



Foothills

Nature Notes

CITY OF PALO ALTO • COMMUNITY SERVICES DEPARTMENT • OPEN SPACE, PARKS AND GOLF DIVISION

Columbian Black-Tailed Deer

The Columbian Black-tailed Deer (*Odocoileus hemionus columbianus*) is common in the foothills. It is mainly characterized by its tail, which is almost entirely black. The tails of other sub-species or races of mule deer all have areas of white in them. The toes of each hoof of the black-tailed deer are close together, a trait which distinguishes their tracks from those of sheep and antelope.

Black-tailed bucks and other male members of the deer family grow and shed a set of antlers each year. During the early summer, a buck is said to be in velvet when its antlers are covered with hairy skin. While in velvet, the antlers grow externally through a build-up of calcium at the tip of each point. In this way, antlers differ from horns which grow internally and are permanent. When the antlers stop growing, bucks rub them against rocks, fence posts, and young trees to remove the velvet. Here in the foothills, the bark of some young trees has been worn away as a result of this activity.

Mating generally occurs during the month of November. Seven months later females give birth to one to two spotted fawns. Immediately after birth, mothers hide their fawns in thickets, tall grass, or behind fallen logs. The fawns remain in these hiding places until they are able to run well. During this period of hiding, fawns depend on their motionless bodies and their spotted coloration to escape their enemies. Fawns apparently have no odor, since predatory animals have been observed to pass by them without noticing them.

Black-tailed deer prefer to feed in open areas or along the edges of chaparral and woodland. Their feeding habits generally follow seasonal patterns according to the type and quantity of food available. During the winter and spring, deer feed in fields and chaparral where they find grasses and wildflowers. They feed in orchards and on cooler northern exposures during the hot, dry summer. In the fall they eat the acorns found in woodland areas. Black-tailed deer favor the tender shoots of chamise, mountain mahogany, ceanothus and California bay laurel, while they occasionally feed on the leaves of poison oak and toyon.



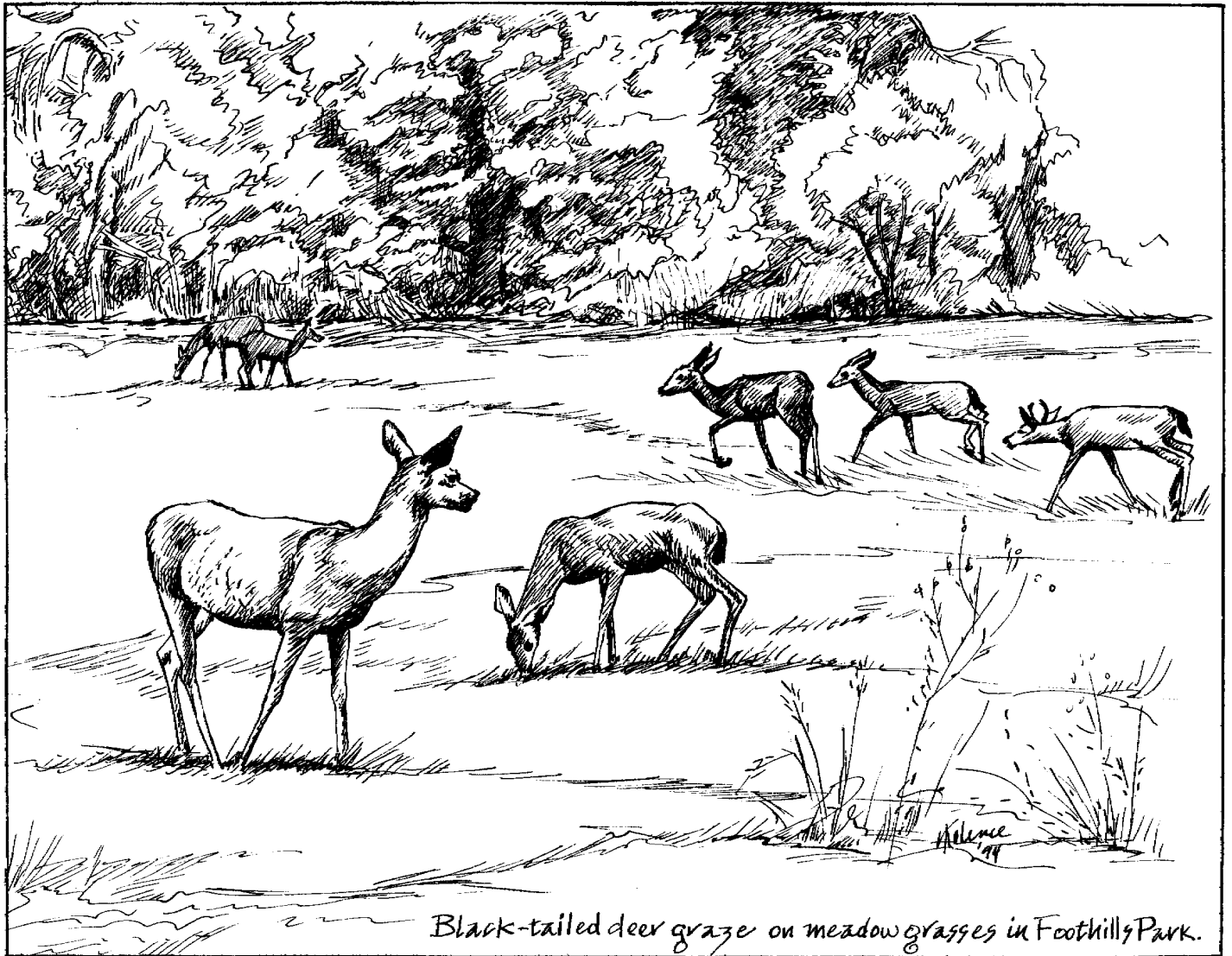
Next to humans, the mountain lion is the most important enemy of deer. A mature lion will kill about 50 deer each year. However, many of these deer are old, sick, or injured and would not have had long lives. Disease and death may result when deer are heavily infested with parasites. Common deer parasites include eye worms, tapeworms, stomach worms, lung worms, fleas, and ticks.

Each year, many people enjoy feeding deer. This is not healthy for them. Artificial feeding can not only cause stomach disorders, but may encourage deer to remain in small areas where they contract parasites and disease. Perhaps of greatest importance is the fact that these deer soon learn to depend on handouts rather than foraging for themselves on natural plant foods. These deer as well as all wild creatures are far more appreciated when observed in a natural undisturbed state.

By Ron Russo

Edited by Kathleen Jones

Illustrated by Virginia Kolence



Black-tailed deer graze on meadow grasses in Foothills Park.