



Decoding the Pattern

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THIS IS ONE of my favorite times of the year. We have securely closed the books on another winter. We are eagerly awaiting the weather report, anticipating the last frost and the green light for putting our much-beloved gardens in the ground. The unofficial start of the summer is within sight. The birds have returned and nesting is well underway. And, yes, our deer population is increasing. For this is the start of fawning season. Last year, I saw my first fawn on May 18. Using my keen eye and a good set of binoculars, I could see the white spots were arranged in a straight pattern, signifying that it was a male. Females have a scattered or zigzag pattern of spots.

From where this information originated, I'm not sure, but it is completely UNTRUE. Myth #11: the pattern of spots on a fawn's coat can't tell you what sex it is. The only way to tell the sex of a fawn is to inspect between its legs where the important parts are, just like the doctor did when you were born. In fact, it is impossible to distinguish the sex of newborns of most any species unless you physically examine them. And even then, it is sometimes still difficult.

Seeing the chocolate-brown coat dappled with white spots, it is hard to believe that it blends into anything. But this pattern is amazingly cryptic. Lying quiet and still, a fawn vanishes into the duff of the forest floor instantly. Spots run in two lateral lines from ear to tail on each side of a fawn's body. Other spots appear randomly on the body and flank. All fawns have this pattern, male and female.

Did you know you can tell how many days old a fawn is by counting its spots? Just kidding. The average number of spots on a fawn's coat ranges from 272 to 342. And each spot ranges in size from 0.24 to 0.51 inches in diameter. The number, size and pattern of spots are unique to every fawn. This myth seems to have a lot of staying power, even though I can't find one resource that even suggests there is a rhyme or reason to the spot pattern of a fawn. I guess it is like some of those old wives tales passed down for generations. Not much truth in them, but they sure sound good.