

FREE PASS

It can be difficult to pass up a young buck, especially if you haven't done it before. However, that can increase your potential for harvesting a big buck in the future.

■ by *Darron McDougal*





■ Modern equipment has made hunters deadlier by increasing their range. When hunters aren't selective about which bucks they harvest, it takes a toll on buck populations and age classes.

PHOTO BY DARRON MCDUGAL

The morning was crisp and cool; the kind deer hunters dream about. I was fortunate to harvest two adult does — the area warranted some thinning — during the first few hours of daylight. After field-dressing and dragging them toward my vehicle but within view of my stand, I quickly reassumed my perch.

At noon, the first antlers of the day appeared. Numbed by the scent of the does that had moved through earlier, the dandy 8-pointer posed perfectly broadside 100 yards away. One of his G-2s was broken off at the main beam. I acquired his ribs beyond my scope's reticle and felt the trigger. Immediately, I let up. With two does down, I had plenty of venison. And although the buck's antlers were nicely framed, he'd be better the next year. I let that Wisconsin buck go.

A few days later, I learned that a neighbor had killed it. Still, I had no regrets. If I'd shot the buck, he wouldn't have had any chance of surviving for another year. Obviously, he met his demise anyway, but that's how it goes. At least I didn't shoot the deer just to say I filled my buck tag.

The topic of passing up bucks is controversial, but I'll approach the discussion in a non-shaming way. In this article, we'll consider some of the deeper matters that will hopefully make you think a little bit more the next time a young buck poses broadside in your shooting lane.

OUR TECHNOLOGICAL AGE

In many of the places I hunt, encountering truly mature whitetail bucks seems to be an increasingly difficult task, even though I'm a better, more detailed hunter now than I've ever been. Other experienced hunters report likewise. It doesn't take an expert to understand why.

First, traveling to hunt in other states is more popular than ever, and droves of hunters are doing it. A lot of that is because of YouTube content and social media posting, which sparks interest among viewers. Unfortunately, many hunters kill deer on traveling hunts they wouldn't take in their home states because they don't want to eat their expensive nonresident tags. That takes a big toll on the buck age class.

We also must consider our weapons. They're deadlier to longer distances than weapons of yesteryear. Modern crossbows in skilled hands, for example, can place accurate arrows to 100 yards and beyond. That doesn't mean it's a responsible shot, but some folks take it anyway. My latest Mathews compound bows also can place accurate arrows to 100 yards and beyond, and although I'm not taking such shots at deer, I can confidently shoot a deer at 50 to 60 yards during ideal conditions. And there are 100-plus-



■ This beautiful 140-inch buck was tooth-aged at 5-1/2 years old. The author took it during a recent public-land hunt in a region not known for producing Booner-class bucks.

PHOTO BY BECCA MCDONOUGH

yard deer bow-kill videos on YouTube. Ethical or unethical, most hunters in the '90s couldn't have imagined such things.

The same holds true with firearms. Muzzleloaders were once a 100-yards-and-in deal. Then manufacturers pushed the envelope to 200 yards. Then 300. And now, I've heard of custom muzzleloaders that shoot accurately to 700 yards and farther. Rifles? I was recently in a deer camp at which a hunter shot a coyote at more than 1,200 yards.

In general, killing bucks is less challenging. It isn't hard in most places to encounter a little fork buck or 6-pointer. If hunters toting modern equipment aren't more selective, we'll see a decline in buck populations and especially age classes. In fact, I believe we already have. And that's especially important to consider alongside other challenges that lead to buck mortality, such as predation,

diseases and winter kill.

MATURING AS A HUNTER

Each year, you'll likely see deer in the age class that you harvest. For example, if you pass up two 2-1/2-year-old bucks and harvest a 3-1/2-year-old, you'll likely have at least one 3-1/2-year-old buck to hunt the next year. That doesn't work everywhere. I know. States such as Michigan, Pennsylvania and most of Wisconsin host armies of hunters, and many 1-1/2- and 2 1/2-year-old bucks don't survive.

Hunters often say, "If I didn't shoot it, someone else would have." That's highly probable in high-pressure areas, but you can't conclusively say that, and no one wins when people make greed-based decisions. Further, if even a handful of hunters in a specific area lost that mentality and passed young bucks, the area would

see a boost in buck age class. It has to.

Of course, it's acceptable for a beginner hunter to harvest any legal buck he likes. In fact, it should be celebrated. But as a hunter gains more experience and harvests a few more young bucks, I always encourage them to set the bar higher. Waiting for an older buck challenges folks to become better hunters. Plus, it's more rewarding for most of us to harvest a more mature deer rather than raiding the 1-1/2-year-old buck pool year after year. In other words, you've done something if you passed up a fork-horn and a 6-pointer for the first time in your life and then harvested an older deer as a result.

In a perfect world, hunters would mature as the years pass and challenge themselves by setting the bar higher. It lengthens the hunt and gives you more time afield when you pass young deer.

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The more you're afield, the more you can potentially learn, and the more you learn, the better the hunter you can become. As a byproduct, that gives young deer the chance to age and older bucks the opportunity to breed does. Then you should have the opportunity to one day harvest a mature buck.

But many hunters simply want an easy hunt, or they want to say that they filled their buck tag. This mentality is rampant in my home state of Wisconsin, especially during the firearms season. If you're legitimately happy with harvesting a young buck, go ahead. But if you're doing it because you're afraid of being the only one in your group to not fill your tag, you're shooting a young buck for the wrong reason. Greed is never the right answer.

I'll acknowledge that many of us hunt for different reasons. Some are in it for the time afield, others want the venison, others enjoy the camaraderie, and others want the challenge of harvesting mature bucks. Regardless, even most meat

hunters would love the opportunity to shoot a big buck someday. However, only a small fraction of hunters are willing to eat their tags for a year or two and watch 2-1/2-year-old bucks walk out of their lives.

If you're truly interested in killing a big buck, lay off the young bucks. From there, you have to pay attention to details. Don't fry bacon in your orange coveralls. Don't drive your four-wheeler right to the base of your ladder stand. Cut out things that hold you back from encountering big bucks, and your odds will increase.

CONCLUSION

There's a saying: "Don't pass up a buck on the first day that you'd shoot on the last day." I'm not sure I like that saying, because I believe we shouldn't settle on the last day. If we choose to pass on a buck early in the hunt, we shouldn't regret it. I love to fill a tag as much as anyone, but we must set goals and do our

best to hold to them throughout a hunt. If we go into a hunt with no intentions of shooting a 3-1/2-year-old buck, we shouldn't do it, even on the last day.

Ultimately, each hunter must decide what will make him happy in terms of buck harvest. Killing big bucks isn't easy, and holding out for a mature buck can lead to a pile of unfilled tags through the years. But if more hunters pass up young bucks, the age class can increase and allow for more opportunities in the future to harvest older bucks, because more will exist. Plus, passing young ones makes it sweeter when we harvest big bucks.

Big buck hunting isn't for everyone. Some folks just don't have the time because of personal circumstances. I get that. But for those of you who love to hunt and want to mature as hunters, one of the best things you can do is give young bucks a free pass.



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