

## Mule Deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*)



### **Key to Identifying:**

Mule Deer are relatively large animal with reddish brown coat that changes from tawny brown in summer to dark or grizzled brown in winter; Mule Deer are gentle and approachable.

Mule and Black-tailed deer are found only in North America, where they are typical of the western mountains. Mule Deer range extends onto the plains in areas of rough terrain such as river breaks and sandhills.

### **Biology:**

Mule Deer have a tan or reddish brown coat in the summer and dark, grayish-brown in the winter. They have a dark brown forehead, the belly, throat, nose band, eye ring are white. On the sides of the chin, Mule Deer have black spots.

Their ears are large – about two-thirds the length of the head – with black borders and white hair on the inside, and they have a large white rump patch with a black-tipped tail. Mule Deer can reach up to 95 cm high at the shoulder.

Adult males (bucks), weigh 70 to 115 kg, but in peak physical condition may weigh up to 180 kg. Females (does), weigh 50 to 75 kg.

Each year male Mule Deer grow and shed a set of antlers. Their antlers have two main beams, each of which forks again into two beams..

### **Behavior & Food Diet**

Mule deer travel alone or in small groups, but Mule Deer sometimes form larger groups. The social system consists of clans of does that are related to each other by maternal descent and bucks that are not related.

Mule deer have the widest distribution of all deer found in British Columbia. Most prefer the dry valleys and plateaus of the southern interior, but they are also common in the south-central interior. Because Mule Deer have difficulty moving through snow deeper than 30 cm, they can't survive in British Columbia's extensive alpine and subalpine areas in winter. In summer, most of the deer migrate to higher levels to profit of nutritious new growth, but some deer stay at lower elevations all year.

In the interior, the Mule Deer's traditional winter ranges consist of shrublands in the dry forest zone. They often remain at high elevations until December, then migrate to lower ranges. In the summer,

they usually leave the dry ranges and move to moister, higher elevations.

The Mule Deer's key winter foods include shrubs like sagebrush, bitterbrush, saskatoon, rose, as well as a wide variety of grasses and herbs and the foliage of Douglas-fir trees. In spring and summer, Mule Deer prefer various grasses, along with herbs like balsamroot, clover, wild strawberry, fireweed, and the leaves of many kinds of shrubs.

Bucks, particularly yearlings and two-year-olds, assert their dominance in sparring matches during which they push their antlers together, twist their heads and flailing their front hooves.. These matches are not fights and actually result in social bonding. Females advertise their receptiveness and tend to cluster around the largest bucks.

Bucks can breed as yearlings, but mostly older and dominant bucks mate. The Courtship consists of a tending bond in which a buck keeps other bucks away from the does until they mate.

Following the rut, bucks lose weight, sometimes have wounds or broken antlers and tend to hide and rest. In British Columbia Mule Deer drop their antlers between January and March (the older bucks shed their antlers first). Antlers regrow April through August.

After a gestation period of six to seven months, fawns are born, normally from late-May to June. At this time, the offspring of the previous year goes away and the doe seek a secluded place to give birth. Generally twin fawns are the rule, however young does often have only one, and triplets occur once in a while. Does leave their fawns hidden while they forage in the vicinity, returning occasionally to nurse them.

Typically, does have young throughout life, and more than 90 percent of them give birth every year. Deer communicate with the aid of scents or pheromones that come from several glands. The most important are the metatarsal (outside of lower leg) which produces an alarm scent, tarsal (inside of hock) which serves for mutual recognition and interdigital (between the toes) which leave a scent trail when the deer travel.

### **Management:**

Mule are not at-risk species in British Columbia, but some deer habitat has disappeared permanently because of residential development. Surface mining, hydro reservoirs, highways, and agricultural land development have caused additional habitat loss. Some Mule deer habitats are safe within provincial parks, wildlife management areas and other reserved lands.

Much of the deer range in British Columbia is on Crown lands where forestry and livestock grazing are important land uses and can co-exist.

Several thousand Mule Deer die each year on British Columbia roads and highways - this is a serious problem, especially where highways cross major winter ranges. The Ministry of Transportation and Highways initiatives for example putting up fences allow deer to pass through.