

ECOLOGY
NATURE RAMBLINGS



Deer

► FROM EARLIEST colonial days, deer have been regarded by Americans with more affection than almost any other form of wildlife.

Not only poets but the hunters who sought deer have praised their delicate beauty, quiet dignity and grace of movement.

When the white men first came to this country, the forests east of the Mississippi were full of one of the finest of all the species, the white-tailed or Virginia deer. This family is still the most widely-distributed, though it is outnumbered in certain areas by the black-tailed or mule deer.

The Indians were dependent upon deer. Deer gave the red man venison and pemmican for food, hides for warmth on winter nights, buckskin for clothing and antler-points for tools and ornaments.

In their turn, the white men who pushed beyond the settlements became quite as dependent upon the deer as the Indian tribes who fought the Europeans' coming. French trader and English pathfinder were alike in this: Boone and Joliet both traveled in buckskins and moccasins.

The white-tailed deer led a hard life, stalked not only by men but by predatory animals such as wolves and panthers. Yet they held their own against them all.

But the long-barreled guns of the whites

dispossessed the Indians and all but wiped out many forms of wildlife. It took a terrible toll of deer. The ax and the plow swept away the native wilderness and destroyed the deer's natural home over vast stretches of territory. Men saw no good in forests when the land could be used for farming. The destruction perhaps was inevitable; pioneering was rough work, and the settlers needed both land and meat.

The low point in the continent's deer population came and went with the turn of the twentieth century. By that time, the reckless hunting by Americans, without thought of the consequence, was coming to an end. They began to make amends for past wrongs. Rigid hunting seasons were enforced, with strict limits on numbers of deer which could be taken.

Predatory animals had been all but pushed into extinction. And the westward course of agriculture helped the deer to return. Abandoned farms, particularly in New England, returned to a semblance of the wilderness they once were. As the brush and trees came back, so did the deer.

Science News Letter, October 10, 1953

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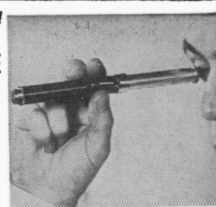
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