

# Older-Aged Buck

by David T. McClung

**T**he meteorologist's prediction of temperatures in the upper 30s and clear skies was a great forecast for the first three days of buck gun season. As promised, I walked to my tree stand with frost under foot and a star-filled sky overhead on opening day. I was hunting our 150-acre family farm with my dad, uncle and brother. Each of us has our favorite stand sites on this beautiful piece of West Virginia landscape.

As the sun began to rise I could hear deer moving in the hollow below me. As they crossed the ridge I saw it was a young four-point buck and two does. After they trotted away, my thoughts turned to one of the large bucks that I had seen on our farm. During the rut, big bucks are not shy about leaving sign, and my tree stand overlooked several huge rubs and large fresh scrapes. At 11 a.m. a shot rang out from the direction of my uncle's stand. We had planned to meet for lunch so I moved slowly in his direction. As I approached his stand, I could see him kneeling over a large-bodied deer. As I moved closer, large antlers began to rise above the grass. "Ten points," my uncle said with a large smile.

My uncle was the lucky one that took this beautiful 4½-year-old buck, but everyone who hunted the farm could take some credit. This was the fifth year of our older-aged buck management plan. Our hunters, along with two neighboring landowners, had agreed to a self-imposed rule: all bucks shot must have an outside antler spread at least ear-tip wide. Our hunting parties were like many West Virginia deer hunters, we have



Right: Len Rue, Jr. Far right: WV DNR photo

# Management



## Harvest Restriction

Ten years since a 14-inch antler harvest restriction was implemented at McClintic WMA in Mason County (*shown here*), the regulation has gained popularity and yielded larger bucks. Besides McClintic—Beech Fork Lake, Bluestone Lake, and Burnsville Lake WMAs, and Coopers Rock and Calvin Price state forests all have older-aged buck management regulations.

had great success killing 1½- and 2½-year-old bucks. However, we realized that if we were ever going to harvest older, large-racked bucks, we would have to let the young ones walk.

Opportunity to hunt property managed for large bucks is not limited to West Virginia landowners. The West Virginia Division of Natural Resources began older-aged buck management on McClintic Wildlife Management Area, located in Mason County, in 2000. McClintic WMA was picked because of its diverse habitat, fertile soils, and thick escape cover. Upon recommendation of wildlife biologists, the DNR Commission passed a regulation that required all bucks harvested on McClintic to have at least a 14-inch outside antler spread. Using antler measurements collected at game check stations in Mason County, this harvest restriction would protect 95 percent of the 1½-year-old bucks and 60 percent of all 2½-year-old bucks on the WMA.

This type of buck harvest restriction had been used for several years in other states on public and private lands. But it was new for West Virginia, and some hunters didn't want to accept the proposed change. However, results from hunter surveys used at the DNR public meetings held around the state each spring showed that a majority of hunters wanted this change. Now, 10 years later, this 14-inch antler harvest restriction has gained popularity. McClintic, Beech Fork Lake, Bluestone Lake, and Burnsville Lake WMAs, and Coopers Rock and Calvin Price State forests all have older-aged buck management regulations.

The commitment to practice older-aged management requires an attitude change in the way most hunters approach deer hunting in West Virginia. The state's liberal bag limits and high deer densities have allowed hunters to have great success. Many of these successful hunters now have different goals and desires in regard to their hunting experience. Today,



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deer hunters have a wealth of information available to educate themselves on topics relating to deer hunting and deer management activities. Some of these topics include habitat improvement, herd age structure, sex ratios, genetics and harvest goals. Hunters can also become hands-on managers of their hunting grounds. Lime and fertilizer application, food plot development, and timber management are only a few habitat improvements hunters can make on their properties.

For many hunters, deer season will always be a three or four-day event, with the hope of harvesting any legal deer. But for a growing number, the pursuit of big bucks and older-aged management practices now provide enjoyment all year. It can begin in late winter hunting for shed antlers, preparing food plots in spring, glassing for bucks during late summer evenings, scouting and hanging a tree stand in the fall.

Practicing older age management doesn't guarantee you will take a wall hanger each year. But, if you let the young bucks walk, they may mature into the trophy deer of your dreams.

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