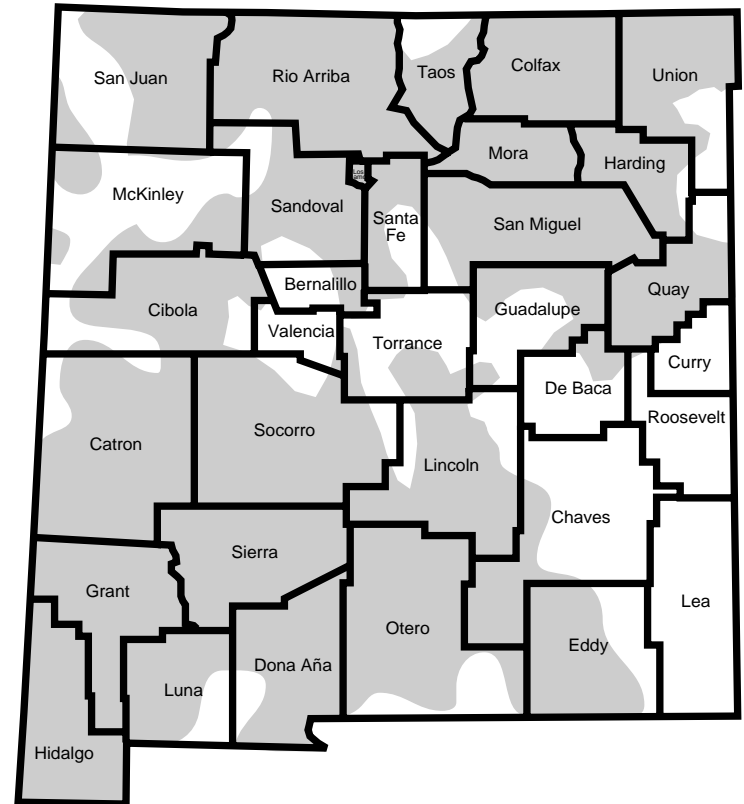
Deer are New Mexico's most popular game animal. The meat, called venison, is delicious, and is also lower in fat and higher in protein than most domestic beef. The key to good venison lies in proper field and home care. The successful hunter must keep the animal's carcass clean, dry, and cool. All visible fat should be cut away when the meat is packaged. Venison should be kept moist while being cooked, and care taken not to overcook it.

Hunters and other wildlife observers know they should search for hidden deer when in the field. Watch for bits and pieces, the rump patch or the tail, the horizontal body line in the vertical stand of trees.

It is easy to walk right past a mule deer that froze in cover and waits for you to pass by. Screen yourself behind shrubs; walk around meadows instead of through them; make as little noise on the trail as you can.

Deer are a beautiful wild resource for all of us to enjoy. With proper management and productive habitat, deer will be on New Mexico's private and public lands for generations to come.

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