



Photo by Jessica Brown Katzenmeyer

Outstanding IN THE FIELD

BEING A GOOD JUDGE CAN HELP YOU REACH DEER MANAGEMENT GOALS

By MDWFP

Many hunters are increasingly interested in deer management, and selective harvest strategies play a significant role in meeting their goals. To meet these goals it is critical for a hunter in the field to accurately recognize certain deer criteria, such as minimum age, minimum antler measurements, and gender. For example, if a hunter can tell the buck's approximate age based on certain physical characteristics, he or she can make clearer choices on whether to harvest the buck or let him grow.



Photo by Monita McCool

Does and fawns

Spotted fawns are easily distinguishable from adult does during early fall. However, by mid-fall, spots are shed and the coat turns brownish to grayish. Once the coat is replaced, hunters must rely on other physical and behavioral characteristics. For instance, a fawn's body and neck are smaller and more compact with a flatter back and belly compared to an adult doe. However, as fawns continue to grow throughout the hunting season, they are more easily mistaken for adult does. Hunters should consider these factors:

COLOR Tarsal coloration on the back legs can be a good indicator later in the season. An adult doe will show a moderate dark staining while fawns will not.

HEAD The fawn forehead and snout will be shorter than the adult doe. Buck fawns also have pedicles that are developing and are covered with hair, or have small antlers protruding. Additionally, a doe's head will be more rounded on top than a button-buck's head, which will appear flattened on top.

CONDUCT Behavior can also be used to distinguish between adult does and fawns. Fawns are more playful and naive than adult does. A buck fawn is often the first antlerless deer seen when hunting because he is less wary and more curious. If a lone deer appears to be a doe, it is usually a fawn or a yearling. When attempting to harvest an adult doe, wait until at least two deer are present. This allows for comparison of physical and behavioral characteristics between the animals.

Bucks

When trying to judge the age of a buck in the field you must look at body characteristics and minimize the use of antler features. No two bucks are the same, just like people, but you can usually quickly determine if one is young, middle-age, or

older. However, be aware that body characteristics can change during the year in relation to the rut. For example, a buck could lose 20-30% of its body mass following the rut.

Yearling bucks

A 1.5-year-old buck often resembles a doe with antlers. The antler spread will typically be inside the ears. A yearling buck will have thin hindquarters, a slender neck, long thin legs, and a small tarsal area. They are usually less cautious and might be in the vicinity of doe groups.

2.5-year-old bucks

Physical characteristics of a 2.5-year-old buck are similar to a yearling buck, such as having long, lanky legs and a small tarsal area. However, some neck swelling is present during the rut, the waist will be longer, and the hindquarters will be thicker. Antlers will typically be about 30-45% larger than a yearling.

3.5-year-old bucks

At this age, a buck's neck really begins to swell during the rut. However, there will be a distinct junction between the neck and shoulders, and the neck will typically connect in the middle of the chest. The waist will be higher than the chest with a taut back and stomach. The antlers will be about 10-30% larger than those of a 2.5-year-old buck, reaching about 70-80% of its maximum antler potential. Tarsal staining will also start to become much greater.

4.5-year-old bucks

A buck will have reached most of his adult body size at 4.5 years old. The neck will

be fully developed, blend into the shoulders, and connect almost to the bottom of the brisket. The waist will be as deep as the chest, and the back legs will have a large stained tarsal region. Antler size is approximately 90-95% of its maximum at this age.

Mature or prime bucks

At 5.5-7.5 years old, a buck will typically have a sagging belly. The neck and shoulders will form one big mass, blending into the bottom of the brisket. The legs will appear shorter than those of a younger buck. Bucks of this age also can have battle scars and a sagging jawline. Antler size will be at its peak.

Over-mature bucks

At 8.5+ years of age, physical characteristics of bucks begin to deteriorate. Neck muscularity will decrease, a potbelly will be present, and a swayed back will be apparent. Skin will be loosened as muscle tone is lost, and antler size will eventually begin to decline.

Using antler criteria with age

Accurately estimating the size and age of deer takes practice in the field. Antler criteria, such as minimum inside spread or main beam length, can be used without field aging to protect younger bucks. This can allow hunters during the early years of a management program to pass younger bucks and study physical characteristics of different age groups more easily. After hunters are experienced at field judging deer, age can be used as a harvest criteria. Use caution, however, because harvesting deer based on estimated age can result in mistakes.



YEARLINGS (1-YEAR OLD BUCKS)

- Thin neck, legs, torso, antlers, and hind quarters
- Antler spread inside the ears
- Small tarsal area
- Less cautious
- Could be in the vicinity of does
- "Doe with antlers"



2.5-YEAR-OLD BUCKS

- Limited neck swelling
- Slim shoulders
- Relatively thin, long waist
- Thicker hindquarters
- Long, lanky legs
- Small tarsal area
- 60% antler size



3.5-YEAR-OLD BUCKS

- Neck thick during rut
- Chest deeper than waist
- Chest larger than rump
- Taut back and stomach
- Slightly larger tarsal area
- 80% antler size

Body size – Seasonal changes

- Consider time of year (Pre-rut, Rut, Post-rut)
- Bucks lose 25% of their body mass during the rut

Body size – Behavior

When bucks posture to show dominance to another buck the hair will become erect, making them falsely look bigger and older than they actually are. Look for other indications of dominance posturing, such as the ears being laid back, their head down, and a stiff walk.

Field judging – Antler size

- The distance from ear-tip to ear-tip is typically 13-14 inches when the ears are in the semi-alert position.
- When the main beam extends past the eye, beam length is probably over 15 inches. If it extends to the end of the nose, the main beams are probably over 20 inches.

In order for a buck to reach his highest antler potential, he must be five years or older. Use body features and minimize use of antler features to determine age of a buck. No two bucks are the same, but, just like people, you can usually determine young, middle age, and older age groups.





4.5
years

4.5-YEAR-OLD BUCKS

- Neck fully muscled
- Neck blends into the shoulders
- Waistline as deep as the chest
- Legs proportionate to the body
- Increased tarsal staining
- 90% antler size



5.5
years

5.5-AND-OLDER BUCKS

- Neck and brisket appear as one
- Large chest and neck
- Legs appear shorter
- Increased tarsal area
- Sagging back, belly, and jawline
- Battle scars
- 100% antler size



6.5
years

OVER-MATURE BUCKS

- Loss of muscularity
- Pointed shoulders and hips
- Swayed back and potbelly
- Loose skin in the neck, head, and chest
- Decreased neck size
- Weathered look

Artwork based on illustrations by Ryan Orndorff



Photo by Monita McCool