

Wandering The Landscape With Deer



A fawn is rehabilitated by San Diego Fawn Rescue. Photo Courtesy of Shawnie Williams

Angela McLaughlin ~ The Journal • **Nov 14, 2019** Nov 14, 2019

Silently and gracefully, a deer makes its way across the landscape, ears perked up for noises and nose awaiting unfamiliar scents.

It is almost mesmerizing to observe such a symbol of the natural world.

While many people see deer as one and the same, there are two distinct species found in the United States: white-tailed deer and mule deer.

According to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), there are six subspecies of mule deer in this state — California mule deer, desert/burro mule deer, Southern mule deer, Rocky Mountain mule deer, Inyo mule deer and Columbian black-tailed deer.

The Ramona and Julian areas are home to Southern mule deer.

Mule deer get their name from their long, mule-like ears — which are noticeably longer than those of white-tailed deer — in addition to a black tip on their tails. Males are called "bucks," females are "does," and their young are referred to as "fawns."

Deer are very social animals that live in small herds, which vary in size depending on the season.

Bucks go into rut during the fall breeding season and spar for females, so they may be more aggressive this time of year as they battle for a mate. Males will shed their antlers after the breeding season, around January or February. The antlers eventually regrow in spring and are covered in a soft "velvet" that sheds in the summer months.

Deer are typically crepuscular animals, meaning, they are active mainly at dawn and dusk. As foraging herbivores, they browse for grasses, young shrubs, new shoots and buds. But they will also include bark and acorns in their diet. While some residents enjoy having deer in their yards, it is generally not a good idea to put out food for them.

"I do not recommend feeding them, because then they are not fending for themselves and they may become reliant on the food," says Shawnie Williams, founder and director of San Diego Fawn Rescue in Ramona. She adds that, if anything, residents could provide a water source for the animals.

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Williams, who worked with Project Wildlife in San Diego for a number of years, started San Diego Fawn Rescue in 2013, which she says is one of only two fawn rescues in Southern California, with the next closest being in Malibu.

San Diego Fawn Rescue may be reached at bonesrus@san.rr.com or 858-603-0170, and has a Facebook page.

The rescue takes a number of calls each year, with many of them regarding adult deer, which are more difficult to rehabilitate than the young, because they are prey animals and do not respond well to human care. Williams recommends contacting a local wildlife rehabilitator or CDFW for assistance with adult deer.

As for the young deer, she says, "I will take calls about fawns day or night."

The staff typically receives calls during the summer months, as deer give birth between April and August. This year, San Diego Fawn Rescue took in eight fawns for rehabilitation.

Most of the time, the calls are about injured or orphaned fawns.

But sometimes, the calls are from well-intentioned people who say they've "rescued" a nesting fawn after assuming it's been abandoned.

"The worst scenario is when people are out hiking, and they see a fawn under the bush and assume it's orphaned when it's not," she says. "The mother has placed it there for its safety. Newborns do not have a scent, but the mother does."

Fawns' coats are spotted at birth, and they lose the spots within a few months. They live with their mothers for the first year.

Williams explains that the mother will often leave her young and travel a short distance away so as not to attract predators with her own scent. But the mother is always nearby and watching.

"We try to educate people — the mother is there; leave it alone."

She says that if a fawn is up and walking around, crying or bleating, or has a noticeable injury, it may need assistance.

"But if they're snuggled under a bush, they're fine."

One case this year involved a 3 ½-pound baby deer whose mother was hit by a car. He was taken in, rehabilitated and eventually released. Williams says that all rehabilitated young are released in the area where they were found.

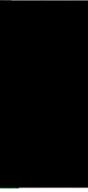
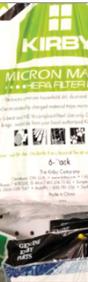
But caring for fawns is not an easy job.

"They are very fragile and a tough species to rehabilitate," Williams says. "You have to be really careful about their gut."

By this, she is referring to the fact that deer are ruminants, meaning they have a multi-chambered digestive tract that includes a rumen. Deer bring food back up from the first part of their stomach (the rumen) to chew it again. They rely on microorganisms in their gut to break down and digest their food, and without a healthy amount of these microorganisms, the deer cannot digest.

This is why it is imperative that fawns not be taken from the wild unless truly necessary.

"There was a lot of food for deer this year, so they weren't starving," she says. "The main thing is cars and getting preyed on by mountain lions."



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As fascinating as deer are, some people prefer to keep them out of their yards and gardens. This can be accomplished with deer repellent sprays or cultivating plants that deter them, such as lavender and chives. Placing nets over the tops of gardens can keep curious deer away, as well.

Captivating the hearts of many an animal-watcher, deer are a joy to observe. Their graceful demeanor can make our hectic world feel like a much gentler place.

So the next time you spot one, take a moment to appreciate this beneficial creature on the landscape.



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