



PHOTO BY DAVID HART

HUNT WHAT YOU HAVE

Realistic expectations help you better enjoy the hunting experience.

■ by *David Hart*

“SHOOT WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY? IT’S A NOVEL IDEA THAT HAS BEEN LOST ON MANY OF US CAUGHT UP IN THE EVER-CHANGING WORLD OF WHITETAIL MANAGEMENT.”

Has the popularity of hunting-themed television shows made things tough on deer hunting? Chris McClellan thinks so. An outfitter for almost 10 years, the central Virginia resident sometimes reminds clients that his region is unlikely to produce a record-book buck. It might not even surrender a buck that circulates across social media outlets.

“Between social media and all these television shows, there is this notion that every buck we shoot is supposed to be a giant, even here in Virginia,” McClellan said. “A lot of people lose sight of a realistic buck for the area they are hunting.”

That opinion might have merit. In other words, television shows and social media outlets create unrealistic expectations for hunters. Many of us will never see a 180-inch buck where we hunt, even in states known for quality deer. Heck, few of us will even see a 150-incher. No matter how many 120-inchers we pass up, no matter how many food plots we plant and no matter what other efforts we undertake, many other factors play a role in the quality and size of antlers in our region. Some are beyond our control.

The most important? Genetics. Places such as Iowa, Kansas and Illinois produce many giant bucks because they have the genetics to grow monster deer. Other factors we can’t control include generous buck limits that let hunters kill two, three or more bucks in a season. In those areas, there’s little incentive for hunters to be selective about the bucks they shoot. Many don’t pass up any legal deer.

WHAT YOU HAVE

The simple solution? Hunt what you have. Come to terms with reality, and accept that a 140-incher in your woods may be the equivalent of a 170-incher in Iowa. That’s what Alabama resident Newt Norton and his fellow club mem-

bers started doing five years ago. Like many deer hunters, they were caught up in the trophy management web for years, passing up bucks that would make many hunters flush with adrenaline.

“We relaxed our rules on what could be killed, and we also started planting Whitetail Institute food plots,” he said.

By lowering your standards to be more realistic, you take pressure off yourself. That lets you hunt with more focus on what’s really out there and gives you more freedom to experience what deer hunting is really about: having fun in the woods and testing your ability to outwit mature bucks.

McClellan wrestled with that concept when he started outfitting 10 years ago. Would his clients have a good, fun hunt even if they didn’t kill a buck that would rival those of traditional trophy whitetail regions?

“A trophy can be just about anything,” he said. “A lot of my hunters have never shot anything over 100 inches because they don’t have the opportunity to see bigger bucks where they hunt. Most are pretty happy to shoot a 120- or 130-incher.”

Located in south-central Virginia, McClellan’s outfit features 4,500 acres of rolling farmland, pine plantations and mature hardwoods. It’s great habitat that’s loaded with whitetails. He also plants various Whitetail Institute products throughout the property. McClellan briefly toyed with mandatory size limits, but he dropped that idea before he hosted his first clients. He doesn’t impose mandatory standards on the bucks his hunters can shoot, but he suggests they pass up younger and smaller ones. He purposely uses vague terms.

“Basically, I tell them to shoot whatever makes them happy,” he said. “That’s not up to me to decide what the definition of a shooter is. A 17-inch 8-point might be the biggest buck of their lives. I know some outfitters out West have

minimum antler size restrictions, and a few even fine their hunters for shooting undersized bucks. I don’t see any reason to do that here.”

Shoot what makes you happy? It’s a novel idea that has been lost on many of us caught up in the ever-changing world of whitetail management. In some ways, we’ve been bombarded with an unrealistic set of standards most of us will never reach. Sure, there might be a 150-inch buck somewhere in your neighborhood, but the odds that you will see it, no matter how hard or smart you hunt, are likely slim.

A lifelong hunter, even McClellan has undergone a transformation of sorts. It’s not that he expected his region of Virginia to surrender a wall-hanger every season. But he thought he might have been able to move the needle when he started passing up younger and smaller-antlered bucks.

“It probably helped some,” he said. “I don’t think we are seeing bigger bucks on average, but we are certainly seeing more older bucks, which is probably a better standard of quality than antler size around here.”

DO WHAT YOU CAN

That’s doesn’t mean you can’t improve the overall health of your deer herd and even the average antler size of the bucks on your property. Norton’s club started planting Imperial Whitetail Clover five years ago and PowerPlant two years ago.

“We’re not growing Boone & Crockett bucks, but we’ve gone from seeing lots of 110- to 130-inch bucks to seeing lots of 125- to 145-inch bucks,” he said. “My dad killed a 158-inch 13-point buck the season before last and this past season we had an 18-point and a 13-point killed.”

Without question food plots help improve the entire deer herd. So can wide-scale habitat improvements. However, selective harvest — passing up young



- GROW 'EM BIG
 Virginia outfitter Chris McClellan plants a variety of food plots in the spring and fall to help improve his deer herd. However, he says allowing young bucks the opportunity to grow is the most important ingredient.

- HEADER HERE
 Mowing is a form of mechanical weed management that's immensely valuable and commonly recommended for food plots.

PHOTO BY DAVID HART

ALABAMA'S NEWT NORTON AND HIS FELLOW CLUB MEMBERS HIT THE SWEET SPOT WHEN THEY RELAXED THEIR RULES AND STARTED USING IMPERIAL WHITETAIL PRODUCTS. THEY SHOT 140-INCH BRUISERS INSTEAD OF WAITING FOR THE IMPROBABLE 170-INCH BUCK.

deer in favor of older ones — is unquestionably the most influential thing you can do. Young bucks will never reach their potential if you shoot them. It doesn't take a scientist to figure that out. Don't pass them all up, though. Or at least don't turn your club or management program into a dictatorship in which everyone lives in fear of shooting the wrong buck. As McClellan said, it's up to you what qualifies as a trophy buck. And you shouldn't push your standards on others, especially those with limited hunting experience. Norton's club began taking more children and beginning hunters on their first hunts about five years ago. They don't impose age or antler size restrictions. It was one of the best things they've done.

"The amount of fun we've been having has increased significantly," he said. "It's hard to describe what it's like to see a kid get his first deer or have buck fever overtake them. We've had the good fortune to have 25 or 30 kids and a few adults kill their first deer with us. Some were pretty nice, and some were spikes or forkhorns, but they didn't care. They were all thrilled." So was Norton, who acknowledged he and most of his club members have undergone a transformation since they started hunting together more than 20 years ago. "We still kill some pretty good deer," he added. "Pretty good" for them might be the buck of a lifetime for you. By under-

standing the limits of your local deer herd, you'll have more fun and will hunt with more focus for the largest bucks in your area. Just be realistic with your expectations. "Be realistic," McClellan said. "If you've been hunting a property long enough, you already know what the potential is. Do what you can to increase your deer herd's health, but don't pass up 130-inch deer just because you're holding out for a 140 that may not exist."

