



LOOK OUT, HERE COME THE WHITE-TAILED DEER

No one knows how many white-tailed deer there were in Michigan before the European settlers arrived.

But it was a lot less than the two million that roam the state today, munching just about everything within reach, including wildflowers, tree seedlings and farmers' crops.

In the 17th Century, Michigan was still one huge, uncut forest, with millions of tall, old trees. Little sunlight reached the forest floor, preventing the widespread growth of seedlings, the deers' main food in winter.

"As we cleared the land, we created deer habitat," said Glenn Dent, supervising interpreter at Kensington Metropark in Milford.

"Now there are a whole lot of little trees. The deer are eating

so many seedlings we're not getting a lot of new growth. And in spring, they feed on wildflowers, so a lot of wildflowers are gone."

To monitor the damage, park officials have fenced in a small wooded area near the Nature Center. Inside, there are seedlings everywhere.

Outside, the pencil-thin shoots all have been bitten off near the ground.

But even Dent is a sucker for white-tails and is always on the lookout for them.

"Look for the white flag," he said, referring to the snowy tuft of tail fur that gives the species its name.

"When they're running, they usually have that white tail up. When they stop, they drop it. After that, don't look for a deer — you won't find it. Start looking for eyeballs, ears, antlers."

In other words, use your spy eyes. Deer don't like to be seen, and their light brown coloring provides excellent camouflage.

On a recent 8 a.m. walk with Dent near Wildwing Lake, neither he nor the Yak caught sight of even one of the park's 166 deer. But it had rained the day before and the temperature was near freezing. The deer were hunkered down, said Dent — invisible but close by.

"They can smell you probably from a half-mile away. There



PHOTO BY SUSAN TUSA

More than 160 white-tailed deer roam Kensington Metropark — so many, their well-worn trails are easy to spot.

are deer looking at us right now."

Starting in late May, hundreds of thousands of Bambi and Falines will be born in the quiet underbrush of woods and forests in every Michigan county. No one knows the exact number, but it's expected to be much higher than last year's total.

"During winters with heavy snow, many deer are unable to find food and die of starvation," said Dent. "But there was very little winter kill this year because there were no big snows. Most females that bred last fall were able to survive, and that number will increase by double with fawns."

That's bad news for Kensington, which has 33 deer per square mile. (Biologists feel the habitats of southeast Michigan can support only 15-20 deer per square mile.) Last year, Kensington staff had to cull, or kill, 110 deer — and the park still fell short of its goal of 20 to 25 deer per square mile.

Two other Metroparks —

Stony Creek and Hudson Mills — had to thin their deer herds, too.

Once, wolves ranged across both the Upper and Lower Peninsulas, keeping the deer population in check. Now the only real animal predators south of the Mackinac Bridge are coyotes, which occasionally pick off young, old or sick deer. But humans bear the main responsibility for deer management.

Are we doing a good job? It depends on your point of view: About 63,000 deer are killed each year by cars, and more than 500,000 a year are killed by hunters.

"Hunting is very important, by our estimation, to maintain a healthy deer herd — one that coexists with the surrounding environment," said Brad Wurfel, a spokesman for the state Department of Natural



PHOTO BY PAT GODDARD

This male deer was photographed in Delta County in the Upper Peninsula.

Resources. "Without a hunting season, the number of deer would go through the roof."

Still, many Michiganders are opposed to hunting. Are you? It's something to think about.

By Patricia Chargot



PHOTO BY SUSAN TUSA

Glenn Dent is the supervising interpreter at Kensington Metropark.

WHEN DEER GET SICK:

While Michigan's deer population is generally healthy, the presence of bovine tuberculosis, which attacks deers' lungs, is a serious problem in the state's northeast corner. Wildlife officials have been fighting it since 1996.

In March, the first cases of chronic wasting disease, which attacks deers' brains, appeared in the Midwest — in Wisconsin, which borders the Upper Peninsula.