

The TROPHY is in the Jawbone

Tim Teel, R.F., Lease Manager
& Wildlife Biologist,
Westervelt Wildlife Services

One hunter's trophy buck may not be a trophy to another hunter. Is it the father-son hunt, the first buck, the high scorer, or the 8 year old 6 point that finally falls? This day and time with social media and hunting shows that do not always represent what hunters are seeing in the woods give false expectations to new and young hunters. This can cause new hunters to lose interest quick or create a bad environment for recruiting new hunters into the sport. Sometimes we need to take a step back to remember what a trophy buck actually is and how we can continue to teach youngsters to appreciate the great resources we have in this state.

In Alabama, being able to harvest a mature buck is a feat in itself. Approximately 94% of land in Alabama is owned by private landowners who all have different ideas on how to manage the deer herd and use a variety of harvest restrictions. If a hunting club has 1,000 acres that they lease but have private landowners around them with a “if it’s brown it’s down mentality”, they will likely have a tough time managing for mature bucks. QDMA coined one of the best phrases for deer management with “Let him go so he can grow.” Harvesting bucks based solely on antler criteria versus age will limit the number of mature bucks you can ultimately grow and harvest. A club in the middle of a deer management cooperative will greatly increase their odds of harvesting a mature buck by using an age criteria of 4+ years of age and educating as many members and surrounding clubs/landowners as possible. A high fence is not needed to grow mature bucks on your hunting property as long as surrounding landowners and hunters are on the same page with your management program. There are many advantages with managing for mature bucks. Creating a buck age structure that has lots of mature bucks in it intensifies the rut and how much activity you see that is associated with it. However, you have to continue to keep shooting does to keep the adult sex ratio balanced also. The following stories are all great examples of mature bucks that were harvested on commercial timberland leases that are free range. None of these bucks would have been harvested without neighboring clubs and landowners practicing a sound deer management philosophy. All of the bucks are mature and as the old saying goes, “they didn’t get that big by being stupid.” With social media and hunters being obsessed with antler score, many times the first question asked to someone that harvested a nice buck is what it scored. The common theme is they are all mature bucks and the trophy is the jawbone. Many bucks are considered trophies because of the memories of the hunt or the milestone for the hunter and his/her mentor. The reason many of us hunt is the camaraderie, memories, and the chance to harvest a mature buck. The following stories are told by hunters with a passion for chasing the elusive, mature Alabama buck.

Skyscraper – Pickens County

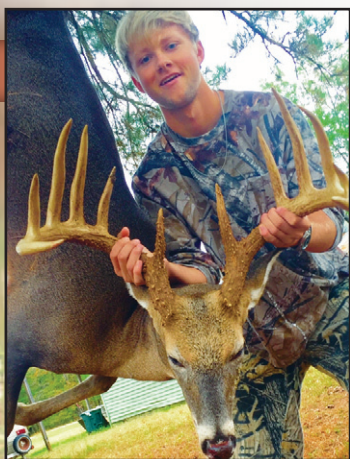
As the season pressed into January and the hunting pressure on our property increased, I started thinking about less obvious locations (sometimes hidden in plain sight). We had a greenfield surrounded by mature pines that had recently been clear cut. It looked barren but had cover from the adjacent swamp. The reason no one was going to this field is that it was in the main intersection on the property so there was a lot of traffic passing by. Who would think that a big buck would hang out here? This field was one of the three options I gave my son Henry to pick from. In sticking to our typical routine, he made the final call. “Let’s go to 8”, he said.

The day before we harvested him, we caught a glimpse of him on the same greenfield at last light. The wind was not favorable for the box stand on the field so we set up on a ridge line 250 yards away in a pop up blind. I knew that he was a solid buck but I did not want to be “that guy” with ground shrinkage. I wanted to be sure we were sticking to the club rules.

As you would expect, we were in the same place at the same time the next day only the wind was in our favor. We were sure to get in the stand extra early as well. With the light quickly fading and a sleeping kid across my lap, my hopes of seeing Skyscraper diminished. I woke Henry up and said, “let’s start to pack up. It doesn’t look like we are going to see him today.” I told him the same thing we have all told our kids when the hunt is settling out. “We have to wait until it gets dark. That’s when the big one could come out.” The only difference was this time the statement came true. We had very little activity and at last light the big 8 point made his move. He had been bedded with a doe on the edge of the greenfield in an unlikely small clump of clear cut debris. When he stepped out into a shaded corner at 165 yds, I wasn’t sure how good he was. I was staring through my binoculars with intensity, and then it happened. The two extra steps I needed to catch the right glimmer. The light unveiled what our club’s summer trail camera photos had been telling us. The beginning, middle, and hopefully the end of Skyscraper. My heart started to beat up into the base of my throat as I positioned my eye. Experience took over and the cross hairs steadied. The deal was sealed.

Henry and I had significant hours in various deer stands covering GA, TN, and AL. We hunted hard hours even for an adult, and we had an unfortunate miss in TN on a mature buck. This deer was one that we had earned together. When we found the 135” buck nicknamed Skyscraper in the cover of darkness, my 6 year old son, Henry, said “We’re back in business, Daddy!”

- B. Hartsfield



McCaleb Buck – Sumter County

When I walked to my stand on October 30th it was about 75 degrees, and I didn’t think I would see a deer. I climbed up in my tree stand around 3:30 that afternoon. I had been sitting down for about 15 mins when I heard something behind me. I turned and saw a huge rack walking straight towards my tree. Along with him were a couple smaller bucks. I immediately stood up and grabbed my bow and turned my attention to the big buck. I began to count his antler points and saw that he was a 12 point. He walked right under my tree eating acorns and got about 10 yards in front of my tree quartering away. I decided this would be the best shot I had. I let my arrow fly and I immediately could tell I had hit him. As soon as the deer ran off I was so shaken up I called my dad to tell him I had shot a monster.

- D. McCaleb

Dream Buck – Sumter County

My son Tre completed Baldwin County High School in 2012. As a parent you want to do something special for your kids after graduation. Unfortunately Tre was diagnosed with a severe case of Epilepsy at nine months old. Over the years, Tre would undergo various treatments and medication to reduce the amount of seizures he was having on a daily basis. In time and through the advancement in medication, the seizures became less frequent but it played toll on his body.

Tre is my little rain man that has a heart the size of Texas. He absolutely loves hunting and fishing and they are his only hobbies. Since Tre was two years old until present, we have enjoyed what God has given us - the great outdoors. So for graduation I asked Tre what he would like for his accomplishment. It was a very simple answer for Tre. He wanted us to join a hunting club so he could harvest a good buck. At the time, I had not been in a hunting club for a number of years due to my job and travel but it didn't stop us from hunting in the Mobile Delta. We have some fond memories hunting in the delta but its hard hunting and when you are caring for a son with a disability the cause for concern is high.

After Tre gave his wish, I started researching clubs and ran across a club in Sumter County, AL. The land was owned and managed by Westervelt. I was familiar with the area and remembered hunting with my dad many years ago in Sumter County. The area has a lot of deer and is known to produce big bucks. So I made the call and set the appointment for us to visit. The hunting club had membership dating back 30+ years. The members made me and my son feel welcomed. After we viewed the property, I let Tre make the decision to join or keep looking! Without hesitation, Tre said, "this is where I want to be dad".

This was our fourth season hunting together on Westervelt property. On January 16th at approximately 4:00 p.m., Tre and I were hunting in a clear cut as usual. We were watching a hillside through our binoculars and saw a buck running a few does. They were headed in our direction but after about thirty minutes I had spotted another buck to my right that was a good 2.5 year old buck. That young buck walked within 20 yards of us without a care in the world. I continued to watch until he disappeared over the next ridge. Then all of a sudden, I heard a "boom". I looked to my left and Tre with his orange toboggan bouncing on his head, fist pumping and hollering "thank you Jesus, thank you Jesus, I got him dad, I got me a big one" he said. I jumped up off the ground and knew right away the old buck I spotted the first time had made a mistake. We waited about 20 minutes and walked on down to the area where he shot and there the buck laid. I couldn't have won the lottery and gained the feeling that I felt at that very moment. My son who has had an uphill battle all his life had just killed his first buck. We held each other both with tears in our eyes and a joy that words cannot explain. We loaded the buck up and made our way back to camp. Once we pulled up all the hunting club members present came over and were more excited than we were about Tre's deer.

I am and will be eternally grateful to Westervelt and the members of my club. By allowing my family to be a part of their family, the organizations has given us the opportunity to make and share life long memories with each other. It's not always about killing deer or big bucks. That's just a bonus! What's important is quality time spent with each other in the environment God gave us.

- B. Sizemore



One thing we all have in common as deer hunters is the adrenaline rush when that mature buck steps into view and gives us a chance to provide venison for our families and create memories that last a lifetime. All hunters have different reasons that make a particular harvest a special memory, but one thing that we can all do to help the sport is manage for quality deer. Let's do our sport a favor and not get too caught up in what a deer scores and manage for quality deer. This will give all of us a better chance to make a lasting memory with friends and family! 🍷