

Oh, Deer!

WRITTEN BY SAM SCHUNK
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When we come across a deer in the wild, it's only natural to be transfixed by its delicate appearance and innate grace. Lost in the serenity of that moment, we may enjoy watching them from a distance as they nibble at blades of grass, care for their young, or even curl up together for a nap in a field.

All beautiful in their own unique ways, three species of deer can be found in the Sunshine State—the White-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), Key deer (*Odocoileus virginianus clavium*) and Sambar deer (*Cervus unicolor*). Commonly named for the color found on the underside of its tail, the White-tailed deer is the most prevalent type in Florida, with a range extending throughout the state from the Panhandle to the Keys. Depending upon the habitat, white-tailed deer vary in size. While adult bucks typically weigh in at 115 lbs., those in the northern regions have been known to tip the scales closer to 190 lbs. Tending to be smaller in stature and weight, females are, on average, 90 lbs., but larger ones may exceed 120 lbs.

Much of the year, the presence of antlers is another clue in distinguishing males from females of this species. While does lack this feature, bucks begin to grow a new set every spring, which becomes covered with velvety tissue that must be removed by rubbing against trees to reveal the hard, smooth antlers beneath. After the breeding season draws to a close in late winter or early spring, the antlers are shed.

Most active at dawn and dusk, white-tailed deer seek out areas with young, low-growing vegetation or edge habitats, which are areas where two different environments intersect such as where a farm field meets the tree

line of a forest. These zones are attractive to deer because they provide safety when browsing for food sources such as flowers, leaves, shrubs, and shoots, as well as a quick getaway from potential predators. To signal alarm to their companions, deer will raise up their tails and flick them back and forth, similar to the motions in waving a white flag. When nervous, they will stomp a foot and snort before fleeing.

If you happen upon a white-tailed fawn, please note that wildlife authorities advise avoiding contact with it. Although a baby deer is able to run and follow its mother soon after birth, it hides in tall vegetation, where its white-spotted, reddish-brown coat acts as camouflage, and it becomes completely still whenever it detects a threat. One of a fawn's primary defenses against predators is its lack of scent, so its mother, with the exception of nursing, will limit her contact with her offspring to minimize her scent in the area in which the young deer is concealed. Therefore, if a fawn does not flee upon your approach, it's generally safe to assume that its mother is not far away.

Catching a glimpse of the two other types of deer found in Florida—the Key and Sambar deer—would involve traveling to opposite regions of the state. As its common name implies, seeing a Key deer requires taking a trip down to the Florida Keys, the renowned archipelago of islands located off the state's southern tip, since this area is the only place in the world where these deer reside. Most easily distinguished by its size, the Key deer is the smallest North American species and

"The more I see of deer, the more I admire them as mountaineers. They make their way into the heart of the roughest solitudes with smooth reserve of strength...ever showing forth beauty and courage." ~ John Muir





subspecies of white-tailed deer, which it closely resembles in appearance. Adult bucks usually measure in at about 30 inches tall at the shoulder and 55 to 75 lbs., while full-grown does reach only 26 inches at the shoulder and weigh in between 44 and 64 lbs.

While these diminutive darlings are believed to have had a slightly larger range historically, they currently keep to 26 islands between Big Pine and Sugarloaf keys, and they are nimble enough, according to Florida Fish & Wildlife, to swim from one island to another. While the current estimated population of 700 to 800 deer is now considered to be stable, the Key deer remains listed as a federally endangered species. Due to hunting and habitat destruction, this species declined to such a point during the 1940s that less than 50 remained, so stringent statewide and federal efforts was implemented to protect these unique animals. The establishment of the National Key Deer Refuge in 1957 was a huge boost for conservation, as were adding fencing along roadways, stepping up law enforcement, and imposing stricter vehicular speed limits since highway incidents account for the greatest percentage of losses annually. Nowadays, most of these deer can be observed on Big Pine and No Name keys, where they graze on over 160 species of plants, including native black, red, and white mangroves as well as thatch palm berries.

Finding the third type of deer living in Florida means making a journey to the Panhandle region toward Apalachicola to visit St. Vincent National Wildlife Refuge, which is located on a 12,490-acre barrier island in the Gulf of Mexico that is only accessible by boat. Native to Southeast Asia, Sambar deer were introduced on St. Vincent in 1908 when three hinds and one stag were imported to the then privately owned island. Over a century later, descendants of those original reddish-

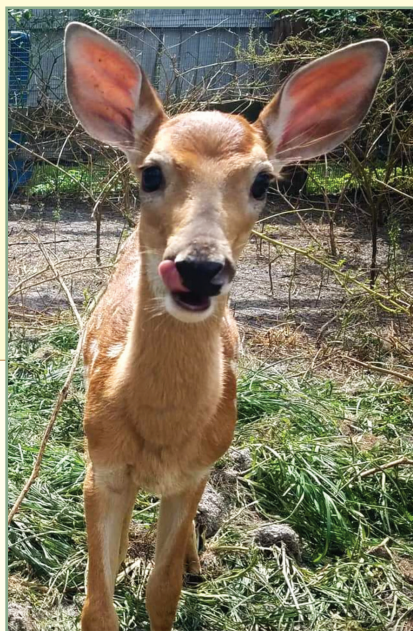
brown deer, which are actually in the elk family, still roam the island. To ensure that these large herbivores do not disrupt the native white-tailed deer and to reduce the impact on the wetlands, this population is limited to between 70 and 100 deer annually. Measuring in at about 6 feet tall at the shoulder and often weighing more than 700 lbs., these enormous, impressively antlered creatures tend to live in groups of about four or five, which may consist of family members. Classified as nocturnal or crepuscular animals since they feed primarily at night and rest during the day, they range in lowlands and marshes, where they graze upon aquatic vegetation, grasses, leaves, and varieties of wild fruit.

Take time to appreciate the deer that make their home in the Sunshine State, and you will find what a uniquely rewarding experience it can be.

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