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Aging Deer on-the-Hoof

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UVALDE -- Harvesting deer at the right age is an important aspect of trophy deer management according to Dr. Byron Wright, Texas Cooperative Extension wildlife specialist.

“There are three aspects to antler development in white-tailed deer,” he said. “genetics, nutrition and age.

“Age is crucial for developing quality antlers and must be considered right along with nutrition and genetics. A lot of people are concentrating on genetics these days when many would be better off improving their deer habitat and letting their bucks get a little older. I really think most hunters would be happy with the results of letting their bucks mature on good habitat before harvesting them.

Wright said research and experience has shown scientists that bucks reach their peak antler growth between 5 and 7 years old.

“I often hear folks claim their biggest bucks are over 7 years old,” said Wright. “This may be true with penned deer living under optimum conditions, but I question whether it’s valid in wild deer. If some of the biggest bucks being harvested really are over 7 years of age, what percentage of the deer 8 and 9 years old do they represent? If 80-90 percent of the bucks 8 and 9 years old have declined in antler quality, then it is pretty dicey business to manage for the 10-20 percent comprising this very small age class.”

Wright believes more research should be done before concrete statements are made about post-mature bucks growing the biggest antlers in the wild.

“Irrespective of the 8-9 year old controversy, bucks have to be at least 5 years old to grow their biggest antlers,” said the specialist. “Being able to estimate a buck’s age before harvest is vitally important in a trophy management program. Aging deer on-the-hoof is more art than science. A person needs to look at a lot of known-age animals to get the feel for the process. Aging deer means looking at many different characteristics and making your best educated guess. Factors like individual animal variation, health, breeding stage, observer bias and geographic area all influence an animal’s appearance. There is a lot of variation among animals that leads to mistakes when judging the age of deer, especially when an animal shows characteristics from multiple age classes.”

Wright said figuring a deer’s exact age is difficult and unnecessary. What is really important in his opinion, is being able to place the deer in one of three major categories: young, middle aged and old. He considers yearlings and 2 year-old deer young; 3-4 years old, middle aged and 5-7 years as old.

Young deer have: 1) long legs 2) long, thin necks 3) high flanks, 4) rumps higher than their shoulders and 5) an overall slim, dainty appearance.

Middle-aged deer have: 1) thick, muscular necks, 2) necks that swell from the shoulders 3) heavily-muscled rounded hind-quarters, 4) bellies that are full, but not sagging, 5) legs that no longer appear long and gangly and 6) flat backs that do not sway.

Old deer have 1) swayed backs, 2) “pot-bellies”, 3) very heavy necks and shoulders, 4) necks that blend into their chests, 5) short or stubby-appearing legs and 6) “squinty-eyes”.

“Allowing the bucks on your hunting lease to grow up will pay dividends later on,” said Wright. “Hunters interested in trophy deer management should hone their skills to increase their odds of making accurate judgements about age.

“My ‘on-the-hoof’ aging suggestions are simply guidelines. Mistakes are going to be made when judging a deer’s age. We just have to learn from those mistakes and while we keep practicing.”