

# WHITE-TAIL TAIL-WAGGING

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For years, hunters, naturalists and field biologists have debated the meaning of the behaviour of white-tailed deer when they are alarmed and hurriedly leave a disturbed area. The animals are observed wig-wagging their erected white tails like a piano student's metronome.

Observers have interpreted this behaviour usually in one of two ways. One common contention is that the wig-wagging simply signals danger, and any deer within sight of the signal responds to it and flees.

The other viewpoint contends that white-tail flag-waving is an assertion of leadership to any follower ready to take the leader's escape route. Nature, however, is seldom wasteful. So many signalling leaders and followers are not necessary to point the way to escape and to use all the participants's energy merely to "mark time" while the animals flee. Then what does all that wig-wagging really mean?

A few close observers of the behaviour of white-tails when startled to flight, especially R.D. Lawrence, celebrated Canadian author-naturalist, have noticed that these animals, whether spooked by humans or natural predators, may scatter widely, thus refuting the no-

tion of any simple escape plan of leadership being used. And flight alone is signal enough to more than suggest the closeness of danger. If these deer closely followed a leader along a narrow escape route, all the while briskly wig-wagging, such behaviour would refute any natural design to minimize attention upon each animal and lessen its use of energy.

This line of thinking suggests wig-wagging of tails has another and more practical interpretation — one of behaviour meant to preserve the species, not the individual. This objective is achieved through all members of an escaping herd wig-wagging, not to target individual animals but to confuse and disturb predators, thereby breaking the concentration and energy flow of the deer's attackers. Thus the behaviour of the deer increases the entire group's chances of escaping harm or death.

This interpretation of white-tail tail-wagging supports the conclusion of experts of timber wolf behaviour: that when wolves hunt deer, only one out of ten attempts, on the average, ends with a kill. Thus nine failures to capture prey may be due to the wolves' confusion and interruptions of their hunting momentum, caused by the tail-wagging of the deer.