

Whitetail Deer

By Dr. Vince Crichton

Whitetail deer first appeared in Manitoba after the last ice age in the late 19th and early 20th century. Agricultural development which was part of early settlement provided ideal deer habitat and they prospered and have continued to do so ever since. This prosperity has been accompanied by up and downs due to the location of Manitoba on the northern extremity of deer range and they are subjected to the ravages of Mother Nature during severe winters. In a series of comparatively mild winters they have spread their distribution further north and have been seen as far north as Big Sand Lake on the west side of province and as far north as the Charron Lake area on the east side. East of Lake Winnipeg, along the Berens and Poplar Rivers, Mr. Geiri Johnson from Arnes Manitoba reported to the author that deer were common in these areas in the mid 30's. Since then, only scattered reports have occurred of the occasional deer however, as suitable habitat is created as a result of logging. Significant numbers of deer have been reported in areas north of the Wanipigow River.

Although an overall provincial survey has never been flown, based on limited surveys and comparison with areas not surveyed, it has been estimated that Manitoba's deer population has numbered up to in excess of 200,000 animals in the early 50's. Severe winter weather, habitat loss and heavy hunting pressure resulted in a dramatic decline to about 30,000 after the 1974 winter. Today, a "guesstimate" would be about 150,000. Most of these animals are located in the southern part of the province with a significant number on private land. The latter, itself, creates major management problems in that deer actively seek out agricultural crops such as cereal crops, alfalfa and various fruits and vegetables in gardens.

Deer are an animal with the ability to take advantage of many different types of habitat in Manitoba ranging from the boreal forested areas through to forest edges, river valleys, agricultural areas and yes, even urban centres.

Although purported to be a browser, they consume a variety of food stuffs including grasses, sedges, fruits, nuts, forbs and mushrooms as well as portions of shrubs and trees and, the ever palatable agricultural foods.

The breeding season for Manitoba whitetails begins in mid October. Although hard data on actual conception dates are not available, based on field observations of rutting activity and limited analysis of reproductive tracts by the author, it is suggested

that most of the breeding takes place from about November 10 - 17. The end result of this activity is fawns which can number from one to three with the average number per female not exceeding two.

Weights of deer are always a topic eliciting a great deal of conversation. Mature males range from about 120 pounds up to and in excess of 200 and occasionally some have been reported to top the 300 barrier. Such animals are truly large deer.

Antler growth is initiated in late April and early May. The size and uniformity of these appendages is dictated by habitat and genetics. There have been large antlered deer from virtually every corner of the deer range in Manitoba and it is impossible to state categorically that large antlered deer come from specific areas. Antlers begin to be shed in December and most are gone by early February although without question some bucks still carry antlers into March. It is assumed, based on observations made of these deer, that they are young animals. Antlers can grow extremely large on relatively young deer and it was noted that the current non-typical record for Manitoba was only 5.5 years old.

Movements of deer in Manitoba can be quite extensive with available records indicating that deer from the Mantagao Lake Wildlife Management Area have been observed in the Narcisse area and as far west as Salt Point on Lake Winnipegosis. Deer relocated from Winnipeg to the St. Malo area have moved back to Winnipeg and as far north as Teulon.

Although there is no large collection of age data for Manitoba deer, the writer collared a deer in the Mantagao Wildlife Management Area as an adult at least one year old and it was observed with the ear tags still in place and with twins at heel 16 years later. It is suggested that an average age might be about 4-5 years.

Although mule deer no longer exist in great numbers in Manitoba they have left their mark in the sense that based on tissue analysis, some areas have a significant amount of hybridization. A notable example is the general vicinity of the Mantagao Lake Wildlife Management Area where a sample suggests that about one third were hybrids between whitetail and mule deer. On an annual basis some antlers examined by members of the Manitoba Big Game Trophy Association display features of both whitetail and mule deer.