CAES
The Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station
Putting Science to Work for Society since 1875

FACT SHEET

White-tailed Deer Fawn Fact Sheet

Dr. Scott C. Williams[1], Michael A. Gregonis[2], and Michael R. Short[1]
[1]The Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station, Department of Forestry & Horticulture
[2]Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, Wildlife Division

With the relatively high white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) population in Connecticut, many residents may be lucky enough to see an adult doe with her fawn(s) this spring and summer. In late May or June, some may also see a lone newborn fawn lying in the tall grass, or on the edge of the woods. It is human nature to think it has been abandoned or orphaned by its mother and want to assist it in some way. However, the near scentless fawn uses its camouflage coat and lack of motion to hide from predators as it grows stronger. If a fawn is found lying quietly and appears uninjured, it should be left alone without human intervention. Its mother is probably nearby and the presence of a human may discourage her from returning.

Figure 1. White-tailed deer fawn hiding in the grass. (sciway.net)

Fawn Facts:

In Connecticut, white-tailed deer mate starting in late October through early January, with the peak of the breeding period the last two weeks of November. Fawns are born about 6 months after mating, in late May-early June. Yearling does usually give birth to one fawn. Older does will usually breed twins and sometimes triplets.

Fawns average about 6 to 8 pounds at birth, and will weigh about 60-70 pounds by their first winter. Does nurse their fawns about 4 times a day as newborns and will continue nursing for about 4 months. At about 2 weeks of age, a fawn will start browsing tender vegetation and learn from its mother what plants to eat. Fawns are born with a reddish-brown coat covered with white spots. This coat acts as camouflage as the fawn beds down on the forest floor or in a field. By winter the spots are gone and the coat turns brown. Female fawns usually stay with their mother for a year and often establish their own home ranges nearby, while males usually disperse after a year.

Newborn fawns spend most of their time bedded down, laying very still, making it harder for predators to find them. A fawn's scent glands are not yet fully developed, so its mother will leave the fawn alone for many hours at a time for a few weeks so her

scent does not rub off on it. She will return every few hours to nurse and move the fawn to a new bedding area. A doe seldom strays more than 100 yards from its fawn, always wary of predators.

It is often during this period of doe absence that members of the public encounter a fawn and assume it is abandoned or orphaned. Although most often she is nearby, on occasion, the doe may be injured, killed or have intentionally abandoned her fawn. People might be tempted to remove the fawn from the wild and contact state wildlife officials or local animal control for assistance. These officials will explain the doe-fawn relationship and persuade them to return the fawn to the wild.

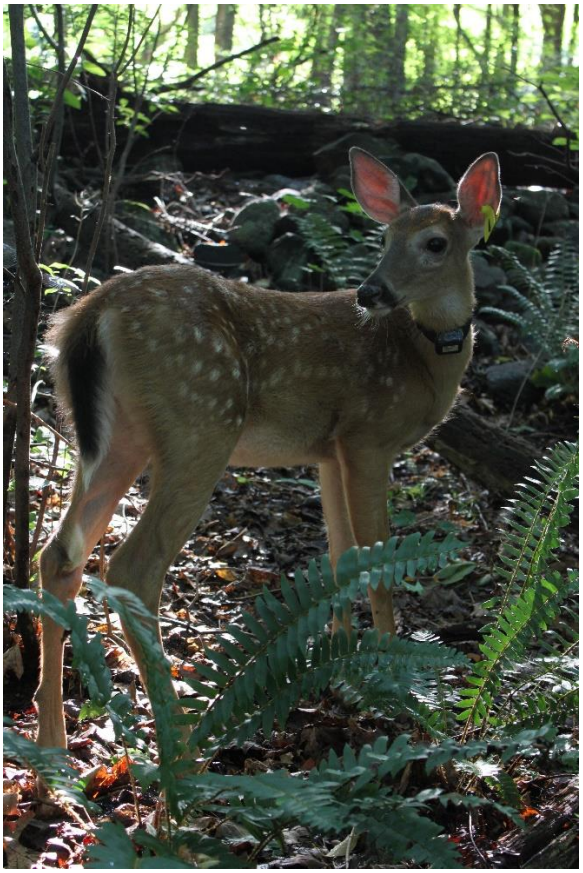

Figure 2. White-tailed deer fawn.

Signs of an abandoned or orphaned fawn include;

- The fawn wandering around crying or bleating
- The fawn has spent more than ten hours in the same spot
- The fawn is unresponsive or lethargic
- The fawn has obvious injuries
- You see evidence of a dead doe in the area

If the fawn has been in human contact for several days or is likely orphaned, it is then transported to a state-licensed wildlife rehabilitator who is permitted to handle and raise it.

Figure 3. Fawn being fitted with radiocollar and ear tag.

Wildlife rehabilitators pen-raise, bottle-feed, and provide natural forage for fawns. The object of the program is to raise and return the fawn to the wild. However, this technique lends itself to daily human contact for approximately 3 months. Because fawns are removed from the wild at a young age, they have not learned self-preservation techniques from their mother and have the potential to imprint on humans and become tame in a short period of time.

Rehabilitated Fawn Study:

Scientists at The Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection, Wildlife Division (DEEP), in cooperation with The Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station (CAES) conducted research to study the survival and movement of rehabilitated fawns after they are released back into the wild.

Figure 4. Soft-released fawns.

During the 2-year study, rehabilitated fawns were subjected to either soft-release or hard-release. The soft-release method consisted of having the rehabilitator permanently leave the holding pen doors open, allowing fawns to roam freely, with water and grain provided within the pen for several months post-release. The hard-release method consisted of transporting the fawns from the rehabilitation facility to a predetermined large intact forest area. Fawns subjected to both soft-release and hard-release were weighed, ear-tagged, and fitted with an expandable break-away radiocollar with a mortality signal, before being released. All fawns were monitored using radiotelemetry on a daily basis for 30 days post-release and then 2 or 3 times/week until the fawn died or 100 days had elapsed.

Study Results:

Regardless of release technique, significant mortality was witnessed in both years: 86% of all fawns were dead within 100 days of release. Hard-release fawns experienced 100% mortality within 35 days of release. Soft-released fawns experienced 69% mortality within 100 days of release. Four soft-released fawns survived past 100 days post-release.

Cause of death for both hard- and soft-released animals were similar: human, coyote, vehicle collisions, pneumonia, bobcat, and unknown causes. Coyotes accounted for 56% of total mortality; unknown causes for 16%; human, vehicle collision, and pneumonia each accounted for 8% mortality; and one fawn (4%) was killed by a bobcat. Causes of death appeared to be similarly distributed, regardless of release technique.

Figure 5. Hard-released fawns.

Fawns in this study exhibited a high degree of release-site fidelity, meaning they did not stray far from where they were released, regardless of release technique. However, hard-release fawns ranged further from the release point than did soft-release fawns.

Conclusion:

Overall, this study found that human intervention does not increase fawn survival, but likely decreases it. Despite substantial efforts by wildlife rehabilitators, there is no substitute for the doe-fawn relationship, which is essential for fawn survival. Members of the public who encounter a fawn should resist the urge to intervene and understand that fawns have a greater chance of survival in the wild without human intervention.

Figure 6. Fawn study coordinator Michael Gregonis prepares to liberate a fawn.

It is normal for a fawn to be left alone for most of the day. Its mother will be back to care for it. She is staying away to avoid leading predators to its location. Keep children and pets away from the area around the fawn and do not touch or try to feed it. A fawn has the best chance of survival when cared for by its mother.

Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank DEEP staff Dr. Howard J. Kilpatrick, Andrew M. LaBonte and William J. Embacher, and CAES staff Mary Beth Chassey and Elizabeth White, and rehabilitators Liz Gode, Deb Corcione, and Donna Sanfilippo.

References:

DEEP "Dealing with Distressed Deer" http://www.ct.gov/deep/cwp/view.asp?a=2222&q=320794&deepNav_GID=1655

DEEP White-tailed Deer Fact Sheet http://www.ct.gov/deep/cwp/view.asp?a=2723&q=326112

Williams, S. C. and M. A. Gregonis. 2015. Survival and movement of rehabilitated white-tailed deer fawns in Connecticut. Wildlife Society Bulletin 39:664-669.

March 2016

Dr. Scott C. Williams, Michael R. Short
Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station
Department of Forestry & Horticulture
123 Huntington Street, P.O. Box 1106
New Haven CT 06504

Michael A. Gregonis
CT-DEEP, Wildlife Division
Franklin Swamp WMA
391 Route 32
North Franklin CT 06254

E-mail: scott.williams@ct.gov
Phone: (203) 974-8609
Website: www.ct.gov/caes

CAES
The Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station
Putting Science to Work for Society since 1875