

# Wildlife of Cades Cove

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Located in the northwest corner of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park, Cades Cove is a treasure trove for the wildlife and nature photographer. With over 2 million visitors a year, picturesque Cades Cove is the most visited part of the GSMNP. While you drive down the eleven mile, one-way, paved loop road, the two by six mile valley surrounded by forested mountains is a haven for White-tailed Deer and Black Bear.



Before Cades Cove became part of the Great Smoky Mountain National Park, it was the home to pioneer families. Many of these homes have been restored to the way they looked in the 1800's. The quaint houses, rustic barns and small churches offer numerous photo opportunities for the photographer. If you are primarily interested in landscape photography, the best time to come is during the second and third weeks of October when the trees are ablaze in reds, yellows and oranges. This is the one of the most crowded times in the park, so come early in the day for best light and fewer people. Another excellent time to visit the park would be in March and April when the dogwood trees and wildflowers are in bloom.

## **American Black Bears**

There is approximately one black bear per square mile in the Great Smoky Mountain National Park. Bears are solitary by nature and avoid human contact as much as possible. Your best chance to photograph black bears is in Cades Cove. In order to photograph them you need to know something about black bears.

Black bears are the most widespread and numerous bear in North America. It is estimated that there are between 400,000 & 750,000 black bears in North America. Their typical habitat is hardwoods & coniferous forests and the occasional open area. The black bears in the Cades Cove area are solid black in color. The adult black bear will grow to 35-40 inches tall when on all fours and

have a length of 4 ½ to 6 feet. Their weight varies widely from 125 to 600 pounds. A black bear's lifespan is 25 or more years.



Female bears are normally mature between 3-5 years of age. Mating occurs during May & June. Bears usually breed every other year. The number of cubs a female bear will have averages between two and four, with health of mother, climate and availability of food being determining factors. Cubs are usually weaned early in the summer and remain with their mother for the entire first year.

Black bears travel in wooded areas, stream & creek beds which will give them a quick escape route (versus thick vegetation). They can run close to 25 miles per hour for short periods of time. Since they have poor eyesight, bears depend upon their excellent sense of smell to locate their food. 75% of the black bears diet consists of vegetation including berries, grasses, herbs, roots & nuts of all kinds. For the remainder of

their diet they'll eat honey, insects, squirrels, fish, decaying animal carcasses and an occasional fawn. Much of their time is spent foraging for food.

Their highly adapted, curved claws enable black bear to be excellent tree climbers. Be sure to look in the trees as they spend much of their time there. Dens are often located about twenty feet up the trunk of large trees. The black bears in the Cades Cove sleep through much of the winter.

To locate black bears, be sure to look for their tracks, claw marks on trees and scat. During the month of July, look for the bears and their cubs near the various berry brambles located throughout the Cades Cove area, especially near the fences surrounding the homesteads. Look for them in the wild cherry trees in May and in the apple trees in July & August. Search the stream beds throughout the summer months. In the fall look around the black walnut trees that are dropping their nuts to the ground.

Keep in mind that black bears are wild animals! Never feed any wild animals in Cades Cove. If a black bear approaches you while you are out shooting, do not turn and run. Yell and wave your arms.

### **White-tailed Deer**

Photographing the white-tailed deer in Cades Cove is a delightful experience. With hunting prohibited and abundant food, the number of deer is close to 1000.

The color of the deer's upper body & sides changes with the season. During the summer, they are a reddish-brown color. When they shed in early fall, the color changes to a lighter shade of brown. They have a distinctive white tail and a white patch on the throat.



White-tailed deer are in the same family as moose, elk & caribou. Only the males have antlers that are shed once a year. Antler size is dependant upon nutrition and age. The deer's antlers are true bone and are the fastest-growing bone known to science. In the spring of each year, if the buck is healthy, a new set of antlers will grow faster and heavier than those of the previous year. The prime age for white-tailed deer is 5 ½ - 6 years of age. While growing, the antlers are covered with short-haired modified skin called velvet. When the antler stops growing (August-September), the velvet dries and is rubbed off or falls off. Sometime in mid-winter, the antlers will fall off.

White-tailed deer have developed keen senses to help them avoid predation. They depend on scent, particularly in thick cover, but also have excellent hearing and vision. The average life span of White-tailed deer in Cades Cove is 10 years.



Look for signs that deer have been in the area. Deer tracks are the most obvious but are not the best way to locate deer. Small trees that have been stripped of their bark are usually caused by a buck knocking the velvet from his antlers. Scrapes are exposed patches of the ground about one to three feet in diameter where a buck has pawed the leaves and grass away. His scent and tracks on these scrapes serve to signal does he's in the area and available. It also warns other bucks that this is his territory and they'd better stay out, or risk a fight. If the scrape is being

renewed and maintained, it's a sure sign he'll return sooner or later.

Rut or mating season is triggered by weather and/or biostimulation. Fawns are born 200 days after breeding. The doe's nutrition during gestation determines how many offspring are born. Except for the first birthing season, female deer usually have two fawns. Fawns are able to walk at birth and are weaned by six weeks of age. A fawn's coat is similar to an adult's but has several hundred spots which gradually disappear when the deer is three to four months old. Deer eat a tremendous variety of foods in the wild. White-tailed deer are primarily browsers. Their diet includes the leaves, twig ends, buds, and bark from small hardwood seedlings, shrubs, and woody vines. They also will eat weeds, native grasses, pecans, persimmon, plum, pears, apples, dewberries, blackberries, and muscadine grapes. White-tailed deer's favorite foods are oak tree sprouts and acorns.

Since deer eat & browse in the fields in the early morning & late afternoons, this is the best time to spot them as well as photograph them. During the day, deer bed in the woods. Be sure to look under the pine trees off to the side of the roads during the day. You'll occasionally see a large buck bedded down.

Don't forget to drive down Sparks Lane & Hyatt Lane. These dirt roads are less traveled than the loop road and often provide some good photo opportunities.

## **Elk**

During February 2001, Elk were reintroduced in Cades Cove. Approximately 50-60 radio collared elk are scheduled to be released from their pens over the next two years. It will be fun to watch the progress of the elk in Cades Cove over the coming years.

Other wildlife that can be found in Cades Cove includes bobcat, red & gray fox, wild turkey, coyote, woodchuck and cottontail rabbit.

## **Tips on Photographing Wildlife**

Not only is early morning and late afternoon the best time to spot wildlife in Cades



Cove, it's also the best light of the day for photography. Unless it's a cloudy day or you're in the shade, photographing from late morning to early afternoon is not a good idea. Your photographs will be less than satisfactory. You'll need at least a 400mm lens to photograph the deer and the bear in Cades Cove. A zoom lens in the range of 80-200 or 80-400 is also recommended. As always when you shoot, use a tripod or bean bag to support your camera & lens. If you're using conventional film, I suggest an ISO in the range of 100-200.

Cades Cove is open to traffic from sunrise to sunset every day of the year with few exceptions. From May until September the park is closed to motor vehicles until 10am on Wednesday & Saturdays. Due to traffic, the best time to come is during the week.

### **Where to Stay**

Townsend, Tennessee (7 miles to Cades Cove – Allow 20-30 minutes driving time).

### **Links**

Cades Cove in the Great Smoky Mountains - <http://www.cadescope.net>

Great Smoky Mountain National Park - <http://www.nps.gov/grsm/>

GORP – Great Smoky Mountain National Park -

[http://www.gorp.com/gorp/resource/us\\_national\\_park/tn\\_great.htm](http://www.gorp.com/gorp/resource/us_national_park/tn_great.htm)

Wildlife Watcher - <http://wildlifewatcher.com/index.phtml>

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