



Spring is Antler ‘Shed’ Season

By Randy Hoyer

It should go without saying, deer hunting is a yearlong activity! Eagerly, we begin setting up blinds, planting food plots and filling feeders in August and September each year in preparation for opening day. Over the next few months, we monitor and check game cameras, rubs, scrapes, and trails, shoot our rifles and bows, and wait patiently for the season to arrive. Finally, it's opening day and we relish the next four months, hunting as often as we can.

After the season ends, we clean gear, process venison, recount the season and talk about what we might expect next year! Yet, how many individuals take advantage of shed horn hunting season? Shed horn hunting season, according to me, begins after Valentine's Day and runs through the end of March. I don't need a license, just the time and patience to go out into the woods and fields and walk, and look, and walk, and look.

As most whitetail deer hunters know, the allusive white tail buck deer will shed or drop its antlers each year. This annual phenomenon occurs in the early spring. Shortly after dropping the antlers, the cycle starts over and the buck deer begins growing a new set of antlers. This amazing process begins in the spring, and by the end of September, the buck deer will be sporting a new set of antlers.

There is no true skill or secret to finding shed antlers, maybe just a little luck. The key is just spending time in the woods or fields and covering as much ground as possible. Most successful shed antler hunters spend their time looking around major food sources for deer, especially in late winter and early spring. Winter food plots such as oats, wheat or rye grass fields are great areas to search, but don't just look there, really spend some time in the tall grass or brush area that encircles the food plot. If one supplements feed year round, such as corn or protein, I would spend significant time around these areas as well.

Other prime areas to search are along fence lines, creek beds, or steep ditches. As an antler loosens, any jump or bump in the bucks walking/running path could jar loose the antler and cause it to fall to the ground. Another area to search is the deer bedding areas where some of my best finds have been and where I have fortunately found both sets of antlers. These bedding areas might be a little tougher to find or I should say harder to get to. They are generally the best since they are located deep in the woods or heavy vegetated areas that require significant effort to search.

When you find a shed, spend some time in that area looking for the other antler from the same buck. Once an antler is shed, a buck will feel the unbalance and sometimes shake its head to remove the new sensation it is feeling. Numerous times, I have found both sets of antlers from a buck within a few feet or several yards from each other. As we also know, bucks will “bachelor up” in



the spring, so it's not uncommon to find several sheds in a general area, especially if one can find a good bedding area.

To walk or ride? Ah, that is a tough question. Here again, I prefer to ride around in our ATV and savor a cold beverage. My wife enjoys shed horn hunting as much as I do, and we both enjoy spending time on the ATV riding the ranch. In an ATV, I can cover twice, maybe three times as much area; however, when I walk, I see the ground much better. Obviously, walking is certainly healthier. When walking, be methodical and focused and don't look too far out front or all over. Keep your attention on the immediate area.

Recent sheds will be brown in color making them difficult to see in taller winter dry grass. Older sheds from previous years will have weathered and be white or grey in color and be more visible than a newly dropped shed.

Competition! Hunters are not alone searching for these sheds. Critters and varmints will hunt and chew on the antlers for the mineral in them. One may find a shed from a previous year, and in addition to being weathered, the tips of the tines will be chewed or gnawed.

Whether walking or riding when looking for shed antlers, keep an eye out for poisonous snakes. After hibernating most of the winter months, rattlesnakes and copperheads will be out and active in the spring time. Be very careful reaching down to pick up a shed that might be laying near a fallen tree trunk or among rocks or boulders. These are prime areas that rattlesnakes and copperheads like to lie and wait for a scurrying field mouse.

I have heard that some people have even trained dogs to find sheds. I've not attempted this, but I can certainly see that it might be very effective, or would that be cheating?

What to do with all those sheds? I personally like to keep them. They become conversation pieces and can make for great yard art. I enjoy reflecting on the really big or unique ones, when and where I found them, and identifying which antlers may have come from which buck. I can generally confirm this with game cam pictures taken throughout the year. Finally, they make really nice décor, if a hunter and spouse are into rustic hunting lodge decorations.

So with all this said, come spring time, get outdoors and see what you can find! As I once heard the former president of the Colorado County Wildlife Management Association, Wayne Zimmerhazel, say, “Shed horn hunting is like Easter egg hunting for grown-ups, and when you find a really big shed, it's like finding the golden egg with the money in it!” If you're a turkey hunter, coincide your shed horn hunting with turkey season. Life doesn't get much better than stomping through the woods on a beautiful spring day during shed horn hunting season!