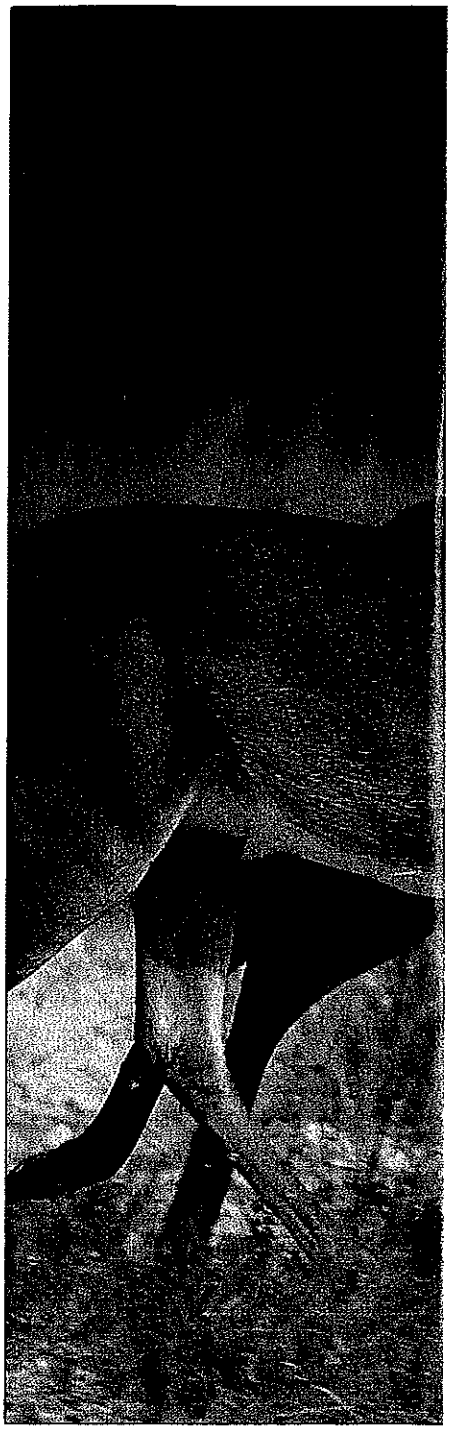
BUILDING YOUR OWN
'DEER FACTORY'

Aging Whitetails Before The Shot

A healthy deer herd contains a good representation of mature bucks and young does. These guidelines will help hunters on your land avoid shooting the wrong deer.

by Dr. James C. Kroll



In the January issue, we looked at using the "tooth wear and replacement" method to age whitetails harvested off your hunting land, to enable you to learn more about your herd's condition. Now, let's look at a second aspect of the same question: estimating a deer's age *before* you shoot it.

The average hunter observes a buck just long enough to see antlers and pull the trigger. But our evangelizing on this subject has started to pay off. In fact, just today a guy called to tell me about the 3 1/2-year-old buck he'd seen on his land. He's not alone, either. More and more, I'm hearing hunters talk of bucks in terms of age, not just antlers.

Why would you need to know the age of a deer before you shoot it? First, if we're to manage our valuable deer resource responsibly, we must pay close attention to proper harvest. As I detailed in the October and November 1999 issues, taking the right numbers of the right deer off your hunting land lets you manipulate both age structure and buck:doe ratios, two key components of a herd's health.

Making the right harvest decisions not only gives us trophy hunters more big bucks to pursue but also helps the herd and the habitat, both of which should be major considerations in any management plan. All studies show that the general public will accept hunting as a recreational activity if it's used as a management tool for the good of the species and the environment. Having a skilled hunter in the woods who is making informed decisions regarding the welfare of the herd is a "win-win" situation. And being able to select the right animals for harvest is part of our skill as hunter-managers.

THE AGING CONCEPT

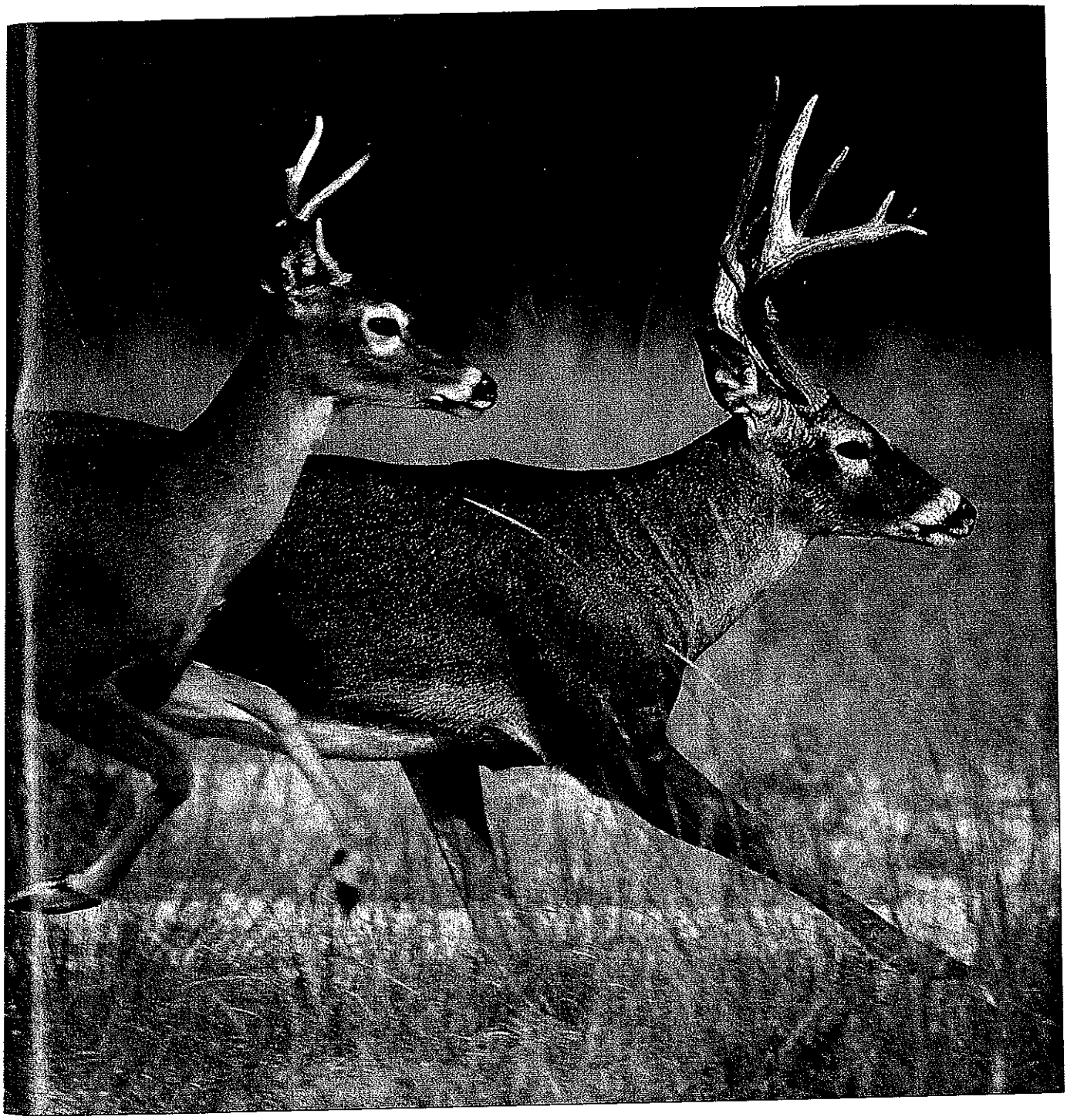
In a room full of people of all ages, I'll bet that you can reliably place most individuals into 10-year age-classes simply by observing them.

If you really take the time to study deer, you can do the same with them. Unfortunately, in many areas, herds are so out of balance that hunters lack the luxury of being able to study various age-classes of bucks in the field. If that's your problem, you might need to come up with other ways to observe deer in nonhunting situations.

One of the best ways to age live deer — and at the same time learn what's actually on your land — is through the use of infrared-triggered cameras. If you have one or more of these units for monitoring deer on your hunting land, the resulting photos can be great aids.

Another option is to visit a local park or wildlife preserve where hunting is prohibited. In unhunted herds, the age structure, buck:doe ratio and overall visibility of deer generally will make direct observation far easier.

Still another way to educate yourself on this subject is by studying printed reference materials. Our Institute for White-tailed Deer Management and



When bucks of different ages are together, it's easy to tell young ones from those that are fully mature. Estimating age can be harder when a deer is alone. Photo by George Barnett.

Research sells a book and interactive video on aging deer. (Call 1-800-403-3793 for details.) Another resource for aging live deer is Mike Biggs' book, *The Whitetail Chronicles*, which, among other things, follows a number of bucks throughout their lives. (Call 1-800-433-2102 for more information.)

AGING BUCKS

Although there are differences in the overall appearance of bucks as they go from summer to early fall to rut to post-rut, most hunters see them only during deer season. Because of this, I'll limit my discussion of age characteristics to that time frame. If you have the chance to spend more time with bucks during the year, you can start to pick up on advanced aging techniques.

Buck Fawns

Identifying a buck fawn isn't a matter of distinguishing him from an older buck; it's distinguishing him from a doe. "Button" or "nubbin" bucks can present real problems from a manager's perspective, because if hunters aren't careful, they'll wipe out future bucks as they try to remove does. Buck fawns usually make up 15 percent or more of a state or province's antlerless harvest.

This problem could be lessened if hunters would pay more attention to the many differences between male and female fawns. A doe fawn is daintier overall and has a narrower forehead. She also behaves more timidly, seldom showing aggression toward other deer. A buck fawn, meanwhile, is often the first deer in the

bunch to venture into an opening. Brash and foolish, he's an easy mark for the hunter who doesn't know (or care) what's standing in front of his gun barrel.

Of course, in many cases the antler pedicels ("buttons" or "nubbins") of a buck fawn are a dead giveaway, though they're not always visible — especially at long range and/or in low light. You might even be able to determine sex by the animal's posture while it's urinating. Does squat; bucks don't.

Yearling Bucks

The 1 1/2-year-old buck (called a yearling or "long" yearling) is the most immediately recognizable of all age-classes. He looks very much like a doe with antlers. He lacks the heavy neck muscles of older bucks and has a slender, almost feminine body. His legs also look too long, due to the lack of depth in his body cavity, and his "waist" (the point just in front of his rear legs) is far smaller than his chest.

A yearling's rack rarely has an outside spread of more than 12 inches and seems to fit within his ears. But the number of points isn't as reliable; he can have anything from small spikes to 8, 10 or even 12 points. (For this reason, we don't recommend using number of points as a criterion for buck harvest, though it beats having *no* restrictions on minimum buck size.)



Even if a buck fawn's buttons aren't visible, his bold behavior often gives him away. Photo by Kraig Haske.

The yearling buck is foolish. When you combine his careless actions with the fact that most antlered bucks in the herd are in this age-class, it's easy to see why yearlings dominate the buck harvest almost everywhere.

2 1/2-Year-Old Bucks

In most cases — but certainly not all — a 2 1/2-year-old buck has a rack just wider than his ears when they're in the normal position. While he's bulkier than a yearling, his body isn't yet fully developed, so even during the rut he rarely features a heavily swollen neck.

The 2 1/2-year-old's legs still look a bit too long, and his waist is still noticeably smaller than his chest. Behaviorally, he's more aggressive than he was as a yearling, but he's still reluctant to try to throw his weight around when in the presence of more mature bucks.

3 1/2-Year-Old Bucks

When you see a 3 1/2-year-old buck, your first impression might be of a thoroughbred racehorse. His neck is more muscular than when he was 2 1/2, but there's still a definable junction between the neck and shoulders. His waist remains a bit smaller than his chest, and he still has a bit of a "big-eyed" look. Overall, however, he's starting to take on the look of a "big" buck. There usually will have been another clear increase in rack size from 2 1/2, though his antler mass won't yet have reached its full potential.

The 3 1/2-year-old is one of the more active and aggressive bucks in the herd. In most management programs he can be classified as "mature." At 3 1/2, a buck has had enough experience to know what the rut is all about, and when the breeding season arrives, he spends most of his time running about the landscape. But this is likely the last year in which he'll travel extensively during daylight hours in open season — especially in areas with significant hunting pressure.

4 1/2-Year-Old Bucks

At 4 1/2, a buck is fully mature. His body is now about as large as it's going to get, so he can put even more of his resources into antler growth. His neck is now fully muscled, and his waist is as big around as his thick chest. His legs also appear to be roughly as long as his body is deep, giving him a well-proportioned look. His antlers might not be much larger than at 3 1/2, but

Eastern Wild Turkey Hunts

Match wits with America's most challenging game bird. First class accommodations and 14,000 acres of the finest turkey habitat in Alabama. Spring season March 20-April 30. Guided hunts $525 per person per day.



WESTERVELT LODGE

Box 2362 • Tuscaloosa, AL 35403
205/373-8212
http://www.westervelt.com

South Texas Trophy Whitetails

SMR SAN MIGUEL HUNTING RANCHES



The *San Miguel Hunting Ranches* are authentic working Texas cattle ranches steeped in the tradition of "Lonesome Dove." They consist of tens of thousands of acres in LaSalle & McMullen counties. These 2 of the top 6 counties produce more **Boone & Crockett** bucks than anywhere in Texas. **BOOK your hunt today!**



210-930-SPUR (7787)
smranch.com
Includes: 4-day hunt — $3,250-$6,500 w/meals, lodge, guide, 1-2 bucks, wild boar, turkey, doe.

they likely will be more massive.

In our studies, bucks in this age-class appear to undergo the most stress. There's relatively high natural mortality among 4 1/2s, especially in areas with so few mature males that those present handle a lot of the breeding duties.

Some 4 1/2s get so worn out that their antlers actually are a bit smaller the next year. Fortunately, a sound year-round forage program, such as the one employed at *WHITETAIL*'s Fort Perry Plantation in Georgia and described in earlier parts of this series, can help bucks of all ages bounce back from the rigors of a hard rut.

5 1/2-Year-Old Bucks

By 5 1/2, a buck has the look of an NFL linebacker, with a neck that seems to blend right into his shoulders. And he has an attitude to match! He's in tip-top shape and can hold his own with virtually any other deer in the herd.

From chest to waist, his body cavity has filled out to the point that his legs now look almost short. He walks quite deliberately but swings his front legs from side to side in a gait that's simply unmistakable — especially in snow. Yet another feature of bucks 5 1/2 or older is a discernible "chin flap": loose skin sagging beneath his lower jaw.

6 1/2-Year-Old (& Older) Bucks

When a whitetail buck reaches the age of 6 1/2, he's "over-mature." At this point, there's no reason to avoid taking such a deer unless you simply don't like his look. His rack probably won't be much larger than it was the year before, though he might have more abnormal points or palmation.

The best way to describe one of these old bucks is to say that he walks like a bull and looks like a middle-aged man: a pot belly, a sway back and sagging skin on the face, neck and shoulders! And there's one other consistent trait: squinty eyes. Perhaps that's due to his sagging facial skin.

AGING DOES

Why on earth would anyone need to be able to age a live doe? The answer has to do with what we biologists call *generation time:* the number of years it takes a population to "turn over," with the vast majority of its members being replaced by offspring. In the case of whitetails, this usually is three to four years.

Missouri Deer Classic

March 4 & 5 • Saturday 9-6 Sunday 9-4 • Boone County Fairground – Columbia

Deer, Turkey, Duck & Goose Hunters' Supermarket!

- hundreds of vendor booths
- manufacturer's booths
- specialty items for outdoor enthusiasts
- B&C, P&Y, ABBM, SMBBC official scorers
- professional dog training demonstrations
- duck calling experts
- deer & taxidermy displays
- free parking
- admission $6.00, children under 10 free

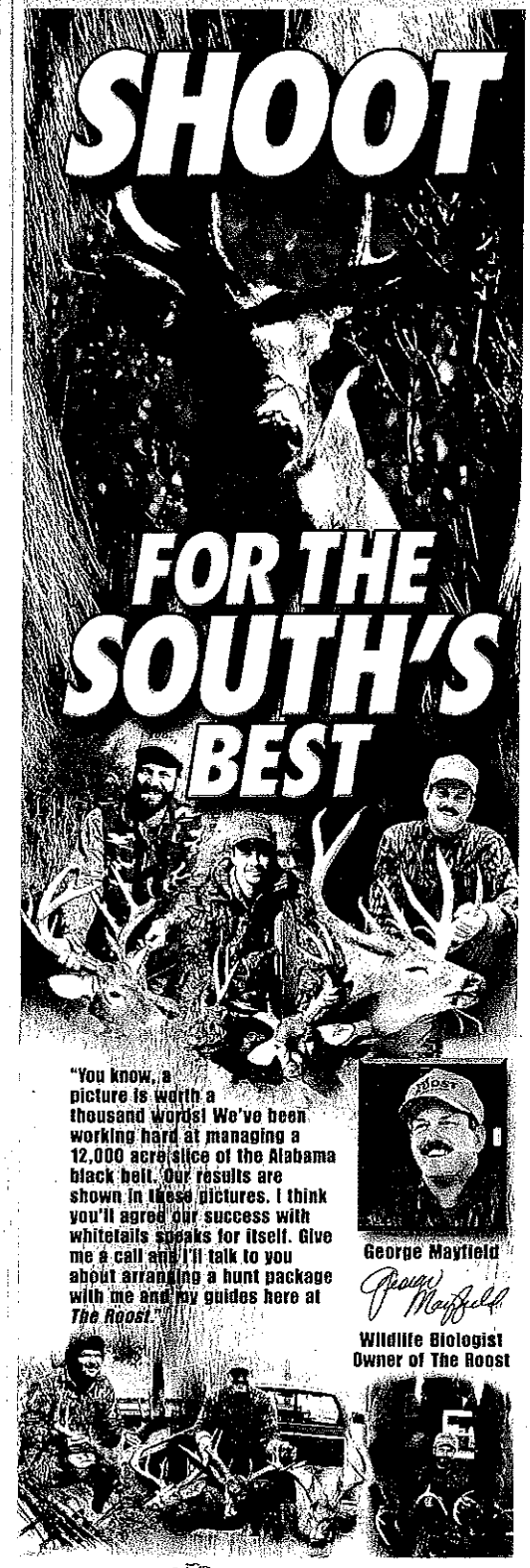
Sponsored by ABBM, MBH, MTA & SMBBC

Visit our web site: www.deerclassic.com

FREE SEMINARS:
Dan Fitzgerald - *Leading Hunter, Speaker and Outdoor Video Producer*
Sam Collora *& the Collora Buck - Veteran Bowhunter Speaks on the Effective Use of Lures*
Terri Marinier *& K-9 Companions - Professional Dog Trainer Extraordinaire*
Brad Harris - *Game Caller, Maker and Sought-after Seminar Speaker*
Keith Allen & Christian Curtis - *1999 Masters of the Marsh National Two-Man Guide-Style Champions*
FREE DISPLAYS: Collora Buck, Odie Sudbeck's Awesome Antlers Museum of World-Class Bucks, MDC's # 1 non-typical and #3 typical world-record bucks and more...



As seen on:
MOSSY OAK'S Hunting THE Country
Remington COUNTRY
Television Series on TNN



The ROOST
P.O. Box 509 • Aliceville, AL 35442
(205)373-3147
http://www.theroost.com
Visa & Mastercard Accepted

You don't want to take every buck with superior antler genetics; you need at least some of them to breed, to maximize their genetic contribution to the herd. This is why more managers now emphasize taking "inferior" mature bucks and leaving at least some of the better ones in the herd.

In order to accelerate the benefits from this type of effort, it makes sense that we must turn over the doe herd rapidly. After all, if we're doing a progressively better job of management over time, shouldn't a doe fawn be better genetically than her mother or grandmother was? An ancient doe represents the herd's past, not its future. Why work to upgrade buck genetics if the offspring of those bucks are going to be held back by the "old" genetics of their mothers? We want the best possible genetics throughout the herd.

Most herds today are made up of old does and young bucks, but I strive for just the opposite. In herds I've managed for a while, 4 1/2-year-old does are rare.

As you might imagine, it's easier to lower the average age of does in a population if you can age them reliably on the hoof. Now, I'd be deceiving you if I said that you can tell a doe's age as reliably as you can a buck's. But you can age does into *general* categories, which will serve your purposes well enough:

Doe Fawns

We've already discussed how to tell doe fawns from buck fawns. But how do you identify a doe fawn if there are no older (bigger) does around for comparison? If you can't distinguish a doe fawn on the basis of body size alone, the best tip I can give you is to *look for ears that seem abnormally short, relative to the head.*

Should you shoot doe fawns? They do have a higher natural mortality rate than older does, so you're going to lose some anyway; still, I generally do NOT recommend taking fawns. If you're trying to improve genetics, you want a lot of these fawns to become mothers. However, if your genetics are good and fawn recruitment is so high that you're concerned about flooding the habitat with more deer than it can provide for in good health, it might make sense to shoot some doe fawns.

1 1/2-Year-Old Does

A yearling doe in many ways looks quite similar to a yearling buck; both are "teen-agers" with a slender build and long-looking legs. The ears of a 1 1/2-year-old doe don't seem as stubby as those of a fawn, and her body will be smaller than that of an older doe.

Because does of various ages tend to travel in family groups, there often will be some opportunity to compare her features and behavior to those of other



A number of subtle clues (see text) suggest that the doe at right is older than the one at left. Even so, examining the tooth wear of harvested deer remains a key step in confirming your estimates of their age. Photo by Kraig Haske.

females. If several does are together, the 1 1/2-year-olds often are the first to venture into openings.

"Mature" Does

Does from age 2 1/2 through 4 1/2 are more matronly in appearance, with ears that seem longer and more "mule-like" than those of younger females. Their waists are about as thick as their chests, even when they aren't pregnant.

As does reach the age of 3 1/2 (and especially 4 1/2), they become more dominant. These "alpha" does rule the roost and like to throw their weight around within the family unit. Most of the classically dominant does I've studied reached that position before they left this general age grouping.

"Over-Mature" Does

As with bucks, over-mature does have sagging skin, pot bellies and sway backs, though perhaps not to the same extent as their male counterparts. They tend to look "bug-eyed," and they have relatively broad foreheads. Also, for some reason, the ears of these ancient does actually look to be shorter than those of does in the "mature" class.

Over-mature does often lose their position of dominance to younger ones, and they can become social outcasts. Another trait occasionally seen in over-mature does is poor hair condition.

CONCLUSION

If you want to become better at aging live deer, you have to practice. But it won't do you any good to estimate the ages of live deer if you have no way to know if you're right or wrong. That's where knowing how to age dead deer comes in. The next time you're about to shoot a whitetail, ask yourself how old that animal is. Then, when you recover it, see if you were right, using what we learned last month about aging deer by tooth wear.

Finally, as we've been stressing, keep good records of every deer harvested on your hunting land. This is the only real way to chart the progress of your management program.

Learning to age whitetails — dead or alive — will add to your enjoyment of hunting. It also will help you make better decisions about how many of which deer to harvest, leading to a healthier herd and better habitat. And in the end, isn't that what management is really all about?



A World With Trees...with productive land, clean air and water, and habitat for wildlife

Trees Make a World of Difference™

Trees Make a World of Difference. Between rivers filled with silt and mud, and clear-running streams that are home to fish and wildlife.

Conservation Trees conserve precious topsoil, control energy costs, and make life more enjoyable and productive.

CONSERVATION TREES

Find out how Conservation Trees can make a world of difference for you. For your free booklet write: Conservation Trees, The National Arbor Day Foundation, Nebraska City, NE 68410.

The National Arbor Day Foundation

