

THE FIRST MONTHS

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Early summer is a time of plenty in the deer woods, but there are many dangers as well, especially for vulnerable newborn fawns. During the first few weeks of life, the fawn's main defense against predators is to hide. Contrary to popular belief, the fawn is not odorless. However, because their scent glands are not well developed, their odor certainly is less than that of an adult.

At birth, the fawn's coat is a reddish brown with numerous white spots. On either side of the back from the neck to the tail there are two rows of white spots that almost touch each other. There are about 30 to 40 spots in each of these rows. Scattered on each side of the fawn there are about 100 more spots of various size and shape. These spots are very vivid in young fawns, but because the hairs are not white to the roots, as the fawn grows older, some of the white is gradually worn away and the spots begin to fade before the fawn molts into its winter coat.

The fawn's coat is well suited for hiding in the forest. Sunlight filtering through the leaves casts a dappled pattern that matches the fawn's coat, making it almost invisible. However, the spotted pattern is not good camouflage in grassy areas where newborn fawns can be easily spotted.

For the first few days to a week, newborn fawns may spend 90 to 95 percent of their time bedded, although they may stand occasionally to stretch or to shift bedding sites. When bedded the fawn will either lie curled in a tight circle or rest with its head up alert for danger. While resting, the fawn has a rapid heartbeat (more than 175 beats per minute) and breathes about 20 times per minute. However, when frightened, the fawn drops its head and folds its ears back. The heart rate drops dramatically to around 60 beats per minute and breathing becomes shallow and slow. In this state of 'alarm bradycardia', the fawns usually will not move even when touched. Clearly this behavior is an adaptation to reduce the chance of detection by predators. By about 1 week of age, fawns will run when discovered and their agility and speed will quickly outdo even the most seasoned athlete.

Does do not stay with their bedded fawns, but typically remain in the general vicinity ready to come to the defense of their newborns. In fact, mimicking the bleat of a fawn at this time of year often can bring a doe running. A doe doesn't seem to be able to distinguish the call of her fawn from that of other fawns, but rather relies on the fawn's scent for identification. At times, the bleat of a strange fawn will cause a doe to check on the welfare of her own fawn.

After the first few days, fawns will begin to follow their mothers for short distances and begin exploring their world. However, during the first 4 to 5 weeks they still remain

bedded for most of the day. At this stage of development, fawns begin to choose their own bedding site by wandering off some distance from their mother and lying down while the doe continues to feed. Often, the doe does not know the exact location of her bedded fawns. Although the doe may use her sense of smell to help locate her bedded fawns, usually she simply returns to the general vicinity where she left the fawn and gives a low intensity 'maternal grunt'. In response the fawn jumps up and runs to the doe, and may utter a soft mew. If the fawn fails to respond, the doe walks around in the area and grunts more intensely.

Does nurse newborn fawns about 4 to 6 times each day, although some may nurse more frequently. Young fawns may only consume 3 or 4 ounces of milk at each nursing bout, but older fawns may take 6 to 8 ounces. Deer milk is more concentrated and has a higher fat content than cow's milk, which explains why cow's milk is a poor choice for raising fawns in captivity.

While nursing, the fawn appears visibly excited. Often the fawn bumps the udder with its head to stimulate milk flow. While nursing, the tail is elevated and wagging, and the fawn may emit a subtle nursing whine. While the fawn is nursing, the mother vigorously grooms the fawn, particularly around the anal and genital areas to stimulate urination and defecation at the nursing site. The mother may consume droppings of very young fawns. After about 2 weeks the fawns no longer needs this stimulation to defecate and doe stops licking the anal region, although grooming of other regions continues.

At about 2 weeks of age fawns begin experimenting with tender vegetation. By watching its mother feed, and by experimenting on its own, the fawn soon learns what foods to select. After about 2 months of age, the 4-chambered stomach is fully developed and the fawn likely could survive without its mother's milk. However, fawns will continue to nurse until they are 4 or 5 months of age, or longer if the doe lets them.

As with many social animals, play is a very important part of a fawn's social and physical development. Play helps fawns strengthen their muscles and reflexes that are critical for escaping predators. During play, fawns dash about in tight circles around their mother, and may toss their head, buck, or jump. Often a fawn may engage its mother in a short time of play. On many occasions I've seen a fawn run around its mother, stop in front of her and solicit her participation by backing up and shaking its head in shoulders from side to side as if to say "Com'on mama, chase me!". In many cases the doe will oblige and participate in a quick game of chase.

When playing together, fawn games are suggestive of many children's games like tag. I've even watched fawns by a riverbank running up and down the bank and splashing in the river playing a game that reminds me of "King-of-the-hill".

Even more than physical development, play helps fawns refine behaviors that will allow them to establish their place in the social order. Mock fighting, aggressive postures, and scent marking are all part of fawn behavior. Although a doe fawn's social status later in life often is inherited from its mother, this social integration is also critical to determine

who obtains and defends the choice fawning or feeding sites. For males, play provides the foundational skills for the development of behavior that will allow them to successfully compete for breeding rights later in life.

By fall, does have provided fawns with all of the skills necessary for survival. While female fawns will almost certainly remain with their mothers until the following spring or longer, male fawns become much more independent of their mothers. During their first fall, or at least by the following spring, young bucks typically leave their mothers to join with other young males. These dispersing males may establish new ranges some distance from their natal range and at this point they are 'on their own'.