

Field-Judging Live White-tailed Bucks & Does

Quality Deer Management (QDM) is a widely recognized and effective strategy designed to produce quality habitat, quality deer and a quality hunting experience. Two of the most important principles of QDM involve voluntary restraint in harvesting younger bucks and implementing an adequate harvest of does, practices that require accurate estimation of buck and doe ages in the field. Antler and body characteristics are most commonly used to estimate the age of live bucks. These characteristics vary throughout the whitetail's range, but when used in relation to local standards, age estimation greatly improves. Estimating the sex and age of live antlerless deer is critical for collecting reliable observation data and for any QDM program that involves selective doe harvest and protection of buck fawns. The ability to separate live antlerless deer into fawns and adults is necessary for any successful antlerless harvest program.



Alabama
Wildlife Federation



This educational poster was developed by the Quality Deer Management Association (QDMA), the Alabama Division of Wildlife & Freshwater Fisheries, the Alabama Wildlife Federation, and the Alabama State Chapter of QDMA to assist Alabama deer managers with sound deer harvest management decisions.

For more information on Quality Deer Management or becoming a member of the QDMA, call (800) 209-3337 or visit www.QDMA.com

Information compiled by Jeremy Meares, Quality Deer Management Association. Copyright 2001.

Buck Age and Antler Growth



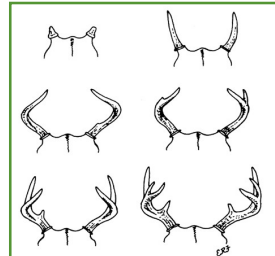
Photos: Charles J. Alshemer

Average antler characteristics for whitetail bucks increase rapidly from 1.5 to 4.5 years of age, with additional increases in some areas between 5.5 and 7.5 years of age. Bucks like this one from New York (above) and this one from Mississippi (below) are good examples of what can be achieved when bucks are allowed to reach at least 4.5 years of age in high quality habitats.



Photos: Dr. Harry Jacobson

Antler Characteristics



This diagram provides examples of antler formations possible for yearling bucks. Diagram courtesy of Producing Quality Whitetails.

Antler Points

- Not a reliable predictor of age in high-quality habitats because yearling bucks can produce 6, 8, or even 10 antler points (see above). In poor-quality habitats, however, antler points may be an effective selection criteria. QDMA recommends seeking professional advice before implementing any antler restriction.
- Use both frontal and side views to get a full count of antler points.
- From the side, count the number of points projecting upward from the main beam. Two upright points on each side mean the buck will likely have 8 points (assuming it has both brow tines). Three upright points mean the buck will likely have 10 points.

Beam Length

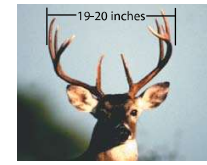
- A relatively good predictor of age, but difficult for most hunters to judge.
- Best determined by a side view.
- A mature buck's antler tip will typically extend beyond the eye. Beams extending to the tip of the nose are generally 20 or more inches in length.



Photo Left - George Barnett; Right - Charles J. Alshemer

Antler Spread

- Yearling bucks rarely have outside antler spreads greater than 14 inches.
- Tip-to-tip distance between the ears in a relaxed or semi-alert position is about 13 to 14 inches for yearling and 2.5-year-old bucks and about 15 inches on bucks 3.5 years old and older.



Photos: George Barnett

Based on ear width criteria outlined above, the buck at left has an outside antler spread of approximately 14-15 inches. The buck at right has an outside antler spread of approximately 19-20 inches.

Buck Body Characteristics by Age Class

1.5-Year-old Bucks

- Resemble does with antlers.
- Do not have swollen necks and muscular characteristics.
- Often enter feeding areas earlier and tend to travel with doe family groups.



Photo: Bill Leo

2.5-Year-old Bucks

- Relatively thin waist and shoulders.
- Limited neck swelling during the rut.



Photo: George Barnett

3.5-Year-old Bucks

- Thickly muscled neck during the rut, although there is still a distinct junction between the neck and shoulders.
- Chest appears deeper than the hindquarters giving appearance of a well-conditioned racehorse.



Photo: Bill Leo

4.5-Year-old Bucks

- Fully muscled neck blends into the shoulders, and waist is deep as chest.
- Show "attitude" in the presence of other bucks.
- Activity more nocturnal.



Photo: Charles J. Alshemer

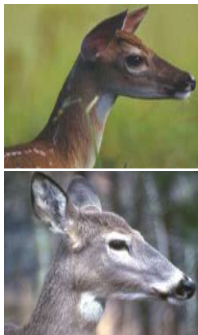
5.5-6.5-Year-old Bucks (Mature)

- Neck blends completely into shoulders and front of body appears to be one large mass.
- Most exhibit prominent potbelly.
- Often have "squeaky" eyes and "battle scars."



Photo: Wynnan Meisner

Judging Antlerless Deer (does and fawns)



Top left photo by George Barnett

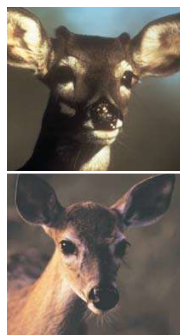


Fawns

- Short nose and forehead
- Ears appear larger in comparison to its head
- Head similar in shape to an 8-oz. drink bottle

Adults

- Longer nose and forehead
- Head similar in shape to a 16-oz. drink bottle



Photos: Top-Wynnan Meisner; Bottom-George Barnett

Separating Buck Fawns from Doe Fawns

Buck Fawn:

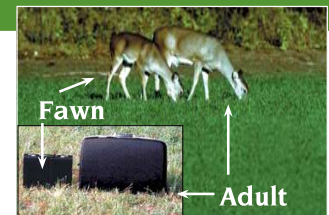
- Look for presence of developing antlers
- Head appears flatter and less rounded

Doe Fawn:

- No developing antlers
- Head appears rounder

Helpful Tips

- Never harvest a lone antlerless deer. Often these are buck fawns. Wait until several antlerless deer are present before making a harvest decision.
- Never harvest antlerless deer in low light, at long distances, or where a positive identification cannot be made.
- Always use binoculars when determining the sex and age of antlerless deer.
- Always give the animal the benefit of the doubt if there is any uncertainty regarding sex or age.



Fawns

- Have short, square bodies (look like a "briefcase" from a distance)
- Have short necks and less muscle development
- Rarely have swaying backs or sagging bellies

Adults

- Have larger, rectangular-shaped bodies (look like a "suitcase" from a distance)
- Have long necks
- Often have swaying backs or sagging bellies

In areas with extended fawning and hunting seasons, hunters may encounter fawns ranging from 2-7 months of age. The fawn in photo A is approximately 1-2 months old; B: 2-3 months old; C: 4-5 months old; and D: 6-7 months old. Despite the differences in size, the overall body shape (square) and short head and snout are still evident in each photo.



Typical Fawn Behavior

- Playful, naive, inquisitive
- Buck Fawn: more aggressive, and tends to be the first antlerless deer seen

Typical Adult Behavior

- Hold ears back displaying aggressive behavior
- Stand on hind legs and "flail" subordinate deer (as seen in the photo)
- Often the lead deer when a group of antlerless are traveling together.

