

Outdoors

Aging deer on the hoof

Most of my hunting friends and I regard any old buck as a trophy buck, regardless of antler size. The reason is that any buck that has survived four or more hunting seasons has obviously developed all the hunter-evasion skills and is just as hard to get a shot at as one with a Boone & Crockett rack. Taking him in fair chase, then, is just as challenging and worthy of pride and admiration as collecting 200-point head.

Judging the age of a whitetail buck with reasonable accuracy is not all that difficult, and you don't have to have a wildlife Ph.D. to do it.

The hardest thing about aging a buck on the hoof is tearing your eyes away from his antlers. No reliable clues to his age are to be found there; the evidence of age appears on his face, neck and body.

For practical purposes, however, it isn't necessary to pinpoint his age to the exact year. You only need to separate the bucks you see into three categories – 1.) yearlings (18 months old and younger); 2.) mature (5-1/2 years and older); and 3.) everything in between.

To oversimplify, a hunter or rancher serious about improving his deer herd (i.e.: growing bigger antlers) never shoots anything in group three, which is made up of middle-aged bucks 2-1/2, 3-1/2, and 4-1/2 years old. The only animals culled

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from group one will be spikes or small freakish forked-horn heads.

The harvest will fall mainly on the old bucks in group two. Regulating the buck kill thus while reducing the doe population to about 50 percent of the adult deer population, will get the results a deer manager is looking for.

Obviously, there's a lot more to the process than this – the owner's goals, hunting history on the property, weather over the last full year, habitat considerations, and many more, but I only have room here for this synopsis.

Many hunters take refuge in the claim that they can't (read: "nobody can ...") look at a wild deer and tell his age. Wrong! Some European hunters are issued a tag only for an animal of a certain species, age and sex. A mistake means a major fine and loss of license – which took two years to earn! I hate to think those guys can do something that Texans can't. It only takes a little effort and practice, and it gives you something to do



This 2-1/2-year-old buck shows all the signs of youth ... slim body, slender neck, taut belly, straight nose-bridge and skinny rump.

while waiting for a "shooter" buck to show up.

By the way, a company called Wildlife Enterprises (22 Laurel Way, Kerrville, TX 78038, phone 830-257-4538) sells a useful little full-color chart illustrating and discussing most of the clues to age on a live deer. They also make several aids to judging a dead deer's age from his teeth, which we'll discuss next week.

Meanwhile, look first at how a buck's neck joins his body. A young buck's neck is slender like a doe's and there's visible space between the lower line of his neck and his brisket. On a mature buck, the neck extends from the top line of his withers to the bottom line of his chest in a broadside view, giving him a burly, heavy-shouldered look.

Notice also the line of his

belly from broadside. An old buck is like an old man, paunchy and sagging, even actually pot-bellied. Next, check the skin under his jaw. If it's a little loose and there's a slight dewlap, he's got some years on him.

Overall, an old buck seems blocky and heavy in the hams and shoulders, deep-bodied and bull-necked (even outside the rut).

His legs look too short because his body is so deep, and his ears often look too short because of the thickness of his neck and the spread of his antlers.



Photos by John Wootters

Note the pot belly on this mature buck. Less obvious is the deep neck base, but those two marks alone tell his age group.

The profile of his nose may get arched with age, becoming a classic "roman nose." Some suggest that older deer seem "squinty-eyed."

The point is that no single indicator is definitive; you have to look at all these areas together, preferably at leisure and from several angles, and go with the preponderance of the evidence, as the lawyers say.

Shoot pictures or videotape of bucks around a feeder and discuss their ages with your hunting buddies. By next season you'll be as good as the average profes-

sional biologist at aging bucks on the hoof. The knowledge will greatly enhance your hunting pleasure.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Peterson's hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for "Shooting Times," "Rifle," "Handloader," "Guns & Ammo" and Peterson's "Hunting."