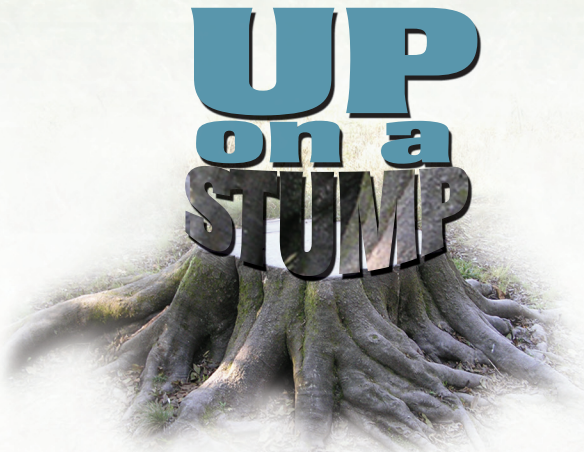


By Dr. James C. Kroll

MANAGEMENT BUCK?

There is an old saying, "You can talk the talk, but can you walk the walk?" Never has this been more true when it comes to the growing lexicon of whitetail management. Among both professionals and laymen I hear a host of terms being bandied about, and it's obvious the user hasn't a clue what he is talking about! There are two that have come to trouble me greatly. First, it's common today to hear someone profess to be managing for "quality" bucks and not trophy bucks. What on Earth is the difference? I guess if you are managing for quality, that puts you in a different elite class than plain old trophy management. Yet, there is no difference in my mind. But, it is the second offending term that causes me to title this issue's column—Management Buck?

A few days ago, I was traveling to Orlando to give an hour and a half lecture on whitetail management on forested lands. As usual, I bumped into a fellow who has watched our show and read my columns for several years. He began our conversation by telling me about the wonderful place he hunts in South Texas. "Why that ranch is one of the best managed ranches I've seen," he proclaimed. "The owner lets me and my dad come hunt, but we only are allowed to kill management bucks." He went on to proudly state last season he had killed an eight-pointer with a 24-inch spread, while old dad had taken another eight with a 22-inch width. "Foolish rancher," I thought to myself; and, congratulated the happy hunter.

I often have criticized the way most ranches are managed here in the Lone Star State. The average landowner will lease his property to a few guys seeking a "managed" place. In almost every instance, "management" turns out to include the following per hunter limit: one trophy buck and one management buck. Here is how the season then plays out. Each hunter searches out and shoots a high-scoring buck (at least for that property). Then they spend the rest of the season doing what my friend, David Morris, calls "inventorying" bucks. By the end of the season, most of the hunters have managed to find the largest framed eight-pointer in their hunting area, letting countless mature bucks with eight points and small frames walk with impunity around their stands. These are what I call *bulletproof* bucks. Over the years, the herd is degraded, with the landowner and hunters thinking they are "managing" the herd for bigger antlers.

It was around 5 a.m. and a friend and I were on the highway between Uvalde and La Pryor to hunt his ranch. "I have an important question," he asked. "How many management bucks do we need to kill?" My response was instant and to the point: "All of them!" He then asked what percentage of the bucks that comprised? When I told him, he almost ran off the road!

Cull herds had been hunted like the place above for many years, leaving the place a vast sea of mediocre bucks. Occasionally, a good buck would stumble onto the property from a nearby, huge property, but other than that it was slim pickings. He pondered my recommendation and said softly, "I can't do that." To this day, he has made no progress.

In most cases, there is no place for culling in deer management. This may seem a contradiction to what I just said about my friend, but it's not. Turns out, he had a great deal of help in degrading his herd. They're called the neighbors. Other than the large property to one side, the remaining three touched five different small ranches and these touched dozens more. For most properties, culling deer is simply a "feel-good activity." Our research has proven the only place for culling at all is behind a high fence, and although you may think the entire state of Texas is fenced, it's only a small percentage. I will return to this later.

I cannot express how much I hate the term "cull" buck. When I hear it used, I begin to like management buck better. I'm descended from a long line of German game keepers. These guys have been doing what we have recently discovered for more than 400 years. To *cull* in the lexicon of the game keeper is to remove both males and females to keep the herd in a balanced state—a natural deer herd, so to speak. A natural herd is one with balanced sex and age structure. So, when a game keeper culls, he removes individuals across all age classes and both sexes. Yes, he also removes males with undesirable antler traits, but *he* is the one who does this work, not the hunter. A good game keeper never trusts the average hunter to make such decisions.

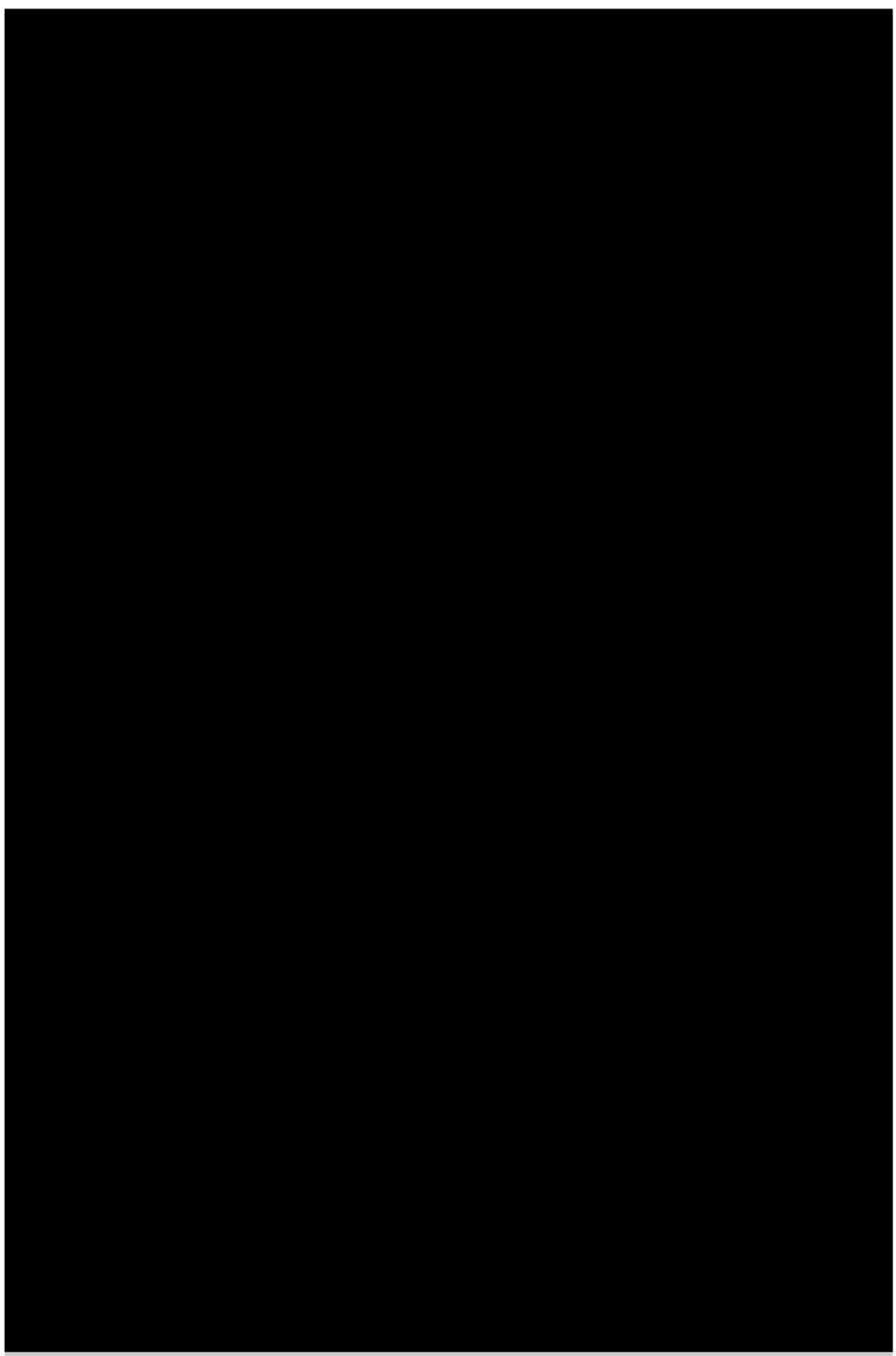
My buddy Gordon Whittington and I wrote a book some time back entitled, "The Art and Science of Patterning Whitetails." As usual, we were way ahead of our time, since the concept of patterning bucks has only recently gained hunter interest. In the book, Gordon and I defined what we considered to be a Trophy Buck; one that is mature! Gosh, I would even put forward that an old buck with 120 inches on his head is worth more to me than a Booner that's only 3½ years old. I have tried to put this philosophy forward on our TV show, "North American Whitetail," and it's having some effect on my TV colleagues on other shows. More and more I'm hearing celebrity hunters either brag on the age of the buck they just shot, or apologizing and explaining why they shot a young buck. The hunting public, on the other hand, is a bit more difficult to change. A couple years ago, I shot a buck on a Kansas property belonging to Buck Forage Oats owner, John Butler. It probably was one of the smallest antlered bucks I have shot in years. Yet, it was one of my greatest hunting moments. The buck was 13 years old, by cementum annuli estimation. "I saw your Kansas hunt," a fellow told me last year. "Why did you shoot that little buck?" The guy did not have a clue why I took that buck, nor had he heard me make such a fuss over the buck in the show!

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Are there management bucks and cull bucks? You have probably gathered I do not accept the term "management buck." However, when it comes to cull bucks, I can be swayed, depending on the situation. Behind a high fence, and under the well-stated goal of producing high-scoring bucks, there's a place for culling and there are cull bucks. Yet, again I seldom

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have seen a high-fenced property that is properly harvested to accomplish this Herculean task.

I was not kidding my friend when I told him he would have to shoot most of his bucks. While you *can* damage a herd by picking off the top end year after year, even on large properties, taking a few cull bucks does little to change the genetics of your herd. You have to be ruthless and wage war on your deer, both bucks and does, to produce large numbers of high scoring bucks on a sustained yield basis. And, there is no end to it. Even though you can increase the percentage of high-end bucks, the genetics for smaller antlers remain hidden in your deer. More than once I have brought a fenced herd to high productivity, only to have the landowner ruin it by backing off culling. And, the most common reason he does this is it no longer is fun! It is what I call the five-year hurdle. By the fifth year, he has discovered managing deer is hard work and decides to back off to a lesser level.

Here is my last point. If you are the rare individual and situation (high-fenced) lending to culling, what bucks qualify as "culls?" That entirely is up to you. Everyone has a perfect buck in their mind. In my 1991 book, "A Practical Guide to Producing and Harvesting White-tailed Deer," I listed the antler frames possible for bucks. Looking straight on at a buck, you can inscribe a shape around the antler frame—diamond, square, rectangle, oval and circle. I personally hate bucks with the diamond configuration, but I know of lots of folks who love them. Does that mean I'm right and they are wrong? Nope! It's just my preference. So, again in the very rare cases where culling is appropriate, five managers could start with the same herd and end up with five very different buck populations. You see now why terms such as trophy, quality and management bucks are so ridiculous? I hope my little rant here has given you some new things to think about while you are sitting there waiting on a big-framed management buck to come by.