



Pinto Deer

*By J.T. Fleegle
PGC Wildlife Biologist*

REMEMBER what I said last month about being boring brown and that no one pays attention to that magnificent brown coat unless something is amiss? Well, try being a white deer in a brown deer world. While the whitetail coat has many functions, camouflage is arguably the most important. It's hard to blend into a forest or field when you're a beacon of white.

As abnormalities go, this is the one most noted by people. Everyone knows what a deer is supposed to look like. When there is white where there is supposed to be brown, people talk. And what people usually say is wrong. I can't count how many times I've been told that "I saw an albino deer," from folks who were out scouting or on a hike or in a field or on the way to the grocery store.

Albinos are very rare. Albinism is the complete lack of pigment. That means pink eyes and white hooves. It is caused by a malfunctioning pituitary gland. This leaves these animals very sensitive to sunlight and exposure. As a result, they usually die at an early age.

What people mistakenly call albinos are really piebald. The piebald condition is an inherited genetic trait. It causes blotches of non-pigmented areas that vary in size and distribution. The result is a wide range of patterns. Some deer have speckles or whitewashed flanks or the markings of a prize pinto. Others are almost completely white. But if they have the brown eyes and black hooves of the classic white-tailed deer, they are still piebald, not albino.

Although piebald deer are the most common when compared to albino or melanistic (black coat produced by the overproduction of melanin) deer, they are reported at rates well under one percent in the population. Having a white or partly white coat isn't the only thing that makes piebald deer different. They also typically have some other abnormality that may include dorsal bowing of the nose (Roman nose), short legs, curving of the spine, deviated limb joints (turned feet), and internal organ malformations. Those with severe defects die at birth or shortly after. Limited observations indicate that piebald deer can breed with "normal" deer and produce both normal and piebald fawns. All attempted matings of two piebald deer have failed to produce offspring. With less than one percent in the population, I don't think two piebald deer meet in the wild very often. While it may be important for people to set themselves apart from the crowd, I have a feeling that the whitetail is more than happy to just blend in.