

Outdoors

Looking a gift deer in the mouth

Last week we spoke of aging whitetail deer on the hoof. This week we find out how to tell whether we were right last week.

You can grade yourself on your age judgment on live deer by learning to “read” the teeth of dead ones. Then you mentally assign an age to a buck you intend to shoot, and check yourself out by his teeth.

Whitetails, being ruminants, chew a cud. This allows them to gather food rapidly, swallowing and storing it in the rumen, or first “stomach.” This minimizes the time a deer spends moving around in the open, distracted by the search for food. Once he gathers his day’s meal, he can lie down in cover and process the food at leisure, remaining inconspicuous and alert to any threat at the same time.

It also allows him to subsist on rather coarse forage, the kind from which it takes longer to extract the nutrients. The first step is chewing the cud. Naturally, chewing up all those twigs, buds, acorns and weeds causes wear on the animal’s molars. If nothing else kills him first, a deer will eventually starve to death even in the midst of

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plenty of succulent food because his teeth wear out.

A biologist named Severinghaus evolved a systematic method of reading the progressive tooth wear of whitetails. This is the best available method of aging a dead deer in the field. There are other, perhaps more accurate, methods of aging deer but they require procedures which can be performed only in a laboratory, and are therefore both expensive and time-consuming.

The Severinghaus method can be employed by anybody willing to take the trouble to learn it, anywhere a deer jawbone can be examined, takes only a few minutes, and its accuracy is adequate for all practical hunters’ or game managers’ purposes.

It is not perfect, however. Sandy, gritty soil can wear a deer’s teeth faster and cause

them to look older than they are, and non-abrasive food such as the protein deer pellets many high-fenced ranches feed make the deer age younger than he is, perhaps by as much as two years. Research is currently underway to give us a handle on that. Also, there is some inherent error in the Severinghaus procedure itself, estimated at up to 20 percent. Until something better comes along, however, it’s a valuable tool for hunters and game managers alike.

There is nothing mysterious about the procedure, and you do not have to be a scientist to learn or apply it. Best of all, my old friend, wildlife biologist Rod Marburger, (Wildlife Enterprises, 22 Laurel Way, Kerrville, TX 78028, phone 830-257-4538) manufactures a handsome aging board with realistic, three-dimensional models of deer jawbones of various ages.

The board has text giving all necessary instructions for its use, and I believe that no serious deer camp should be without one of these. Rod also offers a condensed pocket model with color photographs of jaws of vari-



Photos by John Wootters

An original Marburger aging board is shown at right. At left is a handmade aging board with genuine deer jaws collected by the author’s godson while gathering data on the King Ranch for a master’s degree in wildlife management. The godson, Chip Ruthven, has recently been appointed manager of the Matador Wildlife Management Area in the Texas Panhandle.

ous ages, with text.

I have no room here for a full description of the process, but the theory is essentially that the older the deer, the more tooth wear will be evident on his cud-chewing molars. Exactly how to interpret this wear is made clear by Marburger’s products.

After mastering the method, which anyone who’s

interested can easily do, many hunters save the jawbones of their kills as carefully as they do the antlers, and regard them as no less valid trophies.

Remember last week I said that an old buck is a trophy buck? Well, those jawbones are the proof of age that can back up your trophy claims.

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.”