



Ecology and behavior of mule deer on the Rosebud Coal Mine, Montana
by Duane E Fritzen

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
Biological Sciences
Montana State University
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Abstract:

Mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) inhabiting the Rosebud Coal Mine near Colstrip, Montana were studied 1992-1995. Aerial surveys were used to assess distribution and abundance of deer. Radiotelemetry provided information regarding deer movement, activity, use of vegetation-cover types, and survivorship. Biological materials obtained from collected deer provided information regarding food habits, physical condition, and productivity.

Based on aerial surveys, male and nonproductive female groups exhibited similar distributions different from that of productive female groups. Deer population density, approximately 7.5 deer / km² during this study, increased 1974-1994, while deer distribution shifted from outlying portions of the study area to core reclamation sites.

Fifty of 55 radiocollared deer monitored during this study were yearlong residents of the study area. Mean home range size of males exceeded that of females annually and during all seasons. Diel mobility and activity of females during summer, fall, and spring exceeded that during winter. Mobility and activity were greatest during nocturnal, afternoon, and diurnal hours during summer, winter / fall, and spring, respectively. Deer preferred pine savannah, riparian, and reclamation vegetation-cover types and avoided mixed shrub and disturbance types. Annual survivorship of radiocollared fawns, adult females, and adult males averaged 43.1, 90.0, and 57.7%, respectively. Leading causes of death for fawns and adult females were coyote predation (58.6%) and vehicle collision (17.2%). Hunter harvest accounted for 87.5% of all adult male deaths.

Examination of collected deer indicated forbs comprised 88.2; 50.5, and 55.9% of diets during summer, fall, and spring, respectively. Browse predominated during winter, forming 79.4% of diets. Physical condition of deer was greatest during fall and least during spring. Female ovulation and fertilization rates were high, averaging 1.68 ova / female and 100.0%, respectively.

Although deer abundance increased since 1974, population characteristics during this study suggested a relatively high-density but stable population. Deer movements suggested the study area provided high-quality habitats capable of supporting deer on yearlong home ranges. Post-mining reclamation was used extensively and consistently by deer. Collectively, these findings suggest that surface mining on the study area benefited deer, at least in the short term, providing increased diversity of habitats resulting in increased abundance of deer.

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of

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APPROVAL

of a thesis submitted by

Duane E Fritzen

This thesis has been read by each member of the thesis committee and has been found to be satisfactory regarding content, English usage, format, citations, bibliographic style, and consistency, and is ready for submission to the College of Graduate Studies.

December 26, 1995
Date

Luha Mucki
Chairperson, Graduate Committee

Approved for the Major Department

December 27/95
Date

ERVase
Head, Major Department

Approved for the College of Graduate Studies

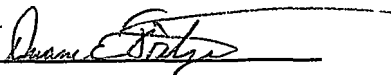
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ABSTRACT

Mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) inhabiting the Rosebud Coal Mine near Colstrip, Montana were studied 1992-1995. Aerial surveys were used to assess distribution and abundance of deer. Radiotelemetry provided information regarding deer movement, activity, use of vegetation-cover types, and survivorship. Biological materials obtained from collected deer provided information regarding food habits, physical condition, and productivity.

Based on aerial surveys, male and nonproductive female groups exhibited similar distributions different from that of productive female groups. Deer population density, approximately 7.5 deer / km² during this study, increased 1974-1994, while deer distribution shifted from outlying portions of the study area to core reclamation sites.

Fifty of 55 radiocollared deer monitored during this study were yearlong residents of the study area. Mean home range size of males exceeded that of females annually and during all seasons. Diel mobility and activity of females during summer, fall, and spring exceeded that during winter. Mobility and activity were greatest during nocturnal, afternoon, and diurnal hours during summer, winter / fall, and spring, respectively. Deer preferred pine savannah, riparian, and reclamation vegetation-cover types and avoided mixed shrub and disturbance types. Annual survivorship of radiocollared fawns, adult females, and adult males averaged 43.1, 90.0, and 57.7%, respectively. Leading causes of death for fawns and adult females were coyote predation (58.6%) and vehicle collision (17.2%). Hunter harvest accounted for 87.5% of all adult male deaths.

Examination of collected deer indicated forbs comprised 88.2, 50.5, and 55.9% of diets during summer, fall, and spring, respectively. Browse predominated during winter, forming 79.4% of diets. Physical condition of deer was greatest during fall and least during spring. Female ovulation and fertilization rates were high, averaging 1.68 ova / female and 100.0%, respectively.

Although deer abundance increased since 1974, population characteristics during this study suggested a relatively high-density but stable population. Deer movements suggested the study area provided high-quality habitats capable of supporting deer on yearlong home ranges. Post-mining reclamation was used extensively and consistently by deer. Collectively, these findings suggest that surface mining on the study area benefitted deer, at least in the short term, providing increased diversity of habitats resulting in increased abundance of deer.

INTRODUCTION

Mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*) are widely distributed and extensively studied in western North America. Investigations have been conducted in a wide variety of natural environments including mountain-foothill (Robinette 1966, Ihle Pac et al. 1988, Pac et al. 1991), prairie (Dusek 1975, Severson and Carter 1978, Swenson et al. 1983, Wood 1986, Jackson 1990), breaks and badlands (Mackie 1970, Komberec 1976, Dood 1978, Riley 1982, Kraft 1987, Hamlin and Mackie 1989, Jensen 1992), and chaparral and desert (Linsdale and Tomich 1953, Kucera 1978, Bowyer 1984, Ordway and Krausman 1986) environments. Studies also have been conducted in human-disturbed environments including agricultural (Egan 1957, Ball 1987, O'Connor 1987), industrial (Eberhardt et al. 1984, Clark and Medcraft 1986, Medcraft and Clark 1986) and urban (Mackie and Pac 1980, Happe 1983, Vogel 1983, de Vos et al. 1984, Bellantoni et al. 1993) environments. However, studies of mule deer occupying a complex of undisturbed and highly disturbed environments generally are lacking.

The human population is expected to increase by 19.4% (3,709,000 individuals) in the Intermountain West region of the United States between 1995 and 2010 (Bureau of the Census 1994). As human population increases, development and alteration of natural habitats will continue such that mule deer may be increasingly impacted (Reed 1981). Mule deer populations already have decreased or been eliminated over portions of the species original distribution, due primarily to recent human influences (Geist 1990). Accordingly,

understanding the ecology of mule deer inhabiting human-disturbed environments is necessary if populations are to be maintained in the future.

The Rosebud Mine and town of Colstrip in southeastern Montana collectively comprise an environment in which undisturbed native vegetation and intensively disturbed agricultural, industrial, urban, and postmining reclamation sites are intermixed. Further, undisturbed and disturbed sites are highly fragmented. The area is inhabited by a sizable population of Rocky Mountain mule deer (O. h. hemionus), many members of which have access to the entire range of sites along the disturbance continuum. Thus, the area represents a unique environment in which to examine mule deer population-habitat relationships in the presence of variable human disturbance.

This study was initiated in July 1991 by Western Energy Company (WECO), the owner and operator of the Rosebud Mine, in response to concerns about mule deer encroachment upon industrial and residential sites on the Rosebud Mine and in the town of Colstrip, respectively. The increased presence of mule deer in these areas resulted in a greater incidence of deer-human interactions, many of which, including deer-vehicle collisions, deer damage to gardens and ornamental shrubbery, and direct physical contact between deer and humans, were detrimental to either humans or their property. The goal of the study was to define habitat / mule deer population relationships in this variable environment. Specific objectives were to (1) evaluate characteristics of disturbed and undisturbed habitats available to mule deer on the area, (2) define physical, reproductive, survival, and behavioral characteristics of mule deer occupying the

area, and (3) assess mule deer distribution among and use of disturbed and undisturbed vegetation-cover types on the area. Understanding population-habitat relationships is necessary if WECO is to achieve its long-term management goals of (1) maintaining the mule deer population on the Rosebud Mine, while (2) minimizing the occurrence of negative deer-human interactions in Colstrip.

STUDY AREA

Location

The study was conducted primarily in the vicinity of the Rosebud Mine and nearby town of Colstrip, in southeastern Montana. Observations, however, extended south to the Big Sky Mine and west to the Sarpy Creek Mine in Bighorn County, yielding an overall study area of approximately 300 km² (Figure 1). The study area as defined specifically for analytical purposes was that area (130.2 km²) containing all relocations of radiocollared deer residing yearlong on or about the Rosebud Mine. The Rosebud Mine lies at 45° 51' north latitude and 106° 37' west longitude and surrounds the town of Colstrip. The East Fork of Armell's Creek is the major drainage within the study area. It courses through the study area along a predominantly east-west axis before turning north and eventually emptying into the Yellowstone River, roughly 50 km north of Colstrip. Major topographic features of the area include the Little Wolf Mountains and the Greenleaf Ridge which separate the Rosebud Mine from the Sarpy Creek and Big Sky Mines, respectively.

Regional and Local Geology

The study area was located in the northern portion of the Powder River Basin in the Northern Great Plains physiographic province (Plantenberg 1983). Geologic history of the region since the Precambrian includes periods of deposition, deformation, and erosion. Deposition occurred during the Paleozoic

