



I saw a deer . . . with antlers!

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IT'S KIND of like Christmas. You know it is coming. Every February the Game Commission receives the same question. "I just saw a buck and he still had his antlers. Is it normal for a buck to be sporting antlers in late February?" The short answer is, yes.

I could end with that and be done, but, you critical thinkers and scientists out there are asking questions and searching for the truth. So, here it is. Antler growth is controlled by a variety of complex hormonal interactions that are "activated" by the environment; in this case, day length. Antlers begin growing when the days are lengthening, between the spring equinox and the summer solstice. Antlers take three to four months to grow and velvet is shed as the days are shortening, just before the fall equinox. You're thinking, this is all well and good but that's not telling me anything about when bucks shed their antlers.

After the breeding season, the level of testosterone (a key hormone in antler development and retention) drops off markedly and the bone-to-bone bond between the antler and the pedicle deteriorates. It is the most rapid deterioration of living tissue known. Once this bond weakens, both antlers can shed within minutes, hours, or perhaps days of one another. What's left is a bloody pedicle, which heals quickly.

Still, you're wondering why some bucks remain antlered well into February, March, or even April. The answer is as simple as every buck is different. Do all children have their first tooth by six months of age? Certainly not. There are lots of late bloomers out there, including myself. I didn't sprout a tooth until 12 months old.

While it is typical for most bucks in an area to shed their antlers within a month or so of one another, it doesn't mean all of them will. Each buck has an individual antler cycle that plays a role in when antlers are shed. Each buck's antler cycle is independent of all other bucks and is thought to be related to the animal's birth date. Once that magic day arrives and the bone-to-bone bond disintegrates, the much-coveted head gear falls away.

So there is no reason to panic if you spot a buck with antlers in early spring. He is just exercising his individuality.