

Outdoors

Shed hunting: Spring ritual for the hard-core

There is solid archeological evidence that deer antlers have always fascinated humans. Even tens of thousands of years ago, back in Paleolithic times, antler material was used not only for tools but also as the medium for artistic engravings and carvings, some of which probably had religious significance in that culture.

If you, therefore, cannot resist picking up every bleached whitetail antler you notice moldering amid the dead leaves, you're simply acknowledging your human heritage.

Some folks collect them. There is even a shed-antler collectors association and, yes, a record book. Listings include categories for all North American antlered game from whitetail deer through caribou and including moose, elk, mule deer, etc. There are divisions for single antlers and for matched pairs, typicals and non-typicals. Scoring is similar to the Boone & Crockett system of measurements, except for the absence of a

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spread credit.

One whitetail cultist in Illinois found a single shed antler that, if we assume the score of the other side matched and that the spread had been 20 inches, would have been a new typical world record at that time. He was so impressed that he actually had the antler cast in solid bronze. I possess one of the few copies.

Some hunters and deer-lovers (same thing) have actually trained dogs to find and retrieve shed antlers.

Many of us regard a big shed antler as a true trophy, only slightly less meaningful than an intact rack. I have seen many big single sheds mounted artistically on a



Photo by John Wootters

The author gloats over a matched pair of shed whitetail antlers, the prize find of an unusually productive day of shed hunting.

plaque on a hunter's wall.

Of course, there are stories about pairs of sheds installed on a full shoulder mount and passed off as a hunter's kill. The famous Texas "Brady buck" was for decades the world record non-typical while the last-year's sheds from the same buck, mounted on another cape, held the number 2 non-typical spot!

Since the two racks are very similar, it's amazing that nobody got suspicious for about 40 years, before the hoax was discovered.

But there's more than mere esthetics in shed antlers. Much valuable information can be extracted from a collection of sheds from a given property.

First, they give a very rough suggestion of how many bucks survived the previous season and winter,

the age structure of the males, their average quality, and the general locations of specific bucks on the pasture. They hint at the herd's overall health and condition, and that of the habitat.

Finding a recognizable shed antler from a special buck that was not seen during the last days of the season erases fears that he was killed across the fence.

It also permits an actual measurement of various features of the rack, eliminating guesswork and confirming (or otherwise) your estimates of his score.

Most of all, it allows you to hold an actual, physical part of the deer in your hand, knowing that he'll still be out there, maybe bigger and better, next season, thanks to the whitetail's homebody nature.

And where do we look for these prizes? Basically, wherever the deer spend a lot of time during late winter. Cover adjacent to crops or woodland food plots is prime shed hunting territory.

Lacking such, look for remainders of natural food-stuffs – fruits, acorns, mushrooms, winter forbs, etc. Coming off the rut, bucks

need to rebuild body condition and energy reserves for the hard winter ahead and they spend a lot of time foraging.

Other areas that have produced a bounty of shed antlers for me have been low spots in the terrain, creek bottoms and canyons where the animals can hole up against winter storms, and along known deer trails, especially where they have to jump or wiggle under fences, blowdowns, etc. Lots of already-loosened antlers are dropped in such spots.

When? Anytime from now on until the grass gets high enough to conceal a shed. Good hunting!

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."