

AGE THIS!

Accurately estimating the ages of bucks in trail-camera photographs is an invaluable skill for any quality deer manager, whether you use your trail cameras to conduct accurate surveys of your deer population or just to gather snapshots of neighborhood deer. To help you hone your aging skills, we'll be selecting photographs submitted by QDMA members and forwarding them to a panel of professional deer managers with significant experience conducting camera surveys and evaluating photographs. We are asking our five panel members to judge the age of each buck and explain how they arrived at their estimate.

Use these pages to challenge yourself. Examine the photographs and attempt to make your own age estimate before you read the comments of the experts. Keep in mind that aging on the hoof is an inexact science – even the experts don't always agree, as you are about to learn. Pinpointing buck ages beyond 3½ is difficult, but luckily this precision is not necessary. For practical purposes of data collection and survey math, sorting bucks into 1½, 2½ and 3½-plus age groups will suffice. As you will see from the estimates in this group, even these dividing lines are not always clear. Often, it takes input from many reviewers to reach a consensus on age. And just because a reviewer is out-voted does not necessarily mean that reviewer is incorrect. (*Note: In order to keep the focus on evaluation techniques instead of a panelist competition, we chose not to link our panelists to their comments by name. Panelists will be listed by name at the end of the article.*)

Age This: Alabama

Owner: Paul Garner of Fairhope, Alabama.

Photo Location:

Southwest Alabama in Monroe County.

Photo Date: August 2006

What the Experts Say:

Panelist A • 5½ • “The photo being taken in the summer explains the small neck with respect to the large body. During the rut when his neck is swollen he would appear nearly twice as large. Full body and

waist, a sway back and maybe a little pot belly. These characteristics put him past 4½ years.

Panelist B • 5½+ • “It's always difficult to field-judge the age of bucks in summer. Their bodies aren't filled out like they are closer to the rut hence do not display many of the 'classic' features most use to judge age, such as the size of the neck. Also, velvet antlers look much larger and appear to have much more mass than they will once the velvet has shed. All that said, I believe the Alabama buck is at least 5½. The huge size of the belly, the belly sag, and sag in the back all are characteristics of a mature buck. The musculature of the shoulder and hams is also impressive even in summer, with prominent, rounded hams and shoulder musculature that completely hides the shoulder blade.”

Panelist C • 5½ • “Swooping back, pot belly. His legs look too



short for his body. A bit too meaty for 4½ – if he was 4½ he would be a bit more muscled and tight. As for 6½, the difference between a 5½ and 6½ on the hoof is the hardest call for me. He just looks a bit too prime to be 6½.”

Panelist D • 6½+ • “Fully developed body, very deep chest. The legs appear short because the body has filled in. Showing sway in the back and has a potbelly. Body has a rippled, bumpy appearance, not smooth and sleek. If you base your decision on the neck, summer and early fall bucks will fool you. Their necks are much thinner and rarely have the swollen look that is associated with rutting. During the rut, this buck will look like a tank!”

Panelist E • 4½ • “It's important to consider the time of year the photo was taken. In full rut this buck will change in appearance as his neck is fully swollen. I don't see it blending completely, however, as it would with a 5½- or 6½-year-old buck.”



Age This: Wisconsin

Owner: Todd Reabe of Brillion, Wisconsin.

Photo Location: South central Wisconsin.

What the Experts Say:

Panelist A • 1½ • “This buck has very long legs, an extremely thin neck and just a touch of staining in his tarsal glands. He has a tight waist, a big dip in front of his hind leg, and little or no musculature in his chest/shoulder area. He looks like a doe with antlers. This buck's antlers may initially give the impression that he is older, but Midwestern yearlings have the ability to grow relatively large racks. The thin neck and lack of musculature in the shoulder/brisket region are the keys to aging this buck.”

Panelist B • 2½+ • “The Wisconsin buck is a tough one for several reasons. Southern managers are often fooled by the large frames of northern whitetails. Northern deer can produce much larger bodies at younger ages than southern deer, especially northern deer in agricultural or mixed agriculture/timber habitat. Secondly, this buck displays some characteristics of a 2½-year-old while other characteristics suggest 3½. The buck's hams look somewhat under-developed (2½) but are fairly rounded (3½). The lower shoulders look thin (2½), but the musculature hides the outline of the shoulder blade (3½). The neck is narrow below the jaw-line (2½) but relatively thick at the juncture with the chest (3½). The buck's waist is not narrow (3½), and his chest is relatively deep (3½). Considering all of these factors, the preponderance of evidence is that this buck is 3½, but considering the geographic region he comes from, it's not out of the question that,

body-wise, he is a top-end 2½-year-old buck.”

Panelist C • 2½ • “His legs look too long for his body and his neck is skinny. His body is skinny with hardly any muscle tone. His antlers have very little mass. At 3½ he would show more muscle tone and antler mass. At 1½ he would show no muscle tone and his legs would be way too long for his body.”

Panelist D • 2½ • “He has a gangly appearance but is more developed than a yearling. The legs appear lanky, and he lacks a developed chest that would be characteristic of 3½-plus. When I think of a 2½-year-old’s body, I imagine a relatively rectangular shape that appears high on the legs. Unlike a yearling, this buck’s body does have some mass and does not look like a doe with antlers. This buck has the characteristics of a young deer but is developed enough to not be a yearling.”

Age This: Mississippi

Owner: Shane Bramlett of Holly Springs, Mississippi.

Photo Location: Marshall County, Mississippi, in northern Mississippi on the Tennessee border.

Photo Date: January 3, 2006

What the Experts Say:

Panelist A • 3½ • “He has decent swelling in his neck (larger than a 2½ but not as much as a 4½+ year old). He has a tight back and stomach, thin waist and a full, muscular chest – all characteristics of 3½. At 4½ his stomach wouldn’t be as tight. His legs appear to be the right length for his body, he has a dip in front of his rear leg and small hind quarters – all characteristics of 3½.”



Panelist B • 4½ • “The Mississippi buck appears to be 4½. However, some characteristics appear to be younger, especially his hams. His rump still displays the downward slope of a younger buck. Often field-judging a buck’s age is a matter of going with the *preponderance of evidence*. This buck displays the typical large neck flowing directly into the brisket with little definition of a 4½-year-old buck. He also has the deep, buffalo-like chest and the lack of waist-line typical of a 4½-year-old. The preponderance of evidence is 4½.”

Continued.

Panelist C • 3½ • “Nice muscle tone, flat back and tight belly. He doesn’t have a Roman nose and is lacking in mass, although he does have nice main beams. He looks like a college boy looking for trouble! At 2½ his legs would look too long for his body. At 4½ he would be a bit stockier with better mass on the antlers.”

Panelist D • 3½ • “Possibly 4½. Beam length was the first indicator this buck is 3½+ years old because they extend almost to his nose. I would estimate the beam length at 18+ inches which would suggest he is not 2½. This characteristic alone is not enough to age him, though, but is used in conjunction with others, such as: chest deeper than waist, neck filling out. Very stained tarsal glands suggest he is actively involved in breeding, typical of 3½+ bucks under a QDM program. He appears to be relatively muscular in the shoulders and has a sleek appearance. At 2½ his chest would not be this deep and at 4½ he would have a flatter stomach area.”

Panelist E • 3½ • “I have observed *thousands* of photos of Mississippi bucks, and I did a double take on this guy. It appears as though he has a chin flap, a characteristic of 6½ plus. Perhaps this guy had a mouth full of food, because he is not 6½! This goes to show that you *must* train your eye to look for *multiple* characteristics. At 1½ and 2½, a buck’s muscle tone in the shoulders, neck and hindquarters is underdeveloped. This buck is just beginning to show some cuts and definition, like a sophomore in High School. At 5½ and 6½, bucks look like real studs as the chest, shoulders and neck appear to be one big mass. Another important observation is his waistline is not quite as deep as his chest. That tip alone will I.D. him as a 3½ and not a 4½ yet. A 4½-year-old’s waist line will droop down to or close to the chest.”

Panelist:	A	B	C	D	E
Alabama buck:	5½	5½+	5½	6½+	4½
Mississippi buck:	3½	4½	3½	3½	3½
Wisconsin buck:	1½	2½+	2½	2½+	2½

In Conclusion: As you can see, aging bucks in photographs requires you to consider and weigh many factors and make decisions based on the *preponderance of evidence*. To improve your own accuracy with local deer, gather as much data as you can from harvested bucks, including the girth of the neck, chest and stomach and antler measurements like mass and beam length. Correlate this information to the buck’s age based on the jawbone, and then, over time, develop age-class standards for the physical parameters of your region’s deer. Also, refer back to live photos of harvested bucks once you have estimated a jawbone age to help sharpen your abilities for the next new photograph.

Camera-Aging Panel: Special thanks to our panel members, who include wildlife consultants Bryan Kinkel of Tennessee, Jason Snavelly of Droptine Wildlife Consulting in Pennsylvania, Dave Edwards of Westervelt Wildlife Services in Alabama, Chris Pevey of Illinois and QDMA’s Education & Outreach Director in the North, Kip Adams of Pennsylvania.

Challenge Our Panelists! Do you have a photo of a buck that is tough to age? Let our panelists make the call. Send digital images to Lthomas@qdma.com. Send print photographs to QDMA, Attn: Age This Buck, P.O. Box 160, Bogart, GA, 30622. Please include daytime contact information.

