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DIFFERENTIATION OF MULE DEER AND WHITE-TAILED DEER

by David W. Oates

The mule deer was so named because of the appearance of its ears. Compared to the whitetail's, the mule deer's ears are noticeably oversized, measuring fully one-fourth larger.

The whitetail is also well named, for its most distinctive feature is the large tail or "flag." The upper surface of the underside is pure white and is often exposed when the deer is fleeing. Instead of a "white flag," the mule deer's tail can be more likened to a black-tipped rope.

Antlers, too, serve to differentiate the species. In the whitetail, the points on each antler arise from a single main beam, much as the points on a garden rake arise from the iron crosspiece. On the other hand, the mule deer's antlers are basically in the form of the letter "Y" and the upper ends fork to form two smaller "Y"'s. The ends of these may fork also.

The whitetail's winter coat has a buff cast while the mule deer's is a plain gray. Both have white bellies; however, the mule deer's brisket is a rich brown. Also, the mule deer's brow has a distinct, dark gray patch.

But regardless of physical appearances, the mule deer proclaims its identity in no uncertain terms when he bounds away. Unlike the loping gait characteristic of the whitetail, he bounces along stiff-leggedly, striking all four hoofs at once, reminding you of a boy on a pogo stick.

a) An interesting feature of both species is the two sets of specialized skin glands. The preorbital tear glands, which lie just in front of the eyes, lubricate and clean the eyes. Longer and wider than a whitetail's this gland sometimes measures more than an inch in the mule deer.

b) The metatarsal glands occupy an elongated area on the outside of the hocks. This area, which shows as a "part" in the hair, is four to five inches long in mule deer, but scarcely an inch long in whitetails.

c) Another characteristic that can be used to differentiate normal (non-hybrid or old specimens) individuals is their "two front teeth." The two incisors of mule deer are longer and narrower than a whitetail's both in fawns and adults.

(a) preorbital tear glands
Whitetail deer

(a) preorbital tear glands
Mule deer

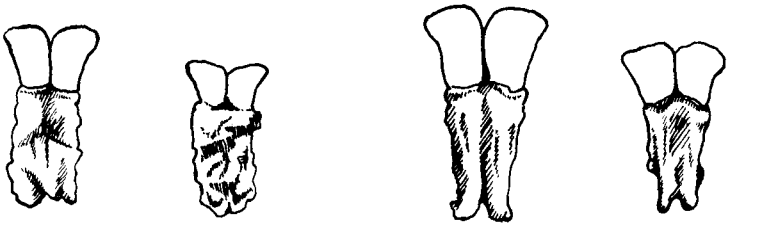
(b) metatarsal glands
Whitetail deer

(b) metatarsal glands
Mule deer

(c) two front teeth

Temporary teeth found in fawns

Permanent teeth found in adults



Mule deer ***Whitetail deer*** ***Mule deer*** ***Whitetail deer***