

Estimating live age instead of antler restrictions for QDM

One of the cornerstones of quality deer management (QDM) is achieving a balanced age structure in the deer herd. Of course, this involves allowing young bucks to reach older age classes. QDM programs strive for bucks to reach at least 3 years of age before harvest. Age of bucks is most often estimated by antlers; however, hunters often confuse larger antlers with older bucks, and this is not always the case.

Antler size is a product of age, nutrition, and genetics. If a buck is killed when young, it has no chance of producing a large rack. Therefore, hunters must allow bucks to reach maturity if they want to kill deer with large antlers. If a buck lives to maturity, but nutrition is limited, antler size may still be relatively small. Available nutrition first goes to body growth and function. Only after those requirements are met, will additional nutrition go into antler production. Only if a buck lives to maturity, and nutrition is not limiting, can the genetic potential of that animal be expressed. Of course, the genetic traits of every animal are different; thus, some bucks are inherently able to grow larger antlers than others. That being said, there are very few bucks that wouldn't please the vast majority of hunters if the genetic potential of those animals is expressed at maturity.

Antler restrictions are usually implemented to help bucks reach older age classes. Common antler restrictions include 4 points on one side, 8 points total, a spread minimum that might range from 12 – 15 inches, or a minimum antler score based on the Boone and Crockett scoring system. *Depending on the area*, various antler restrictions are successful in enabling bucks to reach a certain age. The only way to know if an antler restriction is applicable, and for which age classes it is applicable, is to evaluate the antler characteristics of bucks by age class within an area.

For example, if yearling (1 ½ years old) bucks in a given area only produce 2 – 6 points, a 4-point-to-a-side or an 8-point-total restriction would eliminate yearling buck harvest. However, many 2-year-old deer in that area might grow racks with 7 or more points. The spread of the 2-year-olds then would need to be evaluated. If the average spread of 2-year-old bucks was less than 15 inches, then a 15-inch spread restriction would protect most of the 2-year-olds. But, what about the “upper end” 2-year-olds? They would be eligible for harvest. It is most desirable to allow bucks to reach at least 3 years of age before being eligible for harvest in a QDM program. Thus, a minimum score could be implemented to protect all of the 2-year-olds. Let's say a minimum score of 120 inches is used to protect all of the 2-year-old bucks. Then, there will be 3-, and possibly some 4-year-old bucks in the population that might not score 120 inches. What about them? Should they be eligible for harvest, even if they don't meet the score restriction? If the goal is to allow bucks to reach at least 3 years of age before harvest, the answer is yes. *According to your deer management objectives*, there is nothing wrong with harvesting bucks, regardless of antler size or characteristic, if the buck has reached maturity.

At this point, it should be obvious bucks must be aged on the hoof, and antler characteristics should be used only as a *clue* to identify a buck's age. Body characteristics more accurately identify age, and learning the body characteristics of various age classes is important to successfully achieve a balanced age structure. Without any reference to antlers, a general description of body characteristics by age class is described below. This information comes from *Observing and Evaluating Whitetails* by Dave Richards and Al Brothers. It is an excellent reference, with hundreds of explanatory color photos, available through the Quality Deer Management Association (800-209-3337).

Yearling bucks are easy to identify with slim faces and necks. Their body is also slim, resembling a doe, and their legs appear long (in relation to body size). 2-year-old bucks still appear long-legged and their back and stomach are generally taut. The neck and body is larger than a yearling, but the face still appears larger than the neck from the front and long from the side. 3-year-old bucks exhibit a fuller neck and deeper chest, which, for the first time, appears as large or larger than the rump. The stomach and back are still straight and taut. When bucks reach 4 years of age, for the first time, their legs do not appear relatively long, and may appear slightly short for the body. The neck and body will appear more muscular and full, but still relatively trim. The stomach and back will not sag. In a QDM program, a 4-year-old buck is a prime target. If the vast majority of hunters ever saw and could get a shot at a 4-year-old buck, they would take it.

Identifying characteristics for older bucks are given in *Observing and Evaluating Whitetails*. For most QDM programs, it is a real achievement for bucks to reach 4 years of age before harvest. Using body characteristics to estimate the age of bucks requires practice, just like learning to judge antlers. Of course, this can be frustrating if no mature bucks are present! However, if young bucks are not shot, the population will ultimately include mature animals. Using references such as *Observing and Evaluating Whitetails* will help ready you for field judging live bucks.

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