

On Wisconsin Outdoors

With the Dick Ellis Experts

www.onwisconsinoutdoors.com

July 7, 2008

Velvet Beams & Photo Schemes

Whitetail bucks and the Dog Days of summer

By Dick Ellis

There is a special gift given to a hunter that only comes with time in the field. It is an instinct, a sixth sense, or simply the ability to better see the prey that he will hunt some time during the year than the non-hunter around him; even when that animal is hidden in its own environment. If you are the wife of a veteran deer hunter and don't hunt yourself, you have probably answered, "How did you see that?" in response to his pointing out a deer buried in foliage from your truck traveling down the highway.

We temporarily interrupt this fishing season to bring you one such whitetail buck. And to

dream 10 weeks before the archery season, of the trophy book bucks of autumn and what they may look like now. They can, even in these Dog Days, already be very impressive.

On June 24th, there were factors in this hunter's favor that won't exist over most of fall. The deer now are wearing their summer brown that contrasts with the deep greens of summer foliage as starkly as black on white. And even the largest bucks are relatively unafraid of his most dangerous predator during these lazy days of June and July; he has not been hunted in six months.

I was one of an endless line of cars and trucks in suburban



During the last week of June, a large buck in full antler velvet is caught on camera by the writer in suburban Milwaukee. The antlers should continue to grow for two months and the buck may still be in velvet, consisting of thousands of blood vessels, cartilage and nervous tissue, when the Wisconsin bow deer season opens in September.



I see you too. A large buck in antler velvet, consisting of thousands of blood vessels, cartilage and nervous tissue, doesn't like the writer's surveillance with a camera the last week in June and keeps a wary eye on potential danger before departing in haste.

Milwaukee, and "he" was initially just a two foot line of horizontal brown lost 70 yards out in a canvas of brush. It was mid-afternoon and the sun was bright. There was no head or antlers or flicking tail. Just a thin brown line that in my hunter's mind was backbone. Still, already I hoped it was him. Maybe a spike. Maybe something bigger. But just maybe, the special one that makes the hunter's foot touch the brake and his eyes scan first to see if it's a deer at all. And then to ask...is it him?

I did the turn into the industrial park and took the return trip to see it "all" again, this small patch of brown that said so much; or nothing at all. My hand felt for the camera and the telephoto lens that a reporter keeps by his side but touched nothing. The camera was on the desk a few miles west. The digital memory card was in my pocket. There was fishing photos to turn into a disc, and I cursed my professional laziness for not being ready, especially when just a hint of antler shrouded in summer vel-

vet broke the brush line to the east.

The 10 minute trip home was a 30 minute ride in my mind, the memory card was jammed home into the body of the camera and the telephoto lens replaced on the run. The return trip was another eternity, and when I slowed the truck and made a parking place off the narrow county highway out of the path of traffic, I knew he was gone.

The truck was at a precarious angle in the gravel and vehicles slowed to see why this nut would be climbing up on his truck with a camera swinging from his neck. Too much hot sun perhaps? One slightly inconvenienced passer-by, in fact, labeled me just that in friendly greeting, with a colorful adjective thrown in at no extra charge. This is normal behavior to a Wisconsin outdoorsman, though, and I guessed that 99 out of 100 people that passed this spot had no clue a deer was here at all.

Growing disappointment from futilely scanning the pockets of scrub brush disappeared when impressive velvet antlers popped above the bush-tops. The animal had no doubt jerked up from feeding in the instinctive manner of all whitetails' continuous scrutiny for danger. Seconds later, the

head with eyes literally masked like a bandit by the thick brush materialized in a hole of vegetation. He had moved but not far. He was big; as big as I had hoped in my "what-if" scrutiny of every deer shrouded in summer or fall cover off of every Wisconsin highway traveled.

He was on me immediately and our eyes locked at 60 or 70 yards. A big, old buck has lived to remember close encounters with the human predator and learned to survive because of it. The telephoto found him, and when the red square I had placed on his head like crosshairs in fall signaled "lock-on" I squeezed a first photo, and breathed a sigh of relief.

A love of hunting and fishing and writing is why I first stepped into this. But as the years slip by, a reporter would rather capture the perfect photo than secure a carcass tag. It is why I will wait on my belly on the ice with camera ready, waiting for a friend to set the hook with the strike and capture a bending rod rather than feel the weight of the fish myself. It is also why the first special photo tucked away safely in the camera does indeed mean relief.

We've all watched a photographer snap off an automatic series of continuous

photos as his cover girl poses. My cover boy wasn't posing, and his very demeanor told me a big buck becomes reeducated very quickly to new danger. Without taking his eyes from me, he would give me less than 30 seconds of his time to take 16 photos. Several were unobstructed shots of the headgear and much of his body. A final shot was only antler above brush as he hurried off to places with no hint of this danger.

Unlike many hunters, I don't know when I approach a trophy buck felled by a rifle round just how many points he has. Counting points is a luxury and measuring the spread is part of my ritual after the tag is secured. I was similarly intrigued after these "shots" with what I would find at home with photos transferred from camera to computer.

He's an 11-point full velvet buck, with two months of antler growth yet to determine what he will look like. He has long brow-tines with one brow tine split, and an estimated 20-inch spread.

The hunt is 10 weeks away. Actually, the hunt began June 24th. I "got" my buck. He's a cover boy. ^oW_o

Antler Development

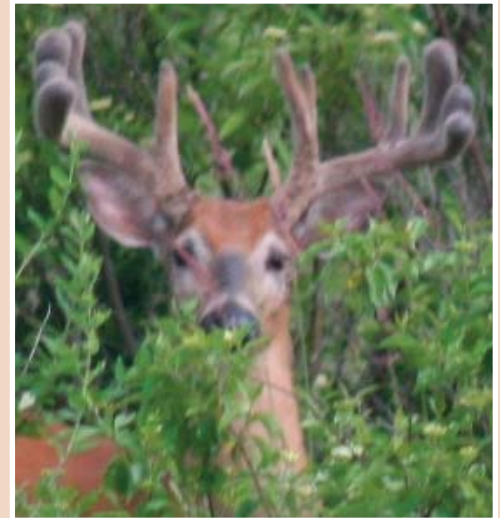
According to the website www.whitetailstewards.com, the two circular areas that grown antlers from a buck's skull are known as pedicles. Antler pedicles start developing on the frontal bones of male white-tailed deer fawns during late fetal development. After birth, early stimulation from testosterone is then required for final pedicle development. When bucks reach four to six months of age, antlers begin to grow from the pedicle. Overall, pedicle formation occurs through a process known as intramembranous ossification, whereas antlers grow by endochondral ossification.

Antler growth nationwide begins between mid-March and early April. In response to changes in photoperiod, growth hormones from the pituitary gland trigger the release of insulin-like Growth Factor (IGF), which stimulates antler growth. During this time, the soft growing antler is covered with hairy skin, called "velvet", consisting of thousands of blood vessels, cartilage and

nervous tissue. Growth of antlers is very rapid, and some deer species are capable of growing nearly one inch of antler per day.

Antlers continue to grow through August or September. As day length decreases in autumn, the pituitary gland indirectly increases the secretion of testosterone and testicular volume increases. In response to these increases, antlers harden through calcification. In this process, soft tissue is converted directly to bone by the deposition of minerals (mineralization) within the matrix of cartilage and blood vessels in the developing antlers. The velvet eventually dries off up and falls off. Bucks rub their antlers against brush and trees to aid in velvet removal.

During the rut or whitetail mating season, antlers remain as hard polished bone with sharp tines. Hard antlers enable bucks to fight, posture for dominance among rival males, and display for does. Between late December and early January, according to the website, testosterone levels decrease and cause the union between the antlers and pedicles to weaken and the antlers then are shed. Once shed, skin grows over the wound left



The antler growth of big bucks is determined by factors including genetics, nutrition, age and habitat. The buck in full velvet, consisting of thousands of blood vessels, cartilage and nervous tissue, was caught on camera by the writer in late June.

by the cast antler. The entire process starts again in spring. ^oW_o