

A Year in the Life of the White-tailed Deer

Day One – The Birth of a Fawn

Karl V. Miller
School of Forest Resources
University of Georgia

Spring has arrived and there is new life in the forest. Abundant rains and warm temperatures have transformed the starkness of winter into a lush green landscape. Almost overnight, the new growth of spring forbs, grasses, and vines provides an abundance of succulent deer forage. It's a time of plenty for the deer and a chance for them to restore body condition that has declined during the bleak winter months.

The changing seasons and the abundant regrowth has also set the stage for a miracle that will be repeated millions of times over the next few months. Following the frenzy of the rut last fall, does have been carrying this year's fawn crop. Now, seven months later, it's time for new life to enter the deer woods.

In response to increasing daylength and the hormonal changes during late pregnancy, a doe's behavior changes dramatically. Although does are normally tolerant of other deer, particularly during winter, a few days before giving birth she becomes increasingly intolerant of other deer, including her own young from last year. A few days before giving birth, she isolates herself in a small 'fawning territory' and drives away all other deer that intrude. At this time of year, it is not uncommon to see yearling bucks and does wandering around alone, or with other yearlings who likewise have been driven away by their mother. For young males, this separation may be permanent, but yearling does likely will rejoin their mothers later in the summer.

An experienced mother typically returns to the same fawning territory that she used in previous years. Research by John Ozoga in Michigan found that mature, dominant does always selected the best fawning sites, and that her daughters from previous years often established fawning territories in adjacent areas. This isolation of the mother and newborn is essential to establishing a maternal bond during the critical imprinting period. Although it appears that a doe will imprint on her fawn after only a few hours, it may take several days for a fawn to become fully imprinted on its mother.

Late-term does appear to be noticeably uncomfortable. About 1 to 2 weeks before birth the udder begins to swell. In our research facility, we have noticed that within a day or two before giving birth does often start pacing and the tail may be held at 'half-mast'. However, this may be due to the close confinement of other deer and may or may not happen in the wild.

Following a series of contractions, fawns are born feet first with the head tucked between the forelegs. Usually, the doe is lying during the process, but it is not infrequent for a fawn to be 'dropped' by a standing doe. The birthing process proceeds quickly. It may take less than 30 minutes from the time the doe lies down until the fawn is born and

completely cleaned, although there certainly is a lot of variation among does. A young doe's first labor is usually more difficult and prolonged than subsequent deliveries. If the doe is carrying twins, the second fawn is born 15 to 30 minutes after the first.

Fawns typically weigh between 5 and 8 pounds. Single fawns generally weigh more than those born as twins, and male fawns almost always outweigh females.

The newborn fawn is covered with amniotic fluid and other membranes, which the doe begins cleaning immediately. Her licking of the fawn can be quite vigorous and her intense maternal attention may even knock the fawn down as it attempts to stand. In a short time, the fawn is clean. Does will consume all traces of these membranes along with the afterbirth. In fact, her cleaning is so thorough that she will often eat blood-stained leaves at the birth site. The primary purpose of this process likely is to help the mother identify the scent of her fawn and to imprint on the fawn. However, this thorough cleaning also helps to minimize odors at the birth site that may be attractive to predators and a host of insects. Consumption of the afterbirth also might help supply the doe with a variety of nutrients during this energy demanding period.

Fawns begin nursing almost immediately. This first nursing bout provides the fawn with a high-protein milk called colostrum. This colostrum is essential to the fawn because it provides the fawn with a variety of antibodies that help it resist disease until its own immune system is fully functional.

Fawns are able to stand within about 10 to 20 minutes after birth, but their weak, wobbly legs won't carry them far. Often the exhausted doe is content to lie still for a few hours after birth and allow the fawns to gather strength and coordination before moving them away from the birth site. Although twins are born at the same site, they are separated after birth and are kept at different bedding sites for their first 3 or more weeks of life.

Very young fawns do not appear to have any natural fear of predators, and may even walk up to humans. If this happens to you, resist the urge to touch or 'rescue' the fawn. Rather, just leave it alone - you can be certain that mother is not far away and will be back to care for the fawn as soon as you leave.