



## Deer of the Prairie

### Mule Deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*)



Photo by Miller, 1963



Photo by Miller, 1963

### White-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)



### Wildlife and Landscapes

Scotts Bluff National Monument is a unique historic landmark which preserves both cultural and natural resources. Sweeping from the river valley woodlands, to the mixed-grass prairie, to pine studded bluffs, Scotts Bluff contains a wide variety of wildlife and landscapes. The 3,000 acres comprising Scotts Bluff conserves one of the last areas of the Great Plains which has not been significantly changed by human occupation.

### History

During the mid 19th century, the only deer living in the area were mule deer. Several pioneer diaries mention deer being shot for food. Since then, white-tailed deer have spread westward as predators have been eliminated and forests along the rivers have increased. They are highly adaptable to habitats adjacent to croplands.

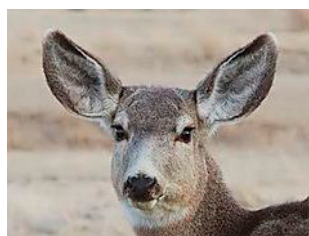
### Telling Them Apart

Mule deer and white-tailed deer are similar, but there are a variety of ways to tell them apart. The most obvious similarity is their color: blue-grey in the winter and reddish in the summer. In size, the two species can also be similar. The mule deer body is 120-210 cm (3.9-6.9 ft) long from nose to tail and 80-106 cm (31-42 in) tall at the shoulders. White-tailed deer are 160-220 cm (5.2 - 7.2 ft) long and 53-120 cm (21-47 in) tall. There is a wider variation in white-tailed deer since there are 30-40 sub-species compared to only 10 sub-species of the mule deer. In weight there is a more marked difference with the mule deer males weighing 92 kg (200 lbs) and females 68 kg (150 lbs) on average and white-tailed deer males weighing 68 kg (150 lbs) and the females 45.3 kg (100 lbs) on average.

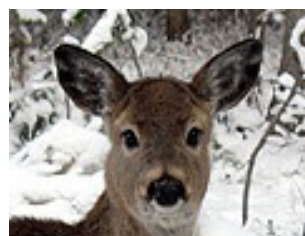
The following sections show a number of ways to identify which deer you are looking at.

### Ears

One of the easier ways to differentiate between the two species is by looking at their ears. The mule deer earned its name for the size of its ears - very large.



Mule Deer



White-tailed Deer

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**Tails**

The white-tailed deer has a very large tail, white beneath, which if alarmed, the white tail raises or “flags”. This “highlighting” communicates danger to other deer. Mule deer tails are much narrower and are black at the tip with the rest white.



Mule Deer



White-tailed Deer “flagging”

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**Antlers**

The antlers of the male or buck mule deer branch equally, each from a separate beam, forking into two tines. The antlers of the white-tailed deer branch from a main beam with prongs.



Mule Deer



White-tailed Deer

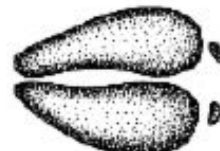
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**Tracks**

White-tailed deer leave hoof prints from hind feet in front of the forefeet when running. Mule deer leave running prints with front feet ahead of hind feet. The reason is their gait. White-tailed deer run with their front feet striking the ground before their hind feet. The hind feet are then brought forward and touch down ahead of their front feet. This running style allows the white-tail deer to sprint with a powerful forward leap. “Muleys” generally keep their legs stiff when running and bounce from one spot to the next like they have pogo sticks for legs.



Mule Deer



White-tailed Deer

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**Habitats**

White-tailed deer prefer forest habitat so are more likely to be found along the river. Mule deer prefer the open spaces of the prairie, therefore are more likely to be seen by the park visitors while walking the trails. Occasionally, the two species of deer will intermingle and be found in one herd.

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**Food**

Deer are browsers, breaking off the tips of limbs, saplings, leaves and low growing stems. Deer will also graze on grass or eat fallen apples in forest openings or fields. In locations where acorns and other types of nuts are found, the animals will paw up leaves on the ground to get at the nuts.

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**Deer Beds**

Deer beds are oval-shaped depressions in grass, moss, leaves or snow where the animals lay down to chew their cud or rest. Deer that are traveling together may lie down in the same locality. Large and small beds together usually represent those of a doe and fawns.

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**Breeding**

Mule deer are more polygamous than white-tailed deer who may mate with only one doe. Females breed at one and one-half years of age with a gestation period of about seven months. A first time bred female or doe has one fawn, while older does usually have twins. Fawns are reddish with white spots.

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**Life Span**

The normal life span is about sixteen years. Coyotes and bobcats, who take the young, are the natural predators here in the park, but wolves, cougars and bears are the major predators in more remote areas. Motor vehicles and trains kill more. In the park in 1989, four deer were killed by vehicles on the Old Oregon Trail highway (Highway 92).