

Deer Management Phase III (Buck Management)

First of all I want to point out that a lot of the things I'm covering in this article are not only being done today but have been done for decades. There have been hunters managing their properties for a long time and have been doing it quite successfully. There are places where they may start selectively harvesting 3 ½ year old Bucks and there are places where they may not harvest a Buck until he is 6 ½ or 7 ½ years old and there are places with strategies everywhere in between. I give props to all of them because they are making a serious effort at managing their Buck population. If you're under a high fence then I'm sure you already have a serious management plan in place. If your property is not under a high fence then you may not be able to plan on getting your Bucks out to 5 ½ years old. You just have to make your own decisions based on your own situation. I am just covering some of the basics of Buck Management because some people are not aware of the different strategies that are available. As I said before I'm hoping to gain the interest of hunters that are hunting smaller unfenced acreage. For unfenced properties Phase I (Monitoring) and now Phase III (Selective Buck Harvest) definitely apply to you. Phase II where we try to estimate our deer population and our harvest requirement's is more for high fenced and large acreage properties.

In this phase we are now going to selectively harvest Bucks in an attempt to grow older age and bigger antlered Bucks. Even though I have addressed this as the third phase in our management process most people just assume that when you talk Deer Management that you are just talking about selectively harvesting Bucks. I have shown you in the first two phases that there is a lot more to it than that. This phase is not limited to high fenced properties since every hunter whether you hunt under a high fence or not can make his or her own decision on whether to shoot a particular Buck or not. The biggest problem with unfenced properties is the thing I call the neighbor influence. Remember the **"If I don't shoot him my neighbor will"** mentality. I covered this in my article "Can you Manage Your Property?" If you didn't read that article and your property is unfenced please make sure you go back and read it.

Also in this phase we are going to have to be able to age these Bucks on the hoof. Please watch my video where I try to show you the various body characteristics of the different age groups. Ageing a Buck on the hoof is not an exact science but with some practice you can get pretty good at it. Believe me when I say that ageing a Buck on the hoof is not 100% accurate and that it becomes more difficult as the age class increases. We have gotten pretty good at identifying 1 ½, 2 ½, 3 ½ and 4 ½ + year old Bucks. Fortunately this fits right into our own specific management plan. I know there are some experienced hunters out there that are pretty good at identifying 5 ½ year old and older Bucks. . If you are able to distinguish the different age groups that you are interested in protecting then you're ready to start protecting some of your Bucks. You each need to determine what your own management goals are and establish your own management plan accordingly. If you have hunters that are not able to age a Buck on the hoof then you may want to consider implementing antler restrictions in order to protect your younger Bucks. Antler restrictions require that a detailed study be done so that you come up with the right antler restrictions that will protect younger Bucks and **not** older Bucks. Please read my article "Analyzing your Buck's Antler Characteristics" to see what the study involves.

The very first step in Buck management is to not shoot yearling (1 ½ year old) Bucks. I am assuming that you do your best to not shoot Fawns (Button Bucks). We use the phrase "Young and Dumb" to describe these yearlings because we see them walking and running around like they don't have a care in the world. We see this before, during and after the rut. I'm sure that if we started shooting them they would become a little more leery

but not like an older Buck. I often think about what would happen if we were shooting yearling Bucks. I assure you that today we see 100% of the yearlings on our property and if we were shooting them there would be only a couple of them left at the end of the season. (The couple that wised up) This would completely change the dynamics of our deer population. We would then be like some places where they hardly ever see a Buck especially an older Buck. When we stopped shooting yearling Bucks several years ago we thought that we would immediately start seeing more 2 ½ year old Bucks the next year but it actually took about two years before we really started seeing more 2 ½ year old Bucks. This first step is an important step because as a result of that Buck making it to 2 ½ years old his odds of reaching an older age class has gone up because he won't be as easy to shoot as when he was a yearling. If you decide that this is the extent that you want to take your management plan then at least you took the first step.

The next step would be to protect 2 ½ year old Bucks since they are still young and have a lot of antler growing to do. If you are doing this then you are taking an important step in allowing your Bucks to get to 3 ½ years old. When we tried to stop shooting 2 ½ year old Bucks a few years ago it again took about two years before we started seeing more 3 ½ year old Bucks but we definitely started seeing more of them!

This next step is where management plans can start heading in different directions. Let me say that if you let Bucks get to 3 ½ years old then I will give you a pat on the back because you have made a good effort at Buck management. Whether you start selectively harvesting 3 ½ year old Bucks or you totally protect them is your own decision based on your own situation. Several years ago we found ourselves harvesting what we considered good antlered Bucks. They all had over 140" of antler (which is big for our area) but when we aged the Bucks we discovered that most of these Bucks were 3 ½ years old. We could only wonder how much antler they would have had at 4 ½ years old. This made us realize how important it was for us to try to learn how to age these Bucks on the hoof. We read articles and watched videos that explained how to age a Buck on the hoof. After this we went back through all of our videos and realized that we had been letting some older Bucks walk just because they didn't have the big antlers that we wanted. As a result of watching our videos of Bucks that we had let walk and then seeing these 3 ½ year old Bucks that we had shot we started to re-think our management plan. It appeared to us that our Bucks that had great antler potential were showing that potential at 2 ½ or 3 ½ years old. On the other hand we had some 3 ½ year old and older Bucks that didn't even have 120" of antler. As a result of this we adjusted our management plan again. Since we had to shoot some Bucks we decided that we would shoot any 3 ½ year old Buck that didn't have at least 120" of antler. You can call these Management Bucks or Cull Bucks or whatever you want but we were thrilled to shoot them. As a result of our new management plan the 3 ½ year old Buck's with the bigger antlers were being given another year to grow. Again, this is our own specific situation and may not be the same situation you have. A good antlered Buck on your property may have 120" of antler or in big Buck country possibly 160"+ of antler. I think we have adjusted our harvest criteria two times over the last 16 years because we have been learning along the way. Having video, pictures and time afield is a great educator. I read an article about a guy that was selectively harvesting 3 ½ year old and older 8 points and he was almost apologetic when he explained what he was doing. I say he should stick with the plan that he thinks works best for him. Over time he may decide to adjust his plan but he should make that decision based on his own situation. I know there are a lot of places that employ an 8 point rule in which they target 3 ½ or possibly 4 ½ year old and older Bucks that have 8 points or less and that's ok. We just decided on something different because of our own specific situation. We focus more on the gross inches of antler instead of the number of points. In 2011 we actually had an 8 point that grossed in the 160's which we thought was incredible.

After your decision on what you will do with 3 ½ year old Bucks you now need to make your own decision regarding 4 ½ year old and older Bucks. Again, everyone's situation is different including the antler potential of

their Bucks. We have some 4 ½ year old and older Bucks that are automatically put on our hit list because in our mind a trophy isn't just a Buck with big antlers, it's also a Buck that is 4 ½ years old or older. (Remember we are not under a high fence) When that Buck reaches 4 ½ years old he doesn't seem to make many mistakes. We have been fortunate because of our specific management plan that we are able to see some 4 ½ year old and older Bucks each season. If we feel that another year of growth could make him spectacular then we will not shoot him. Remember, this is our own specific situation where we have a big variation in our Buck's antler potential. We have some Bucks that will grow well over 150" of antler and then we have some Bucks that will never grow 120" of antler. In the same token we have some Bucks that may weigh over 250lbs and some Bucks that will never weigh more than 150lbs. You may not have to deal with such a large genetic diversity in your deer so your Buck management plan will probably be a lot different than ours. (And that's OK!) We shouldn't criticize each other's management plans if you see a good effort being made to protect young Bucks.

In summary, by protecting young Bucks you are allowing the Bucks to get to an older age which in turn allows them to reach more of their full antler potential. You may decide to start selectively harvesting certain Bucks at 3 ½ years old or if you want every Buck to reach its full antler potential then you may choose to not harvest a Buck until he is 5 ½ years old or older. Each hunter, group or club just needs to come up with a plan that fits their own specific situation and track their results so they can see how their plan is working. Like I mentioned earlier we have actually adjusted our Buck harvest criteria two times since 1996 because we are monitoring our results.