

I believe it's safe to say that the good ole days for whitetail hunting are right now. It hasn't been long ago that I heard stories about hunting back in the good ole days when bucks supported really big racks. But when I glance through the results of local deer contests, and more important the Boone and Crockett record book, it becomes obvious just how much antler size has increased. Just what is it that makes the present so much better than the past? Is it the advancement of deer management techniques, high fences, supplemental feeding, or is it simply coincidental.

One thing for sure the increased occurrence of trophy class deer is not coincidental. In reality, it is a combination of things with hunter awareness playing an important role.

Prior to the 1970's, few deer hunters paid much attention to what a deer scored. The number of points and weight of the animal were important statistics that sportsmen used for bragging rights. The Boone and Crockett Club has promoted and served hunting and conservation since its formation in 1887. And even though its big game records keeping activities began with the publication of the first records book in 1932 few sportsmen were cognizant of the scoring system alone employing it. That changed in the late 1970's when biologists began using the Boone and Crockett scoring system on antlers to measure responses to their various management strategies.

At one time biologists collected only age, length of beam, number of points, and basal circumference of harvested males. The Boone and Crockett scoring method addressed every inch of antler, and by employing this measuring technique, biologists obtained a more precise account of antler size.

As biologists began to rely on this valuable statistic, sportsmen took notice and before long, knowledge of what a deer scored became important to the sportsmen. Hunters suddenly had a tangible means by which they could measure those majestic appendages. By the early nineties, the Boone and Crockett score was the statistic sportsmen used to describe their deer. Articles on scoring deer on the hoof inundated popular sporting magazines, and by the turn of the century, the Boone and Crockett score was common as rattling horns. With this newly acquired knowledge, taking a Boone and Crockett whitetail only became more popular, and this was reflected in an increase in bucks entering the prestigious Boone and Crockett record book. This fact was driven home by Boone and Crockett associate Joel W. Helmer whom reviewed 5,439 of the 5,568 deer entries in the Boone and Crockett record book from 1830 through 2001. According to Helmer, 74% of the record book's total (3,950 entries) occurred from 1980 through 2001. Incredibly, 2,811 or 52% of record book entries during this period occurred between 1990 and 2001. It is interesting to note that many of these entries were of deer shot outside this time period, but discovered by serious antler enthusiasts and collectors. In other words, as interest in antlers rose, so did the search for potential trophies, many of which were simply stored in the attic or garage of elderly hunters.

The sportsman's interest in record book animals paralleled the increase in deer numbers. As deer flourished across the country and expanded on to prime habitat, particularly in the mid western states, so did the number of record book entries in those states.

For example, according to Helmer, the top five Boone and Crockett producing states between 1830 and 1979 were Minnesota (315), Wisconsin (194), Texas (157),

Iowa (108), and Michigan (55), with 39 states and 663 counties having entries. However, from 1980 through 2001, the top five changed to Illinois (509), Iowa (507), Wisconsin (395), Minnesota (293), and Missouri (244), with 41 states and 1,254 counties having entries. Not only were more people aware of the Boone and Crockett scoring system, there were more Boone and Crockett bucks being produced in more counties as a result of expanding deer populations.

Uniquely, the number of entries in Texas' golden antler-producing counties of Dimmit and Webb remained fairly close between the two time periods. From 1830 to 1979, Webb County had 27 entries and Dimmit County had 18 entries. During the 1980 to 2001 period, Dimmit County had 23 entries and Webb County had 21 entries. Why these counties did not produce a significant increase in Boone and Crockett animals during the 1980 to 2001 period is attributable to the fact that deer herds already inhabited prime habitat. The only thing that regulated the occurrence of trophy bucks in these two Texas counties was rainfall.

When the rains arrived at the appropriate time, South Texas experienced banner years like 1992 and 1997, but when debilitating drought occurred, large antlers failed to materialize. Presently, Dimmit County ranks second tied with St. Louis County, Minnesota and third overall since 1830. Webb County presently is tied for fourth, and second overall since 1830.

The actual number of Boone and Crockett whitetails taken throughout South Texas since 1980 has increased at a staggering rate. These deer are the products of sound game management enhanced by hunter awareness. Additional Boone and Crockett caliber bucks have been shot on high fenced ranches which cannot qualify for the actual

Boone and Crockett Club. None the less, the racks produced by these bucks are huge and their numbers continue to increase.

What does the future hold for deer? The future looks bright. Deer hunters want more and bigger deer, and they don't mind working towards that end. Deer hunting enthusiasts are more than willing to spend their valuable time and money in their search for trophy-racked bucks. And they are becoming increasingly discretionary when it comes to shooting the animals. They are more than aware that a buck must reach its golden antler-producing years of six or seven before it can realize its genetic potential and hunters are willing to wait.

How big can those deer antlers get? That's difficult to answer when you look at deer like the 328 2/8" non typical hole in the horn buck found dead in Portage County, Ohio in the 1940's and Milo Hanson's typical buck at 213 5/8" that replaced the former world record thought impossible to be broken. Actually, we have reached the maximum antler size deer can develop in the wild. After all, when we talk about new world record whitetail, the possibility of it occurring is possible, but the probability doesn't even register. Even if a deer has the genetic potential to produce a world class set of antlers, it must exist under natural conditions in the wild. Avoiding drought, disease, heavy snowfall, predators, not to mention hunters and poachers, a deer that survives to its mature antler years is unique. Even in a mild climate like South Texas, researcher Charlie DeYoung has reported a 23% buck mortality rate per age class to predators and other undetermined factors.

The one controllable factor in deer mortality, “legal harvest”, has been and will contribute to the production of trophy class deer. Hunters are intentionally passing up younger deer in hopes of seeing them again displaying larger antlers.

Antlers which are a reflection of age, nutrition, and genetics, have reached a pinnacle as far as antler size goes, at least in the wild. Inside a deer pen is a different story.

Bucks developed under confined conditions continue to amaze antler enthusiasts. The latest phenomenon was found in a pen facility in Portage County, Ohio. According to official Boone and Crockett scorer Horace Ghore, the buck named High Roller gross scores  $377 \frac{2}{8}$  Boone and Crockett. The buck has a basic 10 point rack that is decorated by 34 additional non typical points. The net score that Ghore came up with was  $366 \frac{4}{8}$  Boone and Crockett, a whopping  $32 \frac{7}{8}$  inches larger than the number one non typical Missouri Monarch that nets  $333 \frac{7}{8}$ . Would high roller have attained this type of antler growth in the wild? I doubt it. Matter of fact, the combination of genetic strains required to produce this monster would have been impossible to occur. In simplistic terms, High Roller is the product of manipulated breeding “line breeding”. What this means is that the largest racked bucks were bred to premiere females. This just doesn’t happen in the wild. There is even scientific evidence that some bucks in the wild do very little if any breeding at all.

As long as wealthy deer farmers continue to search for that ultimate buck, I feel penned deer will continue to surprise even the most pessimistic individuals. But the fact remains if large antlers were important to the survival of the whitetail deer, they would have been selected for throughout evolution.

Matter of fact, our earliest prehistoric deer portrayed enormous antlers, but they vanished over time.

The best way to look at the continued antler craze is to simply manage for the best quality deer the land you hunt on is capable of producing. This can be done by simply balancing the deer herd while improving the native habitat. Also, employ patience and discretion while hunting so additional bucks can enter the mature age classes and at least have the chance to exercise their genetic potential. Remember, every landholding is different and none are created equal. If you are lucky enough to have a piece of top quality deer real estate, then expect the best. If not, be satisfied in realizing the land's optimal potential. After all, a mature buck taken in the wild by fair chase is the ultimate trophy regardless what it scores.