

COVER STORY

A Light in the Forest

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Through the years, Lake Metroparks has played host to many unique and interesting creatures. The most distinctive is the albino White-tailed Deer on exhibit at Penitentiary Glen Nature Center. Acquired in late 2005 after she was fatally struck by a car, today she has a permanent home at the Nature Center. She made her home in the Kirtland woodlands where she was sighted on more than one occasion at Chapin Forest and Penitentiary Glen Reservation. How could you miss her? She was a light in the forest so to speak, against the dark grays and muted tones of the surrounding trees. One staff member even recalls seeing her with two brown fawns at her side!

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While she may have lived the life of an average White-tailed Deer, one look at her showed you she was anything but average. She was a true albino. Albinism is a recessive genetic trait where an animal is born with a total lack of pigment or colors, making it appear pure white. It is estimated that one in every 30,000 of Ohio's White-tailed Deer population is an albino. Although it is rare, albinism can occur in any animal species including humans.

Not all white animals are albinos. Some, like the snowshoe hare, use their white coloring as camouflage helping them to escape predators and blend into their surroundings.

How can you tell if an animal is truly an albino? Well, the answer always lies in the eyes. If the eyes are light blue, pink or red (caused by light being refracted off of the



retina) then the animal is a true albino. Because albinism is a recessive trait both parents must carry the gene before it can be passed to the offspring. When both parents carry the trait there is a 25% chance that their offspring will be albino. Most albinos have poor eyesight and hearing and their light appearance makes them more vulnerable to predators.

Albinism is not the only genetic trait that affects the pigment in an animal. One of these other genetic mutations is called melanism. Melanin is a coloring agent found in nature and is essential to producing most of the color found in mammals. Melanistic animals are very dark or in some cases completely black and are even less common than albinos.

Another more common pigment mutation is called piebald. Piebald deer have patches of white hair but have otherwise normal coloring. Depending on where they are located, they have been referred to as pintos and have various patches of white and brown.

While albinism is rare, we know that this female's offspring and others of the White-tailed Deer population in Kirtland still carry the recessive gene. Keep your eyes open and you may see an albino deer in the years to come.