

Life & Times of the

Whitetail



Gee, your hair looks terrific!

WHAT'S SO SPECIAL about hair? When we look at a deer, hair is not the first thing we notice. All deer have hair, so, unless there is something unusual about it (like being white where it is normally brown), no one cares about deer hair. This unappreciated covering of the whitetail is, in fact, key to their survival. From the day a deer is born, its coat keeps it hidden from danger, warm through the winter, and cool during the summer. With a flash of the white hair on its tail, a deer can signal an entire herd that something is amiss.

Fawns are born with little strength and coordination. Their reddish-brown coat dappled with white spots disappears on the forest floor as just another pattern of sunlight and shadow, providing safety in plain sight. Before long the white spots of youth fade and gray shades of winter cloak every deer in the forest.

As the days grow shorter and the temperature begins to dip, this ghost of the forest continues its vanishing act. The hair of a deer's winter coat is mostly gray with reddish-brown tips, snow-white hair on the belly counteracts the shadow cast

by the body and helps prevent a predator's eye from seeing a three-dimensional meal. As are most winter coats, a deer's is toasty warm. Underneath the guard hairs, a soft, wooly underfur is packed more densely than sheep's wool. Air is trapped in the underfur, warmed by the body, and held close to the skin. Bedded during a snow storm, a deer will quickly become a "snowdeer" as flakes pile up on its body instead of melting. Even deer that live in warmer climates need these insulating properties, because wet weather can be as bone chilling as cold weather. Luckily, their winter coats also are water-repellant, because of oils secreted by glands in the skin.

Just as we tuck our winter coats away as the weather warms, deer toss theirs to the ground. Large patches of gray guard hairs and soft underfur are replaced by reddish-colored guard hairs. During this transformation, deer have a "bad hair day" that may last several weeks. Without underfur, warm air is able to move away from the skin by convection, like built-in air conditioning.

So the next time you see a deer, be sure to notice what coat they're sporting and how very fashionable they truly are. 

