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Points or Better- Part 1

Will Antler Restrictions Work?

By Dr. James C. Kroll and Ben Koerth

"We only shoot eight points or better!" How many times have you come across that magic statement when reading an advertisement for a hunting lease or heard it in conversation when discussing what someone is doing on their lease? Sounds great, doesn't it? Makes you think, "That place must have some great deer if they have such high restrictions and are still able to keep their hunters happy."

But, what are they really doing? Obviously, the intent is to keep hunters from shooting little, young bucks. We are seeing a growing trend across the whitetail hunting landscape. More and more hunters are becoming interested in improving the quality of deer and deer hunting on their land. Recently, this trend has led to size restrictions being imposed on some southern states. But what really works, and will such restrictions work on your land?

Mostly, antler restrictions are tried at places where hunters are not accompanied by a guide or someone with the authority to decide which deer a hunter may take. In an attempt to control the harvest of young deer by hunters unable to accurately field age animals before they shoot, landowners and hunting club members have tried for years to come up with a simple method of limiting the harvest to older animals—the assumption being older animals are more likely to be trophy quality.

Of all the things tried, the methods that seem most popular are the ones with some sort of antler size restrictions. The most popular of the antler restriction limits seem to revolve around the number of points. It's quick and it's relatively easy. After all, what is the first thing you look for when spotting a buck? Your eyes almost immediately are drawn to the head and you count how many points he has. Even novice and non-hunters do this.

What remains unanswered is whether point restrictions really work in deer

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management. Can point restrictions control the harvest of young deer? Maybe more importantly, how do point restrictions affect the future genetics of the deer herd? In this two-part series we will present the techniques we have used successfully in many states to produce better bucks.

Quality Bucks or Trophy Bucks?

There are two possible management strategies: quality bucks and trophy bucks. The other strategy, numbers management, is not really management at all. Under the numbers strategy, the deer herd is held as high as possible with very little doe harvest and unlimited buck harvest. In good rain years, a few quality bucks can be found. In average to poor years, antler quality and fawn crops go down the tubes. If you are trying to consistently produce a high-quality product, it's not going to work.

We often have said a quality buck is one you skin out in front of the house instead of behind the house. A trophy buck is one you put in the back of your truck and burn up three tanks of gas driving around showing it to everyone until the venison becomes a bit gamy. Seriously, Dr. Kroll defined "quality buck" in his book, "A Practical Guide to Producing and Harvesting White-tailed Deer," as one that is at least 3-1/2 years of age, harvested in a quality habitat and as part of a quality hunting experience. He also essentially defined "trophy" as a 150-inch Boone and Crockett or larger buck. Which type of buck you manage for depends on many factors, including the size and amount of control you have on your hunting land, personal goals and potential of the herd. In most instances, we have found what folks really want are quality bucks rather than trophies. Yet, there is nothing wrong with wanting either; you just have to decide early on which strategy you are going to pursue.

Quality Buck Strategies

For an area with a high harvest of bu many of which are very young deer, p restrictions can work to some extent limit the number of young bucks tak Young deer, usually yearlings with sm antlers, are allowed to grow at least o more year to produce quality anim somewhere down the line for a luc hunter. In this scenario, the eight points better rule is probably good. Howev anything less than this can lead frustrated managers and hunters becau too many yearling deer will still hit t hanging rack.

In quality deer management, poi restrictions will only work if the bar high enough to virtually eliminate tl harvest of yearling bucks, something th is not easily done. To produce true troph quality animals, the bar has to be hig enough to eliminate the harvest of buc until they are 5 years old or even olde something that is impossible to do wi point restrictions. For someone trying produce high numbers of trophy-cla animals and with the goal of continual

improving the quality of the animals available, we think the eight point or better rule may not be a good idea. Here's why.

The accompanying figures on points and spread are from a sample of nearly 5,000 bucks taken over a six-year period here in Texas. These animals were hunter-killed deer that were aged by their teeth after harvest. Because there remains some question about how well the tooth wear method works in aging deer to exact ages and the fact that we found no significant differences in number of points or antler spread after 3-1/2 years of age, we grouped the deer into three categories: 1-1/2, 2-1/2 and 3-1/2 years old or older.

If you only looked at the number of antler points, it's amazing how much the 2-1/2-year-olds look like 3-1/2-plus animals. The vast majority of whitetail bucks seemingly want to be eight-pointers after their first year. Many of them are never more than eight-pointers no matter how long they live.

This is not new and revolutionary information, but too many deer hunters seem to ignore the facts. Our results mirror the findings of Dr. Charlie DeYoung and fellow researchers of Texas A&M-Kingsville who randomly caught hundreds of bucks with helicopters and nets on several large ranches in South Texas over a number of years. In their study, eight-pointers were by far the most common deer that were aged 2-1/2 years or older.

One important aspect in our study, as well as from the reports by Dr. DeYoung, is the percentage of the deer herd that is in the real trophy category. Animals with more than 10 points make up an exceedingly small part of the total population. It becomes very easy to remove the best animals from the breeding population simply by shooting one or two deer.

In the quality deer management scenario, the eight point or better rule may work to protect a good number of yearling bucks. Few of these young bucks make it to the eight points or better category. However, the very best of these youngsters still become potential targets. If these young animals with great antler-producing potential are harvested, where will the real trophies come from in the future? Anything less than an eight-point rule allows too many yearling bucks to be harvested.

In the trophy management scenario, the eight points or better rule completely falls apart in its effectiveness. Virtually any buck, aside from most yearlings, becomes a potential target. It is heartbreaking for a trophy deer manager to see someone stretching the neck of a 2-1/2-year-old 10-pointer at the skinning tree.

If not points, then what can you use? Another measure that seems to separate deer into age classes better than points is inside spread. While there is some overlap that is normal for biological measures, there are three distinct curves for the different age classes of deer that you don't see with antler points. Inside spread is easy to use and you don't have to carry a ruler around with you to estimate spread. The deer do that for you.

Here is how it works. The average difference between the tips of the ears in a normal upright position for southern deer is about 14 inches. That is exactly the same distance as the inside spread of the average 3-1/2-plus deer. If you are only using antler measurements to decide if a deer is a shooter, forget points. If his antlers are wider than the tips of his ears, shoot him.

The Georgia Department of Natural Resources used the inside antler spread in what was called the Dooly County Experiment. In Dooly County, at the request of landowners and hunters, a 14-inch minimum inside spread was mandated for a buck to be legally harvested. After three years of this management, the experiment was regarded a resounding success. The same number of bucks were harvested as before the size restrictions, only now the deer harvested were older and were sporting higher quality headgear.

Two other common antler measures, main beam length and basal circumference of the antler, need to be mentioned because we have studied them closely over the years, as well. While they may be just

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as good at predicting age classes of deer a inside spread, we believe they are just no practical to use in most hunting situations Beam length is difficult to judge withou the perfect profile view and the differenc in circumference between age classes i measured in the quarter of inches. Try tha when your buck may be in view for les than six seconds.

Does an antler restriction work? You bet There are countless examples of leases an clubs we have worked with that hav produced large numbers of impressiv bucks. But you cannot use points alone The Oakland Club in South Carolina, fo example, has produced in less than decade some of the top bucks taken in th state, all by placing size and ag restrictions on bucks. The Fountain Cree Hunting Club in Trinity County and th Cottingham Club in Nacogdoches Count each have significantly changed the qualit of bucks taken from their leases usin these methods.

We are confident in saying Quality Dee Management is here to stay. Althoug Texas has yet to implement any strategy t improve the age structure of the buc herd, many states are now willing to adm the old way of managing deer herds n longer works. The hunter—o consumer—is demanding higher qualit both in animals and the experience Hunters are taking steps, with or witho professional help, to change the situation

In the next installment of this series, w will take quality to the next level: troph management. We will present th strategies we have used successfully t produce almost three dozen recordboo deer. In the meantime, when that yearlin buck walks up to your feeder this seasor let him walk.