

# Outdoors

## Trophy bucks — wishful thinking vs. management

Everybody dreams of bigger-antlered bucks on his ranch or lease. We know there are three essential elements in the big-antler equation — age, nutrition, and genetics. All are important ... but they are not equally important.

What most sources fail to tell us is that the least of the three is genetics, but to many folks it looks like the shortcut to Boone-&-Crockett glory.

Such thinking leads to tactics like importing pen-raised, northern, or South Texas bucks for herd sires. Just thumb through the advertisements in any whitetail magazine if you question the popularity of this idea. But adding a great sire to a free-ranging herd produces a genetic improvement on the same scale as pouring a cup of water into the ocean to dilute the salt.

The whitetail deer has the greatest genetic variability of any large game animal in North America, and trying to reshape its genotype in free-ranging animals is a.) a total waste of time, or b.), prohibitively expensive — take your pick.

Nutrition can also be influenced by supplemental feeding, of course, but an out-and-out feed-trough operation is impractical without a high fence and is not what most of us call “hunting.” In fact, there probably are few areas occupied by whitetails on this continent where the gene pool is not already good enough that big antlers will result just from improving forage and allowing bucks to live two or three more years.

This drive to change the genotype of wild bucks leads to such weird and fruitless exercises as the notorious “eight-point rule” which demands the harvesting of any buck with eight or fewer points. The theory is that removing the “eight-point gene” from the herd encourages bucks to grow 10 or more points. The rule may call for the killing of any buck lacking one or both brow tines, or any buck without an equal number of points on each side, or any buck showing insufficient spread to suit the proprietor. However it’s worded, it’s a snare and a delusion and it won’t work.

Why not? Let me count the reasons. First, the so-called eight-point strategy does not protect the class of bucks we wish to save. For example, a good many yearling bucks on good habitat will grow eight little points on their first racks. Needless to say, these may be superbucks and must be allowed to grow up. On the other hand, many mature or even old bucks — deer far past their prime — are spared by the rule. Second, half of any fawn’s genes come from the mother doe.

How about brow tines? After a dry March and April, it’s common for bucks to fail to grow one or both brow tines, simply because the eyeguards (the first tines to appear as the rack develops) are established during those months. If rations are short then, so will antler points be.

What’s the solution? It’s simple to say, but difficult to do. The herd, especially the female segment, must be reduced to a number that the acreage can support even in a hard winter or severe drought. Nobody, without

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inspecting the pasture, can tell you how many deer you should have. If your landowner is willing, you can get help from the Texas Parks & Wildlife extension biologist in your district. If not, pick a safe number — say, one adult whitetail to 20 acres — as your goal. By improving the habitat, you automatically improve the nutrition level of the deer herd.

The age structure of the

buck herd can also be manipulated by allowing the middle-aged (2.5 to 4.5 years old) bucks to live. You will never harm your deer herd by harvesting only 5.5-year-old or older bucks. Yes, that means that hunters and/or guides must learn to “age” bucks on the hoof before shooting. It takes practice and a little effort, but it’s not as difficult as it sounds. I haven’t space here to go into the technique, but I’ll devote a whole column to the subject soon.

We see, then, that two of the three elements in trophy antlers — age and nutrition — are somewhat controllable by the wildlife manager, while efforts to manipulate the third — genetics — in wild, free-ranging deer herds are largely futile.



Photo by John Wootters

If the money and effort spent trying to introduce superior genetic strains into a whitetail herd or culling so-called inferior bucks were spent instead on habitat improvement, bigger antlers would begin showing up within about three years.

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The “eight point rule” would dictate that this buck be removed from the gene pool, but it would be a mistake. The antler spread of most whitetail bucks 2 \_ years and older will be outside their ear-tips which together with the baby face and ewe neck marks this South Texas youngster as a potential wallhanger — if he lives long enough.