How Do Deer “Talk”?

By Larry Marchinton, Karl Miller and Tom Atkeson

White-tailed deer communicate in many ways. They send olfactory and visual “notes” to each other with scents and signposts and use “body language” extensively, but they also have a vocal “language” of sorts. In a study at the University of Georgia (similar work was done at Mississippi State University), approximately 400 deer vocalizations were recorded of which 90 were selected for sonographic analysis. We originally identified 12 calls and recently added one more.

Based on our observations, deer vocalizations often are mistaken for insects or other background noises. While the snort, bawl, and bellow are loud, most “deer talk” is not. The quiet “conversations” deer usually have with each other require an experienced hunter or field observer to recognize. To really hear deer talk, one must become “tuned in” to the deer’s world.

Alarming and Distress Calls

Snort – The snort is probably the most widely recognized of the whitetail’s calls. Some snorts are atonal sounds like sharp blasts of “white noise”, while others have a moderately tonal whistling quality. They can often be heard at distances of 1/4 mile or greater. It is not unusual for the snort to be accompanied by the stamping of a front foot. The snort is used to express alarm and is given singly or in a series. It is made occasionally by both sexes but primarily by members of doe groups (i.e., families).

Bawl – The bawl is a very intense call heard when deer are being traumatized. It is a voiced sound of high tonality given with the mouth open. Its pitch generally decreases with age of the animal. Large males especially seem to have a deeper, heavier bawl. Bavls are made by deer of all ages in situations of extreme distress. On rare occasions, badly frightened deer make this sound, but we hear it most often when they are injured or grasped. Deer, other than nursing does, generally respond to a bawl by fleeing. The fawn bawl is a highly effective way of calling does in the summer and to a lesser extent, early fall.

Agnostic Calls

We identified three aggressive or conflict-related vocalizations. They consist of the basic grunt with successive elements added as the intensity of the encounter escalates.

Low Grunt – The low grunt is used by both sexes throughout the year and occurs during the lowest intensity agonistic interactions. It consists of a low guttural grunt coupled with intention postures and is used frequently by dominant animals of either sex to displace subordinates. Usually given singularly, it is a voiced sound of low pitch, tonality and intensity and of brief duration given with the mouth open or closed. Often if the receiver hesitates, the encounter escalates into a rush and foreleg kick by the dominant.

Grunt-Snort – In more intense encounters by either sex, 1-4 rapid snorts are added to the basic grunt. Occasionally given by does, this call is emitted most often by bucks during the breeding season.

Grunt-Snort-Wheeze – This is the most intense aggressive vocalization! It consists of the grunt-snort followed by a drawn-out wheezing expulsion through pinched nostrils. Although difficult to imitate, it can be a powerful hunting tool when properly used.
**Mother-Fawn Calls**

**Maternal grunt** – This call is a voiced sound of moderate pitch, low tonality and short duration given at intervals of a few seconds as a means of the doe communicating with her fawn. It is of low intensity, often audible to humans for only a few yards. If a fawn fails to respond, the doe calls more loudly and can be heard further.

**Mew** – The primary sound of the newborn fawn is the mew, a voiced sound of high pitch and tonality, and low intensity.

**Bleat** – The bleat is a higher level care-soliciting vocalization of the fawn. The intensity and duration of this call are proportional to the degree of deprivation of the fawn. Whereas the mew is inaudible at distances of a few yards, bleats carry as far as 100. Bleats are also heard when fawns are disturbed and usually result in investigations by nursing does.

**Nursing whine** – It usually is made as the fawn is actively sucking or searching for a nipple.

**Contact Call** – It is heard when a member of a group becomes separated and enables deer to maintain vocal contact with one another when visual contact is lost. This call is a voiced grunt of moderate pitch, intensity and tonality. It is similar to the maternal grunt, but likely to be much louder. Hunters who are listening carefully may hear it from 50 to 100 yards away. Grunt calls or mouth imitations of does grunting can be effective at bringing in bucks, particularly young ones.

**Mating Calls**

**Tending grunt** – The tending grunt is given by males during courtship of an estrous doe. It is a voiced sound of moderate intensity and often longer duration than the other grunts described. Hunters can use this call very effectively for bringing in non-tending bucks.

**Flehmen-sniff** – It is an unvoiced sound occasionally made by inspiriting through pinched nostrils while performing a specialized olfactory behavior known as Flehmen, whereby pheromonal components of a doe’s urine are assessed by the buck. It may or may not have communicative significance but is sometimes made within hearing of the doe whose urine is being checked.

**Bellow** – We have heard this long, very intense call on only a few occasions and do not know for sure what context it is made in or even if it is a mating call. Most likely it is an exaggerated tending grunt. This call was not heard or reported in the original study.

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When the season ends and your club members compile this data, you will have an abundance of valuable information. You can determine whether more deer are seen in the morning or evening. You can calculate the ratio of antlered versus antlerless deer and the number of fawns per adult doe. You can count the number of bucks that hunters let “walk” and have some idea of what the upcoming season might hold. Don’t forget about the animals you harvested. Make sure they are accounted for on your observation sheets. You also should record general information about the habitat conditions and food availability. If there was a good acorn crop or you planted food plots, make note of it. These simple instructions when followed, will help you have a more accurate picture of the deer herd, and many years from now you will have a way of look back through the seasons and reflect on your days afield.

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