

Life & Times of the

Whitetail



Is there a doctor in the house?

Viruses, bacteria, and parasite — each can cause illness or even death to a white-tailed deer. Entire books are written on the topic. But there are no doctors in the forest. Luckily, 99 percent of the time, deer are healthy. Usually, only when deer are stressed and their immune systems are compromised do they become susceptible to an endless list of unpronounceable pathogens.

Hemorrhagic disease is caused by the epizootic hemorrhagic disease and blue-tongue viruses. The first documented outbreak was in 1955 in New Jersey. In its acute form, it causes sudden loss of appetite, disorientation, weakness, respiratory distress and rapid death. Die-offs occur suddenly and almost exclusively in late summer and early fall and coincide with peak populations of insects called midges or “no-see-ums,” which transmit the disease. It is common in southeastern states though outbreaks have been documented outside of this range including in Pennsylvania. Many infected deer live and show only mild signs

of disease or no signs at all. Even if a forest emergency room ex-

isted, this deer disease is untreatable.

Another virus causes cutaneous fibromas — hairless tumors found on the skin. They can be found on any part of the deer’s skin and vary in size from ¼-inch to more than 8 inches in diameter. Most fibromas are black or gray in color, and they can be smooth or warty. Deer with cutaneous fibromas won’t win any beauty contests, but the growths are often temporary and usually harmless.

Bacteria don’t get as many headlines as viruses. Anthrax is an often-fatal disease caused by the anthrax bacterium, which can remain in the soil for years. While this is a frightening thought, only a few outbreaks have been reported. Brain abscesses are also the result of bacteria. A number of bacteria can be responsible for infections that cause neurological problems like circling, lack of coordination and other abnormal behaviors. Sparring and rubbing puts bucks at a higher risk of developing brain abscesses than does.

As for hitchhiking parasites, liver flukes, nasal bots, louse flies, a variety of worms, and more than 20 species of ticks can call a deer home. Deer tolerate them all without much fuss. **1**



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