

## **Lightfoot, Blacktail and Forkhorn**

by Thornton W. Burgess

Of all the people who live in the Green Forest none is more admired than Lightfoot the Deer. So perhaps you can guess how delighted every one was when, just as the morning lesson was to begin, Lightfoot himself stepped daintily out from a thicket and bowed to Old Mother Nature.

"I heard," said he, "that my little friends here are to learn something about my family this morning, and thought you would not mind if I joined them."

"I should say not!" exclaimed Peter Rabbit forgetting that Lightfoot had spoken to Old Mother Nature.

All laughed, even Old Mother Nature. You see, Peter was so very much in earnest, and at the same time so excited, that it really was funny.

"Peter has spoken for all of us," said Old Mother Nature. "You are more than welcome, Lightfoot. I had intended to send for you, but it slipped my mind. I am delighted to have you here and I know that the others are. I suspect you will be most comfortable if you lie down, but before you do this I want everybody to have a good look at you. Just stand for a few minutes in that little open space where all can see you."

Lightfoot walked over to the open space where the sun fell full on him and there he stood, a picture of grace and beauty with just enough honest pride in his appearance to give him an air of noble dignity. There was more than one little gasp of admiration among his little neighbors.

"There," began Old Mother Nature, "is one of the most beautiful of all my children, and the knowledge that he is beautiful does not spoil him. Lightfoot belongs to the Deer family, as you all know, and this in turn is in the order called Ungulata, which means hoofed."

Peter Rabbit abruptly sat up, and his ears stood up like exclamation points. "Farmer Brown's cows have those funny feet called hoofs; are they related to Lightfoot?" he asked eagerly.

"They belong to another family, but it is in the same order. So they are distant cousins of Lightfoot," replied Old Mother Nature.

"And Farmer Brown's Pigs, what about them?" asked Chatterer the Red Squirrel. "They also belong to that order and so are related," explained Old Mother Nature.

"Huh!" exclaimed Chatterer. "If I were in Lightfoot's place I never, never would acknowledge any such homely, stupid creatures as those as relatives of mine."

"Don't forget that Prickly Porky the Porcupine and Robber the Rat are members of the same order to which you belong," retorted Old Mother Nature softly, and Chatterer hung his head. "Lightfoot," she continued, "is the White-tailed or Virginia Deer, and is in some ways the most beautiful of the Deer family. You have only to look at him to know that those slim legs of his are meant for speed. He can go very fast, but not for long distances without stopping. Like Peter Rabbit he is a

jumper rather than a true runner, and travels with low bounds with occasional high ones when alarmed. He can make very long and high jumps, and this is one reason he prefers to live in the Green Forest where there are fallen trees and tangles of old logs. If frightened he can leap over them, whereas his enemies must crawl under or climb over or go around them. Ordinary fences, such as Farmer Brown has built around his fields, do not bother Lightfoot in the least. He can leap over them as easily as Peter Rabbit can jump over that little log he is sitting beside.

“Just now, because it is summer, Lightfoot's coat is decidedly reddish in color and very handsome. But in winter it is wholly different.”

“I know,” spoke up Chatterer the Red Squirrel. “It is gray then. I've often seen Lightfoot in winter, and there isn't a red hair on him at that season.

“Quite right,” agreed Old Mother Nature. “His red coat is for summer only. Notice that Lightfoot has a black nose. That is, the tip of it is black. Beneath his chin is a black spot. A band across his nose, the inside of each ear and a circle around each eye is whitish. His throat is white and he is white beneath. Now, Peter, you are so interested in tails, tell me without looking what color Lightfoot's tail is.”

“White, snowy white,” replied Peter promptly. “I suppose that is why he is called the White-tailed Deer.”

“Huh!” grunted Johnny Chuck who happened to be sitting a little back of Lightfoot, “I don't call it white. It has a white edge, but mostly it is the color of his coat.”

Now while Lightfoot had been standing there his tail had hung down, and it was as Johnny Chuck had said. But at Johnny's remark up flew Lightfoot's tail, showing only the under side. It was like a pointed white flag. With it held aloft that way, no one behind Lightfoot would suspect that his whole tail was not white.

“Notice how long and fluffy the hair on that tail is,” said Old Mother Nature. “Mrs. Lightfoot's is just like it, and this makes it very easy for her babies to follow her in the dark. When Lightfoot is feeding or simply walking about he carries it down, but when he is frightened and bounds away, up goes that white flag. Now look at his horns. They are not true horns. The latter are hollow, while these are not. Farmer Brown's cows have horns. Lightfoot has antlers. Just remember that. The so-called horns of all the Deer family are antlers and are not hollow. Notice how Lightfoot's curve forward with the branches or tines on the back side.”

Of course everybody looked at Lightfoot's crown as he held his head proudly. “What is the matter with them?” asked Whitefoot the Wood Mouse. “They look to me as if they are covered with fur. I always supposed them to be hard like bone.”

“So they will be a month from now,” explained Old Mother Nature, smiling down at Whitefoot. “That which you call fur will come off. He will rub it off against the trees until his antlers are polished, and there is not a trace of it left. You see Lightfoot has just grown that set this summer.”

“Do you mean those antlers?” asked Danny Meadow Mouse, looking very much puzzled. “Didn't he have any before? How could things like those grow, anyway?”

"Don't you know that he loses his horns, I mean antlers, every year?" demanded Jumper the Hare. "I thought every one knew that. His old ones fell off late last winter. I know, for I saw him just afterward, and he looked sort of ashamed. Anyway, he didn't carry his head as proudly as he does now. He looked a lot like Mrs. Lightfoot; you know she hasn't any antlers."

"But how could hard, bony things like those grow?" persisted Danny Meadow Mouse.

"I think I will have to explain," said Old Mother Nature. "They were not hard and bony when they were growing. Just as soon as Lightfoot's old antlers dropped off, the new ones started. They sprouted out of his head just as plants sprout out of the ground, and they were soft and very tender and filled with blood, just as all parts of your body are. At first they were just two round knobs. Then these pushed out and grew and grew. Little knobs sprang out from them and grew to make the branches you see now. All the time they were protected by a furry skin which looks a great deal like what men call velvet. When Lightfoot's antlers are covered with this, they are said to be in the velvet state.

"When they had reached their full size they began to shrink and harden, so that now they are quite hard, and very soon that velvet will begin to come off. When they were growing they were so tender that Lightfoot didn't move about any more than was necessary and kept quite by himself. He was afraid of injuring those antlers. By the time cool weather comes, Lightfoot will be quite ready to use those sharp points on anybody who gets in his way.

"As Jumper has said, Mrs. Lightfoot has no antlers. Otherwise she looks much like Lightfoot, save that she is not quite as big. Have any of you ever seen her babies?"

"I have," declared Jumper, who, as you know, lives in the Green Forest just as Lightfoot does. "They are the dearest little things and look like their mother, only they have the loveliest spotted coats."

"That is to help them to remain unseen by their enemies," explained Old Mother Nature. When they lie down where the sun breaks through the trees and spots the ground with light they seem so much like their surroundings that unless they move they are not often seen even by the sharpest eyes that may pass close by. They lie with their little necks and heads stretched flat on the ground and do not move so much as a hair. You see, they usually are very obedient, and the first thing their mother teaches them is to keep perfectly still when she leaves them.

"When they are a few months old and able to care for themselves a little, the spots disappear. As a rule Mrs. Lightfoot has two babies each spring. Once in a while she has three, but two is the rule. She is a good mother and always on the watch for possible danger. While they are very small she keeps them hidden in the deepest thickets. By the way, do you know that Lightfoot and Mrs. Lightfoot are fine swimmers?"

Happy Jack Squirrel looked the surprise he felt. "I don't see how under the sun any one with little hooved feet like Lightfoot's can swim," said he.

"Nevertheless, Lightfoot is a good swimmer and fond of the water," replied Old Mother Nature. "That is one way he has of escaping his enemies. When he is hard pressed by Wolves or Dogs he makes for the nearest water and plunges in. He does not hesitate to swim across a river or even a small lake.

"Lightfoot prefers the Green Forest where there are close thickets with here and there open places. He likes the edge of the Green Forest where he can come out in the open fields, yet be within a

short distance of the protecting trees and bushes. He requires much water and so is usually found not far from a brook, pond or river. He has a favorite drinking place and goes to drink early in the morning and just at dusk. During the day he usually sleeps hidden away in a thicket or under a windfall, coming out late in the afternoon. He feeds mostly in the early evening. He eats grass and other plants, beechnuts and acorns, leaves and twigs of certain trees, lily pads in summer and, I am sorry to say, delights to get into Farmer Brown's garden, where almost every green thing tempts him.

“Like so many others he has a hard time in winter, particularly when the snows are deep. Then he and Mrs. Lightfoot and their children live in what is called a yard. Of course it isn't really a yard such as Farmer Brown has. It is simply a place where they keep the snow trodden down in paths which cross and cross, and is made where there is shelter and food. The food is chiefly twigs and leaves of evergreen trees. As the snow gets deeper and deeper they become prisoners in the yard until spring comes to melt the snow and set them free.

“Lightfoot depends for safety more on his nose and ears than on his eyes. His sense of smell is wonderful, and when he is moving about he usually goes up wind; that is, in the direction from which the wind is blowing. This is so that it will bring to him the scent of any enemy that may be ahead of him. He is very clever and cunning. Often before lying down to rest he goes back a short distance to a point where he can watch his trail, so that if any one is following it he will have warning.

“His greatest enemy is the hunter with his terrible gun. How any one can look into those great soft eyes of Lightfoot and then even think of trying to kill him is more than I can understand. Dogs are his next worst enemies when he lives near the homes of men. When he lives where Wolves, Panthers and Bears are found, he has to be always on the watch for them. Tufty the Lynx is ever on the watch for Lightfoot's babies.

“The White-tailed Deer is the most widely distributed of all the Deer family. He is found from the Sunny South to the great forests of the North—everywhere but in the vast open plains of the middle of this great country. That is, he used to be. In many places he has been so hunted by man that he has disappeared. When he lives in the Sunny South he never grows to be as big as when he lives in the North.

“In the great mountains of the Far West lives a cousin, Blacktail, also called Columbian Blacktailed Deer, and another cousin, Forkhorn the Mule Deer. Blacktail is nearly the size of Lightfoot. He is not quite so graceful, his ears are larger, being much like those of Forkhorn the Mule Deer, to whom he is closely related, and his tail is wholly black on the upper surface. It is from this he gets his name. His antlers vary, sometimes being much like those of Lightfoot and again like those of Forkhorn. He is a lover of dense forests and is not widely distributed. He is not nearly so smart as Lightfoot in outwitting hunters.

“Forkhorn the Mule Deer, sometimes called Jumping Deer, is larger than Lightfoot and much more heavily built. His big ears, much like those of a Mule, have won for him the name of Mule Deer. His face is a dull white with a black patch on the forehead and a black band under the chin. His tail is rather short and is not broad at the base like Lightfoot's. It is white with a black tip. Because of this he is often called Blacktailed Deer, but this is wrong because that name belongs to his cousin, the true Blacktail.

“Forkhorn's antlers are his glory. They are even finer than Lightfoot's. The prongs, or tines, are in pairs like the letter Y instead of in a row as are those of Lightfoot, and usually there are two pairs on

each antler. Forkhorn prefers rough country and there he is very much at home, his powers of jumping enabling him to travel with ease where his enemies find it difficult to follow. Like Blacktail he is not nearly so clever as Lightfoot the White-tail and so is more easily killed by hunters.

“All these members of the Deer family belong to the round-horn branch, and are very much smaller than the members of the flat-horn branch. But there is one who in size makes all the others look small indeed. It is Bugler the Elk, or Wapiti, of whom I shall tell you to-morrow.”

Source:

Burgess, Thornton. “Lightfoot, Blacktail, and Forkhorn.” *The Burgess Animal Book for Children*.  
Electronic.