

Dr. Deer's Whitetail World

BY DR. JAMES C. KROLL

Nutrition, Age And Genetics: The Critical Trinity, Part 2

Of the three key components to producing big bucks, nutrition is clearly the most important. With that in mind, I began our new series last month by discussing the importance of nutrition in producing trophy whitetails. This month, we'll talk about the second-most-important component to the management trinity, and one that you easily can do something about: age. As a good friend of mine once said, "You may have the genes of an all-pro linebacker, but if all you have to eat as a child are turnip greens, don't plan on making the draft!"

I think I can safely say that every B&C buck on record was once was a yearling. If this is true, how many potential world-class bucks have been taken away in the back of a hunter's truck long before those deer reached their potential? Sadly, the truth is that the average buck harvested in the U.S. is still no more than 2 years of age, and many are still yearlings.

Unfortunately, the average whitetail hunter sees a deer for about three seconds before he pulls the trigger. Whenever I give presentations on deer behavior at hunting shows, someone in the audience will invariably proclaim, "I've never seen a deer do that!" Obviously, the hunters who make these kinds of statements never get to witness certain buck behaviors because they pull the trigger so fast there is no time to observe them. So, here's my point: Once you improve the nutritional level for the deer on your land, the next step is to try to help them reach maturity.

THE DOOLY COUNTY PROJECT

I've mentioned this project many times before in my writings. In the early 1990s, there was a grass roots effort by Dooly County, Georgia, landowners to deal with the issue of over-harvest of young bucks. Since hunters often can be their own worst enemy, this grass roots movement pushed to develop ways to protect yearling bucks. The project — co-sponsored by the Georgia DNR and the University of Georgia and funded in part by ***North American Whitetail*** — would require participation not only from landowners and hunters, but also from professional biologists and game wardens alike.



PHOTO BY RON SINFELT

Over the past decade or so, landowners and hunters have done a remarkable job on a grass roots level to protect younger bucks. We've come a long way, but we still have far to go.

Examining antler data from the area's bucks, the decision was made to impose a 15-inch outside-spread limit for legal bucks taken in Dooly County, beginning in the 1993 season. According to our data, a 15-inch outside-spread limit would protect over 98 percent of yearling bucks, as well as the majority of 2-year old bucks.

The Dooly County Project was a huge success. Garnering unprecedented public support, the word got around quickly. But did the project achieve its goal of producing an increased number of older bucks? A study conducted by biologists Mike VanBrackie and J. Scott McDonald in four Georgia counties clearly showed a positive impact. Sixty-three yearling bucks were radio-collared in Dooly and Macon counties, where the 15-inch spread antler limitation was established.

An additional 72 yearlings were collared in Harris and Meriwether counties, where the limitation for shooting a legal buck was the presence of at least four antler points on a side. Study results showed that at least one-fourth of these bucks lived to the age of 3 1/2, something that seldom happens in heavily hunted areas of the country.

OBJECTIONS TO ANTLER RESTRICTIONS

Although I favor using a spread limit, our data indicated that placing either a point or spread limit shows promise to protect young bucks from harvest. After the success of the Dooly County project, several states followed suit. As of 2008, at least 23 states were using some sort of antler restriction, although some were limited to specific management units. In the vast majority, hunter and landowner satisfaction was, to quote my buddy Stan Potts, "off the charts!"

Any politician in any state would be jealous of this level of public support. The one exception was Pennsylvania,

where a handful of highly vocal critics managed to run off the white-tailed deer program leader after antler restrictions were imposed. In spite of the criticism, the Keystone State has over the past few years added an impressive number of bucks to its record book as a direct result of those antler restrictions!

What are the primary criticisms of setting antler restrictions? You'd be surprised; the folks who raise these questions sometimes turn out to be professional biologists. Remember, the success of antler restrictions has been directly related to the grass roots nature of the programs implemented. As a biologist myself, I am fully aware of how professionals sometimes react to the "unwashed" public telling them what to do!

The biggest fear (and therefore criticism) revolved around "hunter opportunity." Economically speaking, the last few years have been tough for many state wildlife agencies, and anything that might reduce the number of hunters — thereby reducing income from licenses, permits and fees — has often not been looked upon favorably. Yet, it was the old hunter opportunity model (quantity over quality) that got us into the situation of not having enough older bucks in the first place! And it's a proven fact that most modern hunters are more than willing to accept a lower success rate (if you measure success in body count) to gain a chance to harvest an older buck.

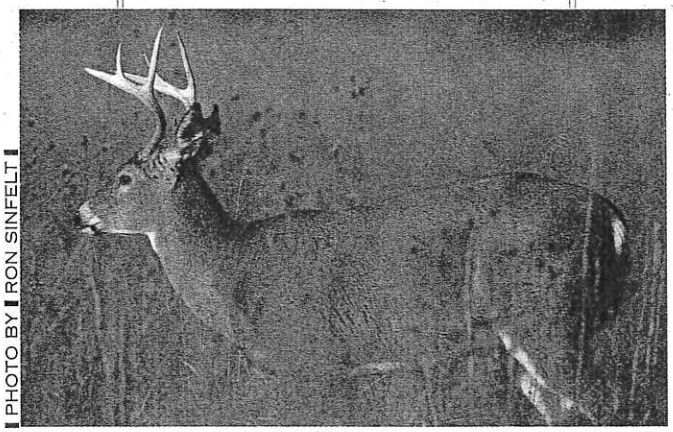


PHOTO BY RON SINFELT

Although age is the easiest component of the "critical trinity" to do something about, the truth is that the average buck killed in the U.S. today is still no more than 2 years old, and many are still yearlings.

THOSE "EVIL" TROPHY HUNTERS

The next criticism revolves around the concept of "trophy hunting." If you're a long-time reader of ***North American Whitetail***, you already know where we stand on this issue. However, there are two things to consider in this debate. First, can you explain to me the difference between a "trophy" buck and a "quality" buck? I might also ask: Do you know anyone who is managing deer for mediocrity?

In truth, managing for older, larger antlered bucks has been and is a win-win situation for the species and for our sport. When you get right down to it, it's really *not* about trophy bucks. It's about producing *natural* herds. By natural, I'm talking about a herd that has a balanced age and sex structure. If you have a balanced age and sex structure, you'll also have some older trophy bucks.

The Good Lord meant for older bucks to fight for dominance and do most of the breeding so that they can pass along their strong genes to the next generation. If we were to deliberately manage to produce fewer older bucks, what would the ultimate impact on the herd be? For one thing, it would be unnatural and unbalanced. It's simply an added bonus that managing for older bucks also produces bigger antlers! Can you think of a stronger, more motivating force that encourages hunters to become active participants in deer management? There isn't one!

THE FUTURE OF DEER MANAGEMENT

The final criticism, and one often waged by some professionals, is this: By protecting yearling bucks with less than 15-inch spreads and/or three or four points to a side, we end up degrading the genetics of the herd. Under this assumption, the theory is that the young bucks with larger antlers will be harvested before their time, leaving the smaller bucks to breed. However, no one to date has been able to satisfactorily prove that this really happens. One study has been done that supports this theory, but its methodologies and mathematics are questionable at best.

I believe we'll see more and more states going to antler restrictions. Historically, though, these efforts have been aimed primarily at protecting young bucks under two scenarios: 1) public hunting and 2) areas with very small landholdings too small to manage. What about the growing number of landowners and hunters managing for quality whitetails? What can you do to improve age structure?

In my opinion, antler restrictions are a stopgap measure in the quest to achieve a balanced and natural herd. A few years ago we imposed the 15-inch rule in east Texas. Last season I stopped by to visit my taxidermist. He has a good feel for what's going on among our local hunters. While in his shop, I bumped into two other hunters. "What do you fellows think about the new antler restrictions?" I prompted.

"They're okay, but we really don't need them," one of the men volunteered. He went on to explain that the group he hunted with would kick a man out of their club for shooting a yearling buck!

His message was loud and clear! He was really echoing a view shared by hunters everywhere. These hunters have adopted a new mentality about deer hunting, and it's making a significant difference in age structure. This is not dissimilar to what happened with catch-and-release fishing. Although there are some downsides to not keeping a fish (I like to eat them), peer-group pressure spread the concept of catch-and-release in only a few years.

Over the past decade or so, landowners and hunters have done a remarkable job on a grass roots level to protect younger bucks. We've come a long way, but we still have far to go. It has been both gratifying and surprising how quickly hunters and landowners have embraced the concept of aging live deer so that they know what they are shooting at. Lately, while attending hunting shows in various places, it's been pleasing to hear average guys refer to bucks they've seen as "3-year olds!"

So far in this series I've discussed the most important two components to the management trinity — nutrition and age. In the final installment, I'll deal with the final management issue — genetics. Stay tuned. You might be surprised by what I have to say.