

# WHEN BUCKS STRAY

by Gene Wensel

I recently got a question via email regarding the theory that yearling bucks are chased off by their mothers from the property where they were born, under the assumption it's nature's way of preventing inbreeding. Not a bad plan. It made me think again about whitetail buck personality traits. Although I'm not a trained wildlife biologist, I have a lot of field time under my belt and a few opinions about why and how deer move.

Disposition traits in deer are probably not all that different from many of those displayed in humans. All physical appearances aside, inherent but unique mannerisms and temperaments give various flavors to any buck's personality. A lot of these genetically formed tendencies are probably dependent upon the doe that rears the buck fawn(s). For that matter, I believe a big percentage of any offspring's genetics probably come from their mother. Aside from physical characteristics, I believe these mind-set, mood swing, and personality traits can result in lovers vs. fighters, curiosity vs. suspicion, runners vs. hiders, social vs. anti-social, passive vs. aggressive, or roamers vs. home bodies. Remarkable antlers characteristics, on the other hand, are purely physical attributes due to genetics, food, age and minimal stress.

Concerning the original question of does "chasing off" yearling bucks, I believe this actual "chasing off" stage lasts only a week or so. When a yearling gets old enough to be on his own, his mother instinctively shuns him. It doesn't take a young buck very long to realize he is, from that day forward, on his own. Many, if not most, probably want to be independent by then anyway. I also believe doe whitetails will tolerate their female fawns a lot longer, even for generations, often forming family groups that stay together for years except while they are rearing newborn. Yearling bucks, on the other hand, eventually grow old enough to instinctively roam to a new area, sometimes many miles away, to seemingly live their lives happily ever after. It is not coincidental that this occurs about the same time their male hormones start flowing. When that magic elixir testosterone kicks in at about the same time their mothers shun them, they pack their baggage, hit the trail, and seal the deal for a new home and new life elsewhere. *But you better believe a buck **never** forgets where he was born!*

I have been recently convinced almost every buck over two years old might have **two** home ranges. One is where they spend most of their adult life. The other is the area they are born and raised in during their first year or so. I now believe many, if not most, mature buck deer *return to their birth area annually* on a regular basis, even if those two core areas are many miles apart.

Since I started using digital trail cameras, I couldn't help but notice how many of the mature bucks I photographed dozens of times during August, September and early October would suddenly disappear for weeks at a time. It would be easy to speculate these deer "went

nocturnal” except for the fact our cameras are out there 24/7. If the missing bucks were in fact in the area, I feel strongly I would get regular (or at least occasional) photos of them. They obviously moved, or let’s say “temporarily left.” A second avenue of assumption would lead us to believe they were just “roaming,” or cruising far, checking on various doe groups, especially in areas of the country with lower deer density. This statement is partially correct, but I now believe they simply go back on occasion to the area they were born to check or visit that environment. I also wonder if this habit is often the cause of many buck fights? Did the “new” buck that suddenly showed up in an area actually live there long before his resident opponent moved in? Interesting food for thought!

I must give credit to my old friend Bobby Worthington for coming up with this seed of wisdom after a long conversation on this subject of roaming bucks. Bobby is writing a book that covers some of these same theories. He had hunted a big non-typical with very identifiable antler characteristics. The buck suddenly disappeared. At first, he suspected someone might have poached him. His trail cameras suddenly showed no evidence of the deer. Then one day, purely by chance, he spoke to a man who described a buck he saw just the night before crossing a road many miles from where Bobby was hunting. The description matched “Bobby’s” buck, so he set a trail camera near where the sighting took place. Within a very short time, he got a photo of the same buck he had been hunting many miles away! Within days, his cameras proved the buck was traveling back and forth many miles, too far and too regularly to be just “straying” or roaming.

I too recall many examples of disappearing bucks. I got trail camera photos of an identifiable big 4x4 with bent brow tines in mid-October last fall. Only two days later, I got a photo of the same buck over three miles away. I ended up getting a dozen pictures of him up to four miles away from where he spent September and early October. Half a dozen or more big bucks simply disappeared from my trail cameras in mid-October every autumn. I recalled my personal biggest buck disappeared from October 17<sup>th</sup> until November 17<sup>th</sup> , even with multiple trail cameras in places he frequented regularly during October.

In 2009, my brother and I homed in on a 4 ½ year old melanistic (black) buck that I initially passed up as a spikehorn three seasons earlier. Our trail cameras gave us over a dozen photos of this buck from August through October 15, 2009, when he suddenly vanished. I suspected he moved east into a huge area of standing corn but we later learned he was killed in November over a mile south of where he had been living earlier. We also found out he had been sighted far south on an annual basis. Could all these bucks just be “going home?”

I can’t help but think this would make a good thesis project for a wildlife biology college student working with collared bucks from known birth places. This sort of study would be much more revealing and accurate if done on wild bucks living outside of a high fenced enclosure. Ideally, these wild bucks would need to be tagged as fawns, later collared and then studied for several years in agricultural or “big woods” areas, not those utilizing regulated feeders.

This subject also makes me ask myself if wounded or sick bucks that travel many miles are in fact “going home” to die? Over the years, I remember hearing of examples of paunched

deer often traveling long distances in fairly straight lines as if they were headed somewhere specific. Many often ran out of gas before they got home. Is it the same with other species? Elephants are known to move very long distances from their core areas to die. Cow elk often move long distances to utilize established calving grounds dictated by sunny slopes, food, water and security. Wintering areas for caribou, deer and elk are also chosen for various reasons and are often utilized for many decades and generations of any given species. Yes, depth of snow, sunny slopes, wind patterns and available food are all vital factors in the attraction, but the bottom line is that the animals know to migrate these long distances instinctively. So do many species of birds.

Roaming over long distances often has to do with food sources, especially during late seasons. I'm annually frustrated when neighbors with food sources draw deer across boundary fences only to be taken with long range guns during late "primitive weapons" seasons. Many nice bucks I passed up with bow and arrow in hopes of giving them just one more year of growth are annually killed (legally) by neighbors who "talk the talk but don't walk the walk" of tagging "only mature deer." Use of food plots or standing row crops might help hold deer in many areas, but during the rut, sexual urges seem to overcome the security of staying local.

In my opinion, whitetail management has become too much of an industry with all the products and commercial interests involved. Deer hunting will always have people who don't really care about big antlers or fully mature deer. I have learned to live with that fact, but since I do care about mature deer, fate often catches up with bucks that roam.