

It's all about the Antlers!

There's something about a Buck's antlers that just intrigues most hunters. Antlers come in all shapes and sizes. I prefer more typical looking antlers while my brother-in-law prefers non typical antlers. They may have 2 points or they may have over 20 points. I used to think that a hunter that shot a 10 point had gotten a bigger and older Buck than a hunter that shot an 8 point Buck. I still hear most hunters today ask "How big was that Buck that you shot?" The response is usually how many points the Buck's antlers had or how much the Buck weighed. Should the hunter that shot a 2 ½ year old 10 point get more credit than the hunter that shot a 5 ½ year old 8 point. I say "No". I think most of us would agree that the older a Buck gets the harder he is to kill. With this being the case I would think that the hunter that shoots an older Buck should get due recognition because he/she has taken a Buck that just doesn't make many mistakes. Today when I am asked about the Bucks that we shoot, I always say the age of each of the Bucks before I say the number of points and weight. In 2012 I shot a 4 ½ year old and a 5 ½ year old Buck which made that my best season ever because I have never shot two older Bucks like that in one season. I also passed up a 4 ½ year old Buck because he showed great antler potential. With some practice we can all learn how to age a Buck on the hoof and we can learn how to age a jawbone. Please read my article "How old was that Deer that you harvested?" so you can see what's involved in ageing your deer.

We are doing our best to grow bigger antlered Bucks because we have this same fascination with antlers. But because of the records that we keep, the trail camera pictures that we get and the video that we take we have learned that some Bucks will just never have big antlers. If we never harvest these older Bucks that have smaller antlers then we are not doing our Buck population justice. This is why our own harvest guidelines encourage us to shoot any Buck that is 4 ½ years old and older especially if he has smaller antlers. We actually consider a Buck that is 4 ½ years old and older a trophy regardless of his antler size. This is just our own situation. You may not want to harvest a Buck until he is 5 ½ or 6 ½ years old and this is certainly your decision to make. On the other hand you may want to harvest a Buck when he gets to 3 ½ years old and again this is your decision to make. If you shoot 1 ½ year old (yearling) Bucks then you probably don't have much concern about the antler size or having older Bucks on your property **or** you must reach certain harvest requirements. Please read my article "Deer Management needs to be Site Specific".

I hear of too many properties that are saying that they aren't seeing as many big antlered Bucks as they used to see. Some of them even have antler restrictions in place. I believe that many of these properties are shooting most of their Bucks that have bigger antlers (*even if they're younger deer*). In the same token they are mistakenly letting some older Bucks with smaller antlers walk. We can tell you from our own personal experience what can happen to a Buck population where older Bucks with smaller antlers are protected or just not being shot. If you get a couple of these older but smaller antlered Bucks that have bigger bodies and/or more attitude they may run off some bigger antlered Bucks that you would really like to keep on your property. Add to this the possibility that these smaller antlered Bucks may pass along their antler characteristics it could be detrimental to your Buck population with regards to antler size.

There are a lot of commercial hunting operations out there who do their best to put their client's on a big antlered Buck. I know a lot of hunters that go on pay hunts and their goal is usually to shoot a big antlered Buck. (Of course Big Antlered is relative to each hunter's own expectations) It's not very often that they hear a potential client simply say that they just want to shoot a 5 ½ year old or older Buck regardless of antler size. The client usually asks to be put in an area where they have a chance of shooting a big Buck. (Big antlered Buck that is) Many of these commercial operations allow and some even encourage their hunters to shoot what they refer to as a management or cull Buck. These are usually older Bucks with smaller antlers. These commercial hunting operations realize the importance of shooting these older Bucks with smaller antlers. Since most of their clients are looking to shoot a bigger antlered Buck then it is important that they remove these smaller antlered Bucks from their deer population. Remember that we are talking older Bucks with smaller antlers and not young Buck's.

In summary, many of us have gotten so caught up in just the size of the antlers that we don't even consider the age of the Buck. The age of the Buck should in fact be the most important factor that should be considered. I guarantee you that every season there are 2 ½ and 3 ½ year old Bucks being shot because they had big antlers. I can only imagine how big their antlers would have been with a couple more years of growth. On the other hand I also guarantee you that on some properties where they practice selective harvest or have an antler restriction in place that there are 4 ½ year old and older Bucks being passed up simply because they have smaller antlers or they don't meet the antler restriction that is in place. I refer to this above scenario as reverse management. This is where you are shooting the Bucks that you really should let walk and letting the Bucks walk that you really should be shooting (*and be proud of it!*). The decision to shoot or not shoot should be based more on the age of the Buck and not solely on the size of the antlers. I know that every year more and more hunters are showing an interest in having bigger antlered Bucks on their property. I wish there was a simple magic formula to do this but there isn't. The most important things are to let the Bucks get some age on them and then make sure you harvest older Bucks even if they have smaller antlers. With some sound management guidelines in the harvesting of your Bucks you can certainly increase your odds of growing some bigger antlered Bucks. If you can start by not shooting any 1 ½ year old and 2 ½ year old Bucks you will be amazed at the results after a few years. If you have not done so already please watch our video called "The Buck we nicknamed Piebald" to see what might happen if you will at least let a Buck get some age on him.