

Of The Outdoors

Spring Is Perfect Time For 'Shed Hunting'

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Believe it or not, spring is here, finally the snow is disappearing and the weather's starting to warm.

It's something that a lot of us have been waiting on for a long time, giving us the opportunity to get outside and enjoy the spring weather.

As I mentioned in earlier columns, this is the time of the year when I do my pre-season scouting for turkey.

While I'm out there tromping around in the woods looking for some sign of that big Tom, I'm also looking for deer sheds or "Shed Hunting" as it's known.

For those of you that haven't hunted sheds, they're the previous years antlers that the buck sheds or dropped after the rut.

Bucks shed their headgear/rack/antlers annually and if you can beat the rodents and other critters out there that chew on them where they use them for a source of calcium, you'll have the opportunity to find a shed or two.

A buck's antler/rack is a lot different from cattle horns, which are hollow, as they're made up of honey combed solid bone.

Pedicles, those knobby nubs that protrude from the buck's skull, are where the new antler/rack grows and what supports the buck's rack.

When bucks start to grow

their new racks/antlers, they're no more than bony growths covered with skin and hair (velvet). They grow incredibly fast in 3 to 4 months, making them the fastest growing living tissue there is.

These pedicles are a permanent part of the buck's forehead and the point where the antler breaks off of when the antler is shed.

Shed hunting in the spring is also an excellent way to determine if that big buck you hunted last year made it through the winter.

If you find his sheds, he's still around unless the winter did him in and you can start to put together a plan as to how you're going to hunt him this season.

After the rut, bucks no longer need their racks as they did during the rut when they were used to attract and impress the does and to fight other bucks that were trying to draw the females away from the harem.

It's a known fact that all of the bucks don't drop their racks at the same time. Some of them will begin to lose their racks following the rut, when their hormone levels start to drop.

As a general rule deer in the upper Midwest will shed their antlers in February and March.

The amount of daylight in a day, the fluctuations in the deer's hormones, their diet and stress have a lot to do as to when a deer will drop their rack/antlers.

There are several reasons deer shed their antlers, one is to allow for regeneration, or re-growth, of new ones.

Others believe the reason they drop their antlers is it will be easier for them to make it through the winter, as winter, with it's harsh conditions make it tough for a deer coming out of the rut to survive.

By shedding their antlers: it helps them to not only conserve energy but also to eliminate excess weight.

The entire shedding process will take two to three weeks to complete, while the re-growth will take the entire summer.

The first to drop their antlers are more than likely those bucks that chased hard during the rut, become fatigued from fighting and breeding during the rut.

If you don't have an area where you've found sheds in prior years, a good place to start looking for sheds would be to drive through the country, looking for those well-used deer trails that cross the roads.

I've found that heavily traveled trails, those that lead from heavily wooded areas, then cross the road into the deer's feeding areas to be a good starting point.

I'd say a good trail to start looking for sheds on would be one that resembled a hard packed cattle trail.

Once you've located a well-used trail, get permission from the landowner to shed hunt on the ground and

then formulate a plan.

The main spots I've found sheds were those near their bedding areas, along a route heading to an area where they're feeding and of course at their food sources.

You'll find more sheds in areas where the deer feed, as when a buck feeds, there's a lot of up and down head movement, which causes the antler to drop off.

Another reason that you'll find a good number of sheds near a food source is that they'll spend a lot of time there during the winter months.

During the winter, when other food sources are covered up, deer have a tendency to "Yard" up in large groups near a food supply.

These feeding areas can be corn/bean fields, near haystacks, grain piles and even open bins, as deer know these areas offer easy access to a food supply.

If they're feeding near bale piles, spend a little extra time checking these areas out as I've found a lot of sheds here as the bucks bang their rack against the bales when they're trying to pull hay from the bales.

Other good spots to look include trails following the bottom of ravines and places where the deer have to jump a fence.

While filming in Mississippi a few years back, my good friend Bubba Flanigan showed me how they hunt sheds in the south.

They leave feeders out

year round for the deer and

when it nears shed time, they attach a piece of chicken wire above the opening to the feeder and when the buck sticks his head into eat, the wire knocks the antler off.

On one feeder there were 19 sheds, the folks down south use this method to track the deer using their land, which made it through the season and to help manage their herd.

They use the sheds to decorate their homes and cabins, making decorative lights and other items that some folks sell in their gift shops.

Timing is everything when using this method as if it's attached too early, the buck might become entangled in the wire.

Hunting sheds is about like hunting mushrooms, as you need to take your time and walk through the fields and hills slowly.

Don't be in a big hurry when shed hunting as even a small amount of snow or leaves can cover a shed, making them impossible to see

until you're right on top of them.

If they've been on the ground long, they'll have faded and will be dull gray color, making them particularly hard to see in sandy soils.

This is the time of the year, especially this year when folks just want to get outside and do something, shed hunting is a great opportunity for you to spend a little time in the hills and woods, enjoying the outdoors while looking for one of Mother Nature's most beautiful art forms.

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