



Deer Sex in the 21st Century: Part 2

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LAST MONTH everything you thought you knew about the rut was turned on its ear. Tests confirm that does breed with more than one buck and 20 to 25 percent of the time twins aren't even full siblings. Has the deer world gone mad? How can dogma decades old just be tossed aside like yesterday's trash? It's simple. We call it science and research. Sometimes theories are supported, sometimes they aren't. Up until the turn of this century, DNA fingerprinting of deer was a pipe dream. It just didn't exist. All the research supported the theory of a male social hierarchy in which those at the top won the breeding rights with any and all does that crossed his path.

With the advent of DNA technology, however, now we can "see" what we couldn't before. This new knowledge may come as a shock to us, but deer sex has been happening this way for eons. It's just taken us 100 years to realize it. So what is going on if the "prince of the forest" is just another face in the crowd?

White-tailed bucks don't have harems or territories. They form a "tending bond" with a doe in estrous, staying with her for 24 to 48 hours. Does live in small groups and bucks chase individual does. The majority of does come into estrous at the same time. That means hundreds of thousands of does need to be bred during a 2-week period. Because bucks don't have harems or territories, they are stuck courting one doe at a time. That leaves the door wide open for all bucks to find one of those hundreds of thousands of does looking for a romantic encounter. No matter how dominant a buck is, he can be in only one place at one time.

Okay, but certainly the larger, more dominant bucks do more of the breeding. Sorry. An ongoing long-term study shows that most males only sire one fawn per season, and over their breeding lifespan, the average isn't even two. The most successful bucks still have few fawns, and breeding success cannot be predicted by antler characteristics. Yearling males, despite holding the lowest position on the deer dominance totem pole, even breed. In fact, yearlings are part of the breeding scene in all populations studied, even those with a large portion of males 3.5 years and older.

In the end, deer will keep having sex like they always have with no regard to our silly theories and assumptions. Everybody gets in on the action, so let the romance continue.