

Introduction

A lot of books about deer antlers start out by saying, “Antlers have fascinated man for centuries.” If you’re reading this book, you’ve probably already figured that much out, so I’ll spare you the caveman stories.

The truth is, whatever fascination people have for antlers, either now or centuries ago, it is a justifiable one. Antlers are the fastest-growing tissue in the animal world – faster growing than even cancer cells. Plus, no other mammalian tissue falls off and regrows. Certain animal species, such as lobsters or newts, can regrow body parts. However, that ability is almost unheard of among mammals. There have been instances in which children have regrown missing digits, but these acts of regeneration are never fully complete and are apparently limited to youths, as adults have never been known to regrow fingers or toes. Male deer, on the other hand, are not only designed to regrow new antlers each year, but successive racks are typically even larger than the previous ones.

Antlers are mysterious, too. Why do deer grow antlers that fall off and regrow each year, while other animals, such as sheep, continue growing horns throughout their lives? And what’s the difference between antlers and horns? Do antlers serve advantages over horns, or vice versa? What purposes do antlers serve?

Scientists have unraveled some of these mysteries, and others we’ll never know. But this fascination with antlers is what drives us to want to learn more about them, to study them and even to search for them in woods and fields each spring. That last item is my focus in this book. It’s my intent to not only “shed” some light on the mystery of antlers, but more importantly, to help you find more shed white-tailed deer antlers.

But why would anyone want to look for shed antlers? Well, why do writers put a pen to paper, or why do artists feel compelled to make that first brush stroke on canvas? I suppose it’s because these folks simply feel the urge within to do so. The same could be said for shed hunters, but there are other reasons as well.

One common reason for shed seeking is deer hunters want to know how many bucks survived the deer season on their hunting grounds, but not all shed-hunting ventures are purely linked to deer hunting. Some seek antlers to make crafts for fun, decoration or profit. Others pick up antlers simply for their natural beauty. And there are those souls who see shed hunting simply as a good excuse to get outside after a long winter of being cooped up indoors and spend some time with family and friends. Whatever your reason for antler collecting, take comfort in the fact that you are not alone in your pursuit. In fact, many people who taste a bit of success afield experience something that borders on an obsession with shed hunting. After you find your first nice antler and go several days without finding the match, you'll soon see why.

I apologize if this book turns otherwise normal citizens into shed-seeking addicts who lie abed at night, wondering just where the matches to their shed antlers may be. In any case, I hope you'll find it a useful guide that helps you find more antlers and enjoy your time outdoors.

Why Search for Antlers?

Up until my college days, I'd been only the most casual of antler hunters, and it showed when browsing through my collection of zero (0) sheds. But one day when I got home from work, my roommate, Nick Morehouse, showed me three antlers he'd found that day while hiking, which reinforced the notion that shed hunting is far more productive than working. I'd always loved both hunting deer and watching them, and, like most people who are interested in deer, I liked deer antlers.

After seeing Nick's newfound antlers, and turning them over and over in my hands, I was salivating like one of Pavlov's dogs at dinnertime. This shed hunting was something I had to get into! When my brother Jack found two sheds while turkey hunting later that spring, it only fueled my desire to find an antler. Finally, on the last day of Jack's turkey season, he and I scoured the woods for sheds, and I finally found my first antler: a 4-point right side. It was an experience I'll never forget.

Today, I love antlers. I like to look at them, ponder how they grew and compare them with other antlers. I like the glossy look of a fresh shed, the twisting curve of a main beam and the heft of a new find in hand. It may sound crazy, but I know I'm not alone. Thousands of people share the same appreciation for antlers. Maybe it's the fact that each antler is unique, or the fact that when we hold an

antler, we are holding a part of an animal that may be still alive. Every antler is a precious find for shed hunters. No matter how many sheds we find, each one has a story involving scouting, dumb luck or perseverance ... and a special connection to a buck who may be still out there, waiting to tell another story in bone.

But aside from simply loving antlers, other things drive people to walk for hours on end for seemingly little or no gain. Shed hunting is an excuse to get outside after a long winter, when people like me, who have been sitting around a little too much all season, need it most. I have trouble sticking to a rigid exercise program, but I have no trouble going shed hunting, and I get great exercise, whether I'm on snowshoes early in the year or on foot later on. But of course I don't see it as exercise; to me, it's a labor of love.

Shed hunting also gives deer hunters great insight into what's going on in the whitetail's world. I can say without reservation that I've learned more about deer from shed hunting than from books and magazines or spending time deer hunting. Obviously, finding an antler is a good indication that a buck survived the winter. Shed hunting teaches you how deer travel, and areas that they not only prefer, but also those they avoid. If you live in an area with snow cover, you'll have a perfect medium to study tracks and deer movement through the woods while you search for antlers. Looking for sheds also gives you time to ponder what's going on in the deer woods, and when you do this and start asking questions about what you're observing, you start to learn things. All too often when we're deer hunting, we haven't the time to study what's happening as we hustle to our stands. Plus, worrying about controlling your odor and scaring deer is a nonfactor to the shed hunter because deer will have months to return to their normal routine after you tramp through their territory.

Another enjoyable aspect of spending time in the woods looking for antlers is observing all the other things around you. It's refreshing to watch birds return and animals come out of hibernation on a 60-degree April day as the snow recedes and reveals hidden antlers. Taking in the fresh air makes you feel alive and I can think of no better way to spend a spring weekend, either alone or with friends and family. That's part of the real beauty of shed hunting. Unlike during deer season, when a squirming child could spook a deer, shed hunting is a great activity for you and your whole family. Searching for antlers lets you spend quality time with your friends and family and helps children take an interest in the outdoors at an early age. Children who tag along on shed hunts at a young age

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may be thoroughly interested in deer and deer hunting well before they're legally able to tote a gun. Plus, the outdoors is a great classroom for young and old alike. And, the more eyes in the woods, the better the odds of finding antlers.

Aside from all these great benefits of shedding, there's another reason why shed hunting is so popular: you can discover some truly huge whitetails. As deer hunters know, whitetails are wary creatures, especially large, mature deer. In fact, if you look at the Boone and Crocket Club record book, which is one of the most respected record-keeping organizations for big-game animals, you'll notice that the No. 1 and No. 2 nontypical bucks, which scored $333\frac{7}{8}$ inches and $328\frac{2}{8}$ inches, respectively, were both found dead. These deer survived for years without ever succumbing to a hunter's arrow or bullet, dropping sheds each year. In fact, whitetail sheds have been found that would certainly rival, and may actually exceed the racks of current world records. Of course, we won't know their exact score because a rack's inside spread is taken into account for scoring, and it's impossible to get an exact measurement when the antlers are detached from the skull. However, the North American Shed Hunters Club has established a way to recognize trophy-sized shed antlers as well. The NASHC record book, *Shed Antler Records of North American Big Game*, records record-sized shed antlers instead of whole racks.

Whether you're looking for exercise, time outside or antlers for a craft project, shed hunting is a great way to get outside and enjoy the outdoors.

Before You Begin

This book is designed to help you find more shed white-tailed deer antlers. However, before you read it, get inspired to find sheds and rush out the door expecting to find antlers with your newfound shed-hunting knowledge, let me offer some disclaimers.

First off, before you search for sheds anywhere, you should check with your state and local natural resources agency to make sure shed hunting is legal in your area. I am not aware of any states or provinces where collecting shed antlers is prohibited, but some places restrict nonresident shed hunting or restrict shed hunting on public lands. Some western states have even enacted shed hunting seasons in some areas to keep people from bothering game as they struggle to survive the winter. Also, state parks, wildlife refuges and some Canadian Crown lands may be off-limits to shed hunting. Crossing the U.S./Canadian border with shed antlers is also regulated, but more about that

in Chapter 6. As a safety precaution, you should always check with local law enforcement on rules and regulations of antler possession before heading out.

Despite the fact that I “wrote the book” on shed hunting, I don’t claim to be a shed-hunting expert. In fact, I have met many folks who find more antlers in a single season than I could find in several years of shed hunting. However, I do believe my knowledge can be helpful to both beginner and veteran shed hunters alike, and that using the tips provided in this book, you can find sheds in any geographic region where whitetails are found. After all, deer must eat, travel and bed wherever they live, and they do so in a similar manner. Each geographic area has its own nuances that affect deer behavior, but taking the path of least resistance and bedding to take advantage of sunny winter weather are universal whitetail behaviors. Shed hunting in the mountainous West will require different methods than shed hunting in the Chicago suburbs or Kansas CRP fields, but you’d be surprised how many similarities you’ll discover between deer in these diverse areas. Using my same basic techniques, I have been fortunate enough to find sheds in several states and provinces. Over the years, I’ve found sheds from whitetails, mule deer, moose, elk and caribou. I am always looking for new shed hunting adventures.

Keep in mind, weather in a particular geographic region can dictate deer movements and, in effect, the presence or absence of sheds. You may walk several miles in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan in winter without cutting a deer track. That’s because deer may travel miles each fall to reach ancestral yarding areas where they can find food and shelter to keep them alive through cold, snowy winters. Likewise, deer in regions that receive deep snow may actually move closer to towns in winter. Here, they often find abundant food in the form of backyard shrubs, as well as food placed in feeders by people who love to watch deer. Travel is also easier for deer in towns because of plowed roads and shoveled sidewalks. Deer can also escape predators such as wolves, which dare not venture into town. But unless you know these little nuances of your particular shedding areas, you may be wasting your time.

I encourage you to read this book, learn from it, and then spend as much time as possible in your local shedding grounds to see how the information in this book pertains to your specific area. I suspect convincing most shed hunters to get afield more often won’t be too hard. Good luck!





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The Science of Antlers: Pride Goeth Before the Fall

Antlers are unusual appendages. They are made of true bone, but strangely, they are the only bones that grow outside of an animal's body. What is their purpose, and how do they form? We'll probably never know the real reason deer grow antlers, although many scientists have put forth compelling theories. Due to their bifurcated, or branched, structure, it has been suggested that antlers were developed specifically for fighting, as the tines of opposing bucks engaged in battle would "catch," preventing bodily injury to the combatants. Certainly bucks use their antlers for fighting, and they do so quite effectively, but antlers serve other purposes. In fact, the very sight of a large set of antlers is enough to drive off an inferior buck before a skirmish ever begins. Antlers are secondary sex characteristics, and as such, a large set of antlers is a true advertisement of a buck's health and vigor. It takes approximately four years for a buck to reach its maximum body size. Once body growth is complete,

Although horns and antlers appear similar, structurally they are quite different. The horns of this bighorn sheep (top) are made of keratin and continue growing throughout the animal's life. The antlers of this white-tailed deer (bottom) are made of true bone and are cast annually.