



ENCOUNTERING NEWBORN DEER FAWNS

Fact Sheet #26

OVERVIEW

Newborn fawns are alone and separated from the doe by design. This behavior allows fawns to hide from predators before the fawns are developed enough to outrun them. Approaching or handling newborn fawns increases their stress level and threatens their survival. People often pick up fawns that are alone, thinking they need help, and bring them to local wildlife agencies for care. Although well intentioned, removing a fawn from its hiding place separates it from the doe and severely changes the animal's life.

Big game species employ two different behaviors after giving birth to maximize survival of their offspring. Newborn young that walk with their mothers shortly after birth, such as bison and bighorn sheep, are called "followers." Conversely, offspring such as deer fawns and elk calves that hide and lay still during the first week of life are referred to as "hidiers." Every year, wildlife biologists receive numerous phone calls from the public concerning abandoned newborn fawns. In almost every instance, the fawns have not been abandoned and are waiting for the doe to return to nurse. People who find newborn fawns should never approach or pick them up—doing so dramatically decreases the probability that fawns will survive.

EARLY LIFE BEHAVIOR

Shortly after birth, mule deer fawns exhibit hiding behavior to avoid detection and maximize survival. Newborn fawns are licked clean by the doe to minimize scent and have a spotted coat to help camouflage them. Newborn fawns spend more than 95 percent of their time hiding. Fawns are typically alone, or within a few meters of their twin, during most of the day for the first week of life. They only stand a few times each day when the doe comes to nurse them. Once nursed, the mother nudges the fawn back to the ground and leaves the immediate area—usually remaining just a few hundred meters away.



Photo: Levi Hefelfinger

During the first three to four days of life, fawns try to avoid being discovered. When approached during the hiding phase, fawns typically lay their head and ears flat on the ground and remain motionless even if touched or accidentally stepped on. Research has shown the average resting heart rate of a newborn fawn averages 177 beats per minute. When approached by a human, the heart rate immediately drops to 60 beats per minute and breathing is temporarily suspended; the heart rate and breathing patterns of a newborn fawn return to normal shortly after being left alone.

When fawns are four to six days old, they typically adopt a hiding/bolting strategy. During this phase, fawns remain hidden and motionless until the potential threat is very close, and then bolt from their hiding place and run to escape. By one week of age, fawns typically spend more time on their feet and attempt to escape threats when they are at a greater distance. The likelihood of someone having a close encounter with a fawn is typically greatest during the first few days of life when fawns are only hiding.

TIMING OF BIRTH AND THE IMPORTANCE OF NURSING

The time period when fawns are born is very consistent from year-to-year, but the birth dates vary throughout the range of mule deer. In northern regions, births occur in a narrower time frame because of the later timing of spring plant growth and because late-born fawns may not gain enough weight to survive the next winter. In southern regions, the peak of fawning is not as narrow and may be more influenced by the timing of summer rains in dry environments. In most of the Rocky Mountain states and western provinces, the majority of fawns are born in June.

Photo: George Andrejko



In the southern deserts of Arizona and Texas, most fawns are born in late July and early August, while black-tailed deer in the Pacific Northwest can be born into September.

The timing of birth is influenced by a variety of factors, but the primary driver is to align the fawning period with abundant availability and quality of forage. This is when the doe experiences the greatest energetic demands of late pregnancy and lactation. This is important because deer milk contains nearly three times the amount of fat and protein as a domestic cow, resulting in newborn fawns gaining 5 to 10 percent of their birth weight each day during the first few weeks of life. Undisturbed nursing provides the rich milk needed for rapid growth and survival of a newborn fawn.

ENCOUNTERING A FAWN

People may encounter a lone fawn exhibiting hiding behavior. Lone fawns are not abandoned and do not need help from humans. On the contrary, the doe is nearby and aware of your presence. If the fawn is still wet, it means that it is less than a few hours old. In this case, it is likely that the fawn has

not yet bonded with the doe. There is greater risk of abandonment if disturbed, so leave the area as quickly and quietly as possible. If the fawn is dry, it has likely bonded with the doe and the probability of abandonment is reduced. In this case, be quiet, keep your distance, enjoy the experience, take a picture, and quickly leave the animal undisturbed.

SUMMARY

Most wildlife agencies do not have the resources or facilities to raise newborn fawns, and these animals do not acclimate well after being released back into the wild. Some wildlife agencies also prohibit rehabilitation of deer fawns because of disease concerns. If you encounter a newborn fawn, view it briefly from a distance and never touch it or pick it up.



Photo: George Andrejko

More information on mule deer can be found at www.muledeerworkinggroup.com

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