

"Baby Sitting Service" in the Wild?



Brief: Sneaky Deer Moms use Another Species as Babysitters" was the title and I found it intriguing. My first thought was that deer were adept at using the sounds of nature like increased squirrel chatter or bird noise that would alert them to danger near their fawns. But much to my delight, given the "mule madness" trend in the deer industry, it turned out to be a comparison of the more aggressive behaviour of mule deer mothers and the more timid whitetail mothers. Although this is a study of wild deer behaviour, we recognize that the strategy our farm-raised does employ for the protection of fawns is very similar to their wild relatives. Instinct leads mother deer to separate fawns and hide them in the grass, away from predators. Fawns are born with no scent, so their mothers return only a few times a day to move them and clean them to keep them scent free.

The article goes on to say, "while studying deer on a cattle ranch in the 1990s, Susan Lingle -- now a behavioral ecologist at the University of Winnipeg in Canada -- noticed that white-tailed deer often left their fawns near female mule deer while they went off to browse. On multiple occasions, Lingle saw coyotes try to kill white tail fawns, only to be driven back by the striking hooves of an adult mule deer. Moreover, white-tailed fawns were more likely to survive in years when mule deer were abundant."

I found that to be an interesting statement. As part of a trapping family, I recognize how the cycles of one species often affects another. Lynx populations are very closely tied to showshoe hare populations, which seem to have a 10 year cycle at which time disease drops the population of hares and thus the lynx too are affected. We would often just attribute

high fawn survival rates and mule deer abundance to good feed and forage. So the fact that in some years, the good babysitting service could be a result of abundant mule deer, which in turn adds to the protection of whitetail fawns, is a new dimension to consider regarding fawn survival in the wild. Interesting study to be sure.

Lingle and her colleagues "found that mule deer moms tended to stay close to their concealed fawns, while white-tailed moms wandered farther afield. And while the two species were often found together, it was usually white-tailed deer who came to join mule deer groups, not the other way around. Perhaps most strikingly, female white-tails actively chased away other females of their own species, but hardly ever showed aggression toward mule deer."

So apparently, according to Lingle, the findings suggest that "white-tails actively take advantage of mule deer's protective instincts." This research has not yet been published but has been presented earlier this year at the Animal Behavior Society's 2017 conference at the University of Toronto Scarborough. Perhaps this is interesting take-away information for producers who farm mule deer and whitetail does together. Have you noticed a difference in mule deer and whitetail doe behaviour and can you use it to your advantage on the farm?

-Tara-Lynn Barks



<https://www.insidescience.org/news/brief-sneaky-deer-moms-use-another-species-babysitters>

<http://www.linglelab.org/research.html>

Photo by Dale Barks

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- date of birth • farm origin

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