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It is almost breeding season for white-tailed deer. This is known as the “rut,” a time when bucks are furtively seeking receptive does. Some rutting behaviour starts as velvet is shed from the antlers and coincides with decreasing daylight and increasing testosterone levels.

One common behaviour that bucks display during the rutting season is using their antlers to make **rubs** on trees. A chosen rub site might be a woody-stemmed shrub, a thin sapling or a small tree, around 3-4 inches in diameter. Generally, a rub tree is less than 8 inches in diameter. There are different reasons for rubbing. Scraping antlers on trees helps to strengthen the neck and shoulder muscles for potential battles with other bucks. It also allows for a release of pent up aggression from rising testosterone levels. A favorite rub tree can be shredded from repeated abuse, especially as multiple bucks may use the same tree. Such battered trees serve as “sign posts,” offering visual clues for other deer that one or more bucks passed through or may still be in the vicinity. A rub can also act as an olfactory sign post, when other deer are alerted by scent left on the tree from glands on the buck’s forehead. The combination of visual and olfactory signs may intimidate smaller bucks to the point of hormonal suppression: their testosterone levels stay low enough that they will not try to mate. Bucks also make **scrapes** under trees by intentionally disturbing the leaves and soil around the trunk, depositing scent from glands on their nose and forehead. Afterwards, they often paw the ground and release urine, leaving more of their signature scent behind. Rutting white-tailed bucks frequently choose a **licking branch**, which — you guessed it — applies even more of their individual scent to inform other deer of their presence.

Whitetails are “**polyandrous**,” meaning they mate with multiple individuals. Still, there is a lot of competition among bucks for opportunities to breed. Early in the rut, bucks of varying sizes engage in brief sparring matches. These skirmishes are usually nothing more than macho shoving matches, which probably help to determine dominance. As the season progresses, rivals are more likely to be of a similar hierarchy, and battles can escalate to more dramatic antler fights. Surprisingly, most tense encounters between bucks are resolved without a physical altercation. Avoiding fights helps to conserve valuable energy as well as avoid injury — or worse. Bucks have been found with their antlers locked together, which can result in a tragic outcome for one or both animals.

Once a receptive doe is claimed, a buck will spend one or two days tending her before moving on. In this time period, he may have his strength and endurance tested by rivals who attempt to drive him off and claim the doe. White-tailed bucks may lose around 30 percent of their body weight through the physical rigor and stresses of the rutting season.

Margie is a self-proclaimed nature nerd with a passion for all things finned, furred and feathered...even the creepy-crawly-scaly kinds. She’s summered on Wolfe Lake since childhood and loves sharing what she learns about our wild things.