

Are You Really Protecting Your Bucks: Part Two

By Dave Edwards, Jr.

In Part I, we discussed the vital role that doe harvest plays in the success of your quality deer management program. In summary, doe harvest is essential to maintain a desirable deer density, maintain or improve the adult sex ratio, and reduce buck fawn dispersal. Because each property, deer herd, and landowner/hunt club's objectives are unique, the number of does that need to be harvested to achieve overall program goals are different. Even on the same property, the level of doe harvest needed each season is dynamic and changes with habitat, environmental, and herd conditions. However, it is safe to say that regardless of where you are, if your goals are to maintain a quality deer herd, you should be harvesting at least as many does as you are bucks every year.

Now that you understand the importance of doe harvest, let's discuss managing your bucks. That's what we're really interested in anyway, right? Assuming that you are adequately harvesting does and have achieved a desirable deer density that is in balance with your habitat, how do you get older bucks in your herd? If you want more mature bucks in your deer herd then you obviously have to allow young bucks the

chance to grow up. "Let Him Go So He Can Grow" and "Dead Deer Don't Grow" are two quotes that have been beat to death in the realm of QDM. While you may be tired of hearing them, they hit the nail on the head! You wouldn't believe the number of times I've had to remind hunters wanting more mature bucks to harvest that dead deer don't grow. I mean, in some cases, to the SAME landowner/hunt clubs every year! These hunters consistently harvest a large proportion of their young bucks each year and wonder why their program is not working. I've almost gotten to the point of making it a macro on my computer so that I wouldn't have to type it again! If you are shooting young bucks, how can you expect to have mature bucks in the herd? They don't just magically appear. It's amazing to see the number of landowners that do not harvest enough does and have little in the way of buck harvest restrictions that think they have a bunch of mature bucks on their property. When we conduct a camera census for these landowners, they realize they have been hunting big, mature bucks that weren't even there! I'll have to admit that regardless of how much pressure you put on your buck population, you will normally have a couple of bucks that will slip by hunters and reach maturity. Which means that at least one or two "Ole' Big Boys" may exist even on areas with limited buck harvest restrictions. However, chances of killing them are slim-to-none. They didn't get that old by being stupid! I'm sure you've seen or heard of some impressive bucks taken on public wildlife management areas that received a tremendous amount of hunting pressure and where any buck with visible antler was legal to harvest. These are what I call accident bucks. If you want to produce a deer herd with many quality, mature, bucks to hunt (on purpose!), you need to balance the buck age structure, meaning allow bucks to mature. Obviously, the more bucks you have in the mature age classes, the better your chances are of observing or harvesting one of these trophies. Not to mention that maintaining a balanced buck age structure is much healthier for your deer herd.

As a rule, mature bucks are normally a challenge to harvest. However, you may be surprised at how much easier they are to see once you stop shooting at them at a younger age! Buck populations that receive "low hunting pressure" are not as alerted at the smell of a hunter or the sound of a truck. They no longer associate these things with something terribly negative. Now,



Good example of a yearling



Good example of a buck you DO NOT want to shoot. This is a good 2 year old buck. (10 points)

don't get me wrong. I'm not saying they are stupid, just more tolerant of the normal disturbances. They will still pose a challenge for you to harvest. Many of you may be able to associate the way I'm describing these bucks with the way most doe populations acted several years ago before you started putting pressure on them. On properties that do not aggressively harvest does, it is common to see several does during a hunt that do not seem to care whether you are there or not. Once you start protecting young bucks from harvest, you will start seeing bucks, particularly the younger ones, on a regular basis and they seem to grow up with less fear of the normal disturbances associated with hunting activities, which makes hunting more enjoyable. Keep in mind, however, that excessive hunting pressure, whether you harvested a deer or not, will make any deer head for cover.

Which bucks do you need to protect? Well, this all depends on your overall deer management goals. If you are managing for a quality deer herd, you will most likely be trying to protect bucks younger than 3 1/2 years

old. If your program is a bit more intense, you may be passing bucks less than 4 1/2 or 5 1/2 years old. Whatever your buck harvest/quality goals, you need to determine the most effective buck harvest restrictions that will protect the age classes you don't want to see at the skinning shed. Past harvest data is very useful in determining antler characteristics that will work for your particular deer herd and goals. Your biologist should be able to help assess which antler characteristics will work for you. Two of the most commonly used characteristics include main beam length and inside antler spread. These two antler measurements, as a rule, get larger with age. Requiring bucks to have a minimum number of points is also commonly used because it is easy for hunters to judge, but is a poor indicator of age. If your program is working, you will have many *young* 8 point bucks running around. In my experience, using a minimum antler spread has been just as easy for hunters to judge and if set around 14-15 inches, will normally protect bucks younger than 3 1/2 years old.

While it is often good to start off using some kind of antler restriction in the early stages of your QDM program, particularly for hunting clubs with several members, you should ultimately be working towards learning



Example of eartip to eartip spread (14-15 inches). . . this buck is probably 16 inside spread

how to age bucks in the field. The Quality Deer Management Association offers several books and informational posters that can help you learn how to age deer on the hoof using body characteristics (QDMA- 1-800-209-DEER). With a little experience, you can become quite proficient at aging deer. Most clubs that I have worked with for much time have converted from requiring some form of minimum antler characteristics, to requiring bucks to be a specific age before being harvested. This system works particularly well for mature QDM programs with hunters that have common goals.

Change does not happen overnight. If you are just starting to protect young bucks this season, don't expect to have wall hangers running you over next year. The timeline to success depends on many things. Past buck harvest, size of your property, neighboring property's management practices, habitat management, environmental conditions, your current buck population age structure, and your doe harvest strategies all influence how long it will take for your program to be successful. If you are starting off with a buck population primarily made up of young bucks (2 1/2 years old or less), it may take three years before you see significant changes. If your goal is to produce bucks that are 4 1/2 plus years old, stay focused and patient. I've seen many landowners/hunting clubs give up on producing quality bucks too early. I often encourage my clients to conduct an initial camera census to determine the status of their deer herd before they even get started. The results of the camera census (e.g., overall deer density/condition, number, quality and age structure of the bucks, adult sex ratio, fawn production, etc.) provide a good starting point and allow them to make sound, informed deer management decisions. In a nutshell, it tells them where they are (as far as the status of their deer herd) and helps them determine what they need to do to achieve their goals. A camera census is also a great way to monitor the success of your program. I've conducted several camera censuses for folks that thought their program was not working, when in reality it was! They simply had not adjusted their hunting strategies. These hunters continued to hunt from the same shooting house's overlooking a food plot or feeder and expected to see these mature bucks appear. I've conducted a camera census for a property that had been under QDM for 5 years and found that the program was *NOT* working. After closer investigation, we found that 3 of the surrounding properties were being commercially hunted where any legal buck was harvested. While the camera census results were disappointing, the census helped us solve the problem. Besides helping you monitor the success of your program, a camera

census is a great way to observe the antler quality of the bucks on your property, judge the merits of each buck, and make harvest decisions before the moment of truth in a deer stand. This often helps prevent buck harvest mistakes and allows you to educate guests or hunting club members on which bucks they can shoot, and more importantly, which bucks not to shoot.

Producing a quality deer herd with many mature, quality bucks requires hard work and patience. While there are many other aspects of QDM, protecting young bucks and harvesting an adequate number of does to maintain quality herd and habitat conditions are the backbone of a successful QDM program. Producing mature bucks requires that you take an active role in your management program. Remember, while your deer biologist may like to claim he is managing your deer herd, he is only your advisor. *You* are the manager. Each time you pull the trigger, you are making a management decision. If in doubt about whether to harvest a buck or not, don't shoot. My motto is that if I have to ask myself whether a buck is a shooter or not, I don't shoot. Good luck, hunt hard, be patient, and think quality. I hope you have a memorable hunting season!

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**Just a good example of a quality Buck . . .
probably 3 years old**