

Life & Times of the

Whitetail



Habitat, Sweet Habitat

IF THERE'S one thing everybody needs, it's a place to call home — a place to find shelter, a good meal, a drink of water and a warm bed. For deer and other wildlife, that home is called habitat. Any place that provides food, water, bedding areas, fawning areas and escape cover can be deer habitat. Deer are very adaptable. There are few places that a deer cannot find the things it needs to survive, which means they can be found from the big woods to Lancaster farms to Pittsburgh suburbs. Though deer can live almost anywhere, all habitats are not created equal.

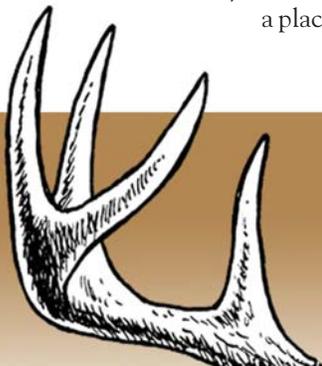
In “good” habitat, food and cover sources are plentiful and of high quality, resulting in less time and travel to find them. The body condition of deer in good habitat is better because they expend little energy for the essentials of life, and they are more productive. Deer in poor quality habitats spend more time and energy finding food and or cover.

What does good and poor habitat look like? Take a walk outside, what do you see? Would a deer have a place to hide or something to eat?

What is growing within a deer's reach — below a height of five feet? Just because it's green and grows, doesn't mean it's deer food. Hay-scented fern, for example, covers vast expanses of the forest floor but deer avoid browsing it because it contains an enzyme that inhibits a deer's ability to absorb nutrition.

Deer need to consume four to eight pounds of forage (thousands of calories) a day for body maintenance, growth and activity. The bigger the deer, the more food it needs. During winter, the maintenance energy for a 120-pound deer is more than 3,100 calories per day. Add the energy needed for travel, feeding, and, for females, fetus growth, and that number jumps to more than 18,000 calories per day.

Nutritional quality varies among food sources. Consider some of a deer's winter forage: hemlock has about 2,300 calories per pound; hobblebush twigs, 2,100; maple twigs, 2,100; cedar, 1,050; pine and twigs, 1,100; and aspen, 1,150. If it's a good year for acorns, the supply can last well into winter and they have about 2,300 calories per pound. Not all forage below five feet is our equivalent of filet mignon. 🍖



By **J. T. Fleegle**
PGC Wildlife Biologist