

Life & Times of the

Whitetail



The Birds & the Deer

WHERE DO baby deer come from? Bambi likely never asked his mother that question. Why? Because deer just know. Nature has programmed this species better than any computer technician ever could. The primary purpose of deer is to make sure there are more deer next year and the next year and the next. Individually, they are ensuring the survival of the species just by doing what they do.

Every fall there is a coordinated effort between does and bucks to ensure their genes will be passed on. Not because of the cooling temperatures or the colorful scenery. Because it is in their best interest to give birth during a time of year when weather and food conditions are favorable. Gestation in white-tailed deer is about 200 days. Hence, conception must take place in the fall for a spring birth to occur. This season of conception is more commonly known as the rut.

For bucks, the rut is very stressful. Bucks spend months preparing for the rut, starting in the spring with the growth of their antlers. Antlers are an important status symbol used to impress the does and intimidate other suitors. They are used to create rubs, which communicate with does and other bucks, and to spar with other bucks. As the rut draws near, lots of spar-

ring and posturing occurs as bucks try to secure a higher rung on the dominance ladder.

Bucks do a lot of preparing for the rut, but does are the ones to signal the start. As does approach estrous (the only time they are able to conceive), all the preparation pays off for the bucks. The most dominant bucks get the first chance to mate with a willing doe.

But as the rut progresses, dominance means less because the majority of does come into estrous at the same time. In Pennsylvania, the first two weeks in November are the peak of the rut. That means hundreds of thousands of females are looking for a mate at the same time. The market is flooded for a short period because does are receptive for only 48 hours. No matter how old, how impressive a rack, or how dominant a buck, he can be in only one place at one time. Mating opportunities walk right by him when he is engaged in the courtship of another doe. That leaves the door open for other, less impressive bucks to sweet talk a receptive doe.

By the end of the rut, after weeks of challenging suitors and chasing does, bucks are exhausted, losing up to 25 percent of their body weight. They discard their rack and replenish their reserves in time to do it all again at same time next year. □

