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The Phantom Deer

**When Daniel Boone goes by at night
The phantom deer arise
And all lost, wild America
Is burning in their eyes.**

— Steven Vincent Benét

The white-tailed deer travel a path through these woods, going downslope near the brook, which they cross at a certain place. Deer have used this same path all my life, and I have imagined them passing along the “map” of it to generations of youngsters. Maybe they have done this for centuries. In the winter we can easily see their heart-shaped tracks in snow, but there are enough wet places on this route to show tracks anytime. A deer that is bounding or running leaves a track with spread toes. In open woods or clear land, a deer will typically run at a canter for a few paces and then leap up as if to get a look around. They can leap thirty feet at one bound.

The white-tailed deer are our only local species. That tail is pretty long, about twelve inches, and often as the deer go bounding away, you can see the white underside as the tail is held up tall. The does (females) especially do this. Other times, the tail is flattened downward, and the dark top side blends in with the rest of the coat and is not so visible. Deer show the white flag in order to be easy to follow, for guiding youngsters or others in the herd. But a single animal wanting to disappear from a pursuing predator will not flash the flag. And bucks are more likely to flare out their white rump hair when running, rather than raising their tails. That white rump hair is three inches long and they can flare it or not, as they choose.

This is winter, and Monterey folks have been noticing places where the deer have dug snow away in order to find acorns. Turkeys do this, too. Deer are browsers and nip off buds and twigs, also bark. I have read one account of deer eating fish, though I find this hard to picture. These fish were reportedly left behind by fishermen, which is also tough to figure.



The teeth of a deer are designed to pull off bark or nip twigs, and then pass these back to the grinding teeth which have many sharp cutting ridges, built to deal with tough and woody material. The long digestive system does the rest, with a rumen that can hold eight to ten quarts of food, and other specialized sections: the reticulum, omasum, and abomasum. There are sixty-five feet of intestines! This digestive system does not include a gall bladder, since these are not necessary for digesting most plant foods. We have to wonder again about a deer eating a fish.

Deer have no upper teeth right in front, just a tough pad on the top jaw. We used to watch our goats ripping bark off trees with this same kind of dentition. The lower jaw has sharp incisors and can cut the bark and pull it off a little, then hold it pinched up against that upper tough pad. Gripping the bottom end of a strip of bark, the goat or deer can expertly pull and rip off a long piece of bark, stripping way up the tree before yanking it loose. Then all this tough stuff heads down into the four sections of stomach and miles of intestines. Adult deer weigh about 150 to 200 pounds. Every year the males develop antlers, starting

with a “button” and then a “spike,” but you can’t tell the age of a deer by its antlers. They are a good indication of how well fed he is.

Year after year antlers grow and then are shed, which might well make you wonder why we don’t find them lying in the woods. If we are lucky, we do. More often who finds them are the rodents who want the calcium they contain. Even when we do find an antler, it is likely to be well nibbled by mice. The bucks grow antlers in the fall, for rutting season. This is mating time and they first spar with saplings and rub their itchy antlers there to get the velvet off. Then they will fight each other, pushing their heads together. By mid-December mating time is over and the does are pregnant. Bucks drop their antlers. They have often lost weight during this time due to a lack of interest in eating.

Fawns are born in early May or June and at first have no scent so predators can’t find them. The mother goes off browsing and comes back to feed the new babies several times a day but otherwise she stays away so her own scent doesn’t attract predators to the fawn. At three weeks, the fawn follows the mother. By August the fawns are eating, as well as nursing and by September they are weaned. Those bucks have got antlers again already and the seasons roll around.

Maybe that folk hero Daniel Boone still goes by at night, in his coonskin cap. I used to get him confused with Davy Crockett, who not only had the same kind of hat but was also played by the same actor on television, Fess Parker. One thing I know they both did was go silently through the woods, like the phantom deer of wild America. They got through the mountains by Cumberland Gap, “kings of the wild frontier” two centuries ago.

I think my East Monterey deer were here looping through these woods then, and ever more will be. May it be so.

— Bonner McAllester