

Cherokee Ethnobiology

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WHITE -TAILED DEER

Cherokee Importance

The Deer Clan is one of the 7 Cherokee Clans making the White-tailed Deer a sacred animal. Cherokees from this clan were the keepers, hunters, and trackers of the deer, as well as keepers of the deer medicine. Deer Clan members were swift runners and therefore, messengers. White-tailed Deer have been a staple food source for the Cherokees probably as long as the Cherokees have existed. In addition to being a major food source, deer were used as a resource to manufacture clothing and utility items, as well as being a major source of early trade and commerce. Deer antlers were also used to knap flint into arrowheads, spearheads, knives, etc. before the introduction of steel and other metals. Some of the heavier bones, such as the femur (upper leg bone), could have also been used as tools and weapons. The Cherokee story of the Spirit of Little Deer goes as follows: Little Deer was the protector of the deer. Cherokee hunters were knowledgeable in the ways of hunting the deer and prayed to the Deer Spirit out of reverence when deer were killed for food. If a hunter killed a deer needlessly and without asking the Deer Spirit's pardon, Little Deer would track down the hunter and give him rheumatism so that he could hunt no more. Today, White-tailed Deer are still the most sought-after big game animal in the United States.

Description

White-tailed deer are among the smallest members of the deer family in the United States, with the largest being the moose, then elk. In this region, White-Tailed Deer stand about 3 feet tall at the shoulder and weigh from 80-200 pounds (larger north and smaller south) as adults. Deer differ from other ruminants such as cattle and goats by having antlered males (bucks). These antlers are shed and re-grown every year, instead of horns, which are not shed. Female deer (does) generally do not have antlers, but a few antlered does are spotted every year. When the fawns are born, primarily from May to June, they are spotted, which helps them blend into the cover and hide from predators. The spots usually begin to fade in September. During the turn of the 20th century, deer numbers were at an all-time low. After tremendous conservation efforts, their numbers are higher now than they have ever been in recent history.

Where found:	White-tailed deer can be found in just about any habitat east of the Rocky Mountains, and from southern Canada to Venezuela and Peru, and from dense forests to city suburbs. Whitetails are one of the most adaptive animals in the United States.
Other Name:	Whitetail deer
Taxonomy:	Kingdom - Animalia Phylum - Chordata Class - Mammalia Order - Artiodactyla Family - Cervidae Genus - Odocoileus Species - virginianus

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