



Whitetail Predation

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It's What's for Dinner

THE BURGER — an American food icon. Whole restaurant chains have been built around it — McDonalds, Burger King, Wendy's, Red Robin, Fuddruckers — just to name a few. It's on the menu of countless other eating establishments as well. This is the predicament in which the white-tailed deer finds itself — on the menu of a laundry list of predators. Deer (whitetails, blacktails and mule) are the most wide ranging members of the cervid family. The only place in North America they are not found is the Arctic Circle. Of the three deer species, whitetails are king. They exclusively inhabit the entire eastern U.S., from the Atlantic west to the Rocky Mountains, and even have a taste for the Caribbean, extending south through Central America and into South America.

With this sort of coverage, deer could be the burger of the predator world, well known to both northern and southern carnivores. They also come in a variety of sizes — small for those who prefer lighter fare to large for those with a crowd to feed. So they are a welcome addition to the dinner table for the famished fox or the ravenous pack. What's not to love about the delicious white-tailed deer? In the tropical rainforests of Venezuela, exotic predators such as the jaguar, ocelot, and even the jaguarondi, stalk our very familiar white-tailed deer. Moving to more familiar ground, wolves and mountain lions were the main predators of deer in what is known as the eastern United States before Europeans colonized it.

Historical accounts indicate that deer were the main food source of mountain lions, and were considered a staple of the wolves. These infamous and iconic nemeses of the whitetail have long since vanished from our eastern landscape. But predators are still a part of a whitetail's everyday life. Lest we forget about coyotes, bears, bobcats and humans to name just a few. All still play a very active role as predator in the lives of our modern day white-tailed deer. And like the wolf, mountain lion and jaguarundi, the predators we find today in Pennsylvania are different in size, hunting technique and prey selection. Looking at each, we can appreciate their relationship in Mother Nature's economic market and the role they play in the "circle of whitetail life." So grab a seat at the table. Dinner is about to be served and everybody loves a good burger.