

Fawn's First Day

White-tailed deer bring new **life** to Minnesota in spring.

WHITE-TAILED deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) live throughout the state, from northern forests to southern farmland. Just about everyone in Minnesota has seen a white-tailed deer. But not everyone is lucky enough to see a young deer being born. Female deer, or *does*, are excellent mothers.

Starting as early as 1 year old, a doe will have one, two, or three fawns each spring. Typically, does that are 2 years old and older have twins. In most parts of the state, half of the fawns born are males and half are females.

Does are social animals. Most of the year, they live in small family groups. As a doe prepares to give

birth, she finds a hidden spot away from other deer.

State parks have good *habitat* (food and shelter) for deer. You might see a deer if you find a deer trail and sit quietly nearby. Or watch for deer by walking quietly in the woods. If you encounter a fawn, keep your distance, stay quiet, and slowly move away without disturbing it. Seeing a fawn in hiding is a special experience.

Photographer Chris Thayer visited Fort Snelling State Park one spring day and spotted a doe giving birth to a fawn. Quietly, he moved away and hid behind bushes as he took this series of photographs of the fawn's first day.

By 4 weeks old, a fawn begins following its mother. The fawn must be about 10 weeks old before it is weaned and can stop drinking its mother's milk and eat only plants.





Being **Born**

A doe and a male deer, called a *buck*, mate in the fall. Fawns develop inside of the doe's womb in her abdomen. Pregnancy lasts about seven months. Fawns grow in a fluid-filled sac called a *placenta*. The placenta is connected to the mother's blood supply. It carries nutrients and oxygen to keep the growing fawn healthy. Most

fawns are born in late May and early June in Minnesota.

❶ A doe can give birth while standing or lying down. The birthing process can last for minutes or hours. The doe experiences *contractions* of her abdominal muscles. These intense muscle movements help to push the fawn out of the doe's womb. Though the doe may strain





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to push the fawn out of her body, she does not make loud sounds. She keeps quiet to avoid attracting predators, such as black bears, bobcats, coyotes, and gray wolves.

2—4 When the fawn emerges, it weighs between 5 and 8 pounds, about as much as a newborn human. The fawn is covered by the placenta and its fluid. The

mother immediately begins to clean the fawn, grooming it with her tongue. She eats the placenta to reduce scent that might attract predators.

5—9 The mother deer's grooming behavior begins the *imprinting* process. Imprinting is when the mother learns the scent of her fawns. This allows her to tell her fawn from others.



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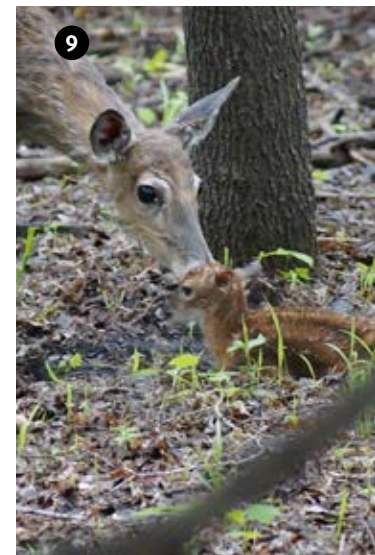
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Standing Up

10 — 13 The fawn is *precocial*, meaning that it can crawl, stand, and walk soon after being born. Within a few minutes, this fawn crawls alongside its mother as she cleans it. Soon after, the fawn searches for the doe's nipples and begins to nurse milk. During the first 24 hours, the milk contains

colostrum. Colostrum has antibodies from the mother's body that help to keep the fawn healthy.

14 While the fawn nurses, the mother licks it near its tail to encourage the fawn to urinate and defecate. The doe eats the fawn's waste to get rid of the scent, which could attract predators.

Do Not Disturb

People should never move or handle a fawn. During the fawn's first two months of life, it spends most of its time away from its mother. So just because you see a fawn alone does not mean that it is abandoned. Very young fawns sometimes approach people, domestic animals, or even cars. Most times, the mother is not far away and will return to feed the fawn. If you find a fawn, leave it alone and move away slowly and quietly.



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Hiding Out

By the time this fawn is 2 weeks old, it will be able to outrun most predators. The young fawn's best defense from predators is to hide and wait for its mother to return.

15 The doe returns several times a day for her fawn to nurse. She uses a soft grunting sound to call her fawn out of hiding. If the fawn leaves the hiding place, the doe follows a scent trail to find her fawn. The fawn has a special *interdigital gland* between the toes on the hooves to mark its scent wherever it walks.

16 To *camouflage* or hide, the fawn has brown fur that blends in with dry grass and leaves. The fur has white spots to mimic sunlight

dappling the ground. For most of the day and night, the fawn beds down and hides in cover. It lies on its belly with its head flat along the ground to make its profile small.

The mother is always nearby so she can hear her fawn. But she stays far enough away so that predators don't key in on the fawn's hiding place. If a fawn encounters signs of danger—predators or people—it makes a strong *bleat* to call for its mother. Then the doe runs to the fawn. The white-tailed doe rarely strikes a predator or a person. Rather, she runs circles around the fawn and snorts loudly from her nose to try to scare off the intruder.

Growing Up

A fawn learns a lot from its mother. Does know where to hide, how to avoid predators, and where to find food. By 18 months of age, most male deer *disperse* or leave their mother to make their own *home range*. Most female deer stay in their mother's home range for their entire lives and raise their fawns there too. In Minnesota,

deer live in a home range of about 1 square mile. But deer will migrate long distances to wintering grounds when weather is severe.

When you see young deer, think about the amazing relationship between does and fawns. Because of their specialized behaviors, plenty of fawns survive and help deer populations grow each year. 17



TEACHERS RESOURCES:

Teachers guide: mndnr.gov/young_naturalists