

Life & Times of the

Whitetail



How old is that deer?

THIS IS a popular question around deer season. Often at processors and deer camps alike, you will hear phrases like, “Look at the rack, that buck must be four or five years old” or “That’s an old deer, look at how gray she is in the muzzle.” These observations, however, do not accurately reflect the age of a deer.

To accurately age a white-tailed deer, the best method is to pull a lower incisor, root attached, and send it to a laboratory for cross-sectioning. Many mammals, including deer, can be aged by staining teeth and counting the rings that appear, just like on a tree. This process of *measuring* a deer’s age takes time and money; therefore, in most cases, *estimating* a deer’s age is enough.

The age of white-tailed deer can be estimated by replacement patterns and tooth wear. Although antler size does increase with age, interactions between genetics and nutrition cause much variability in antler growth.

Up until about 10 months old, a deer has up to five teeth, premolars and molars, on each side of its lower jaw. Premolars are

replaced as a deer reaches adulthood. Molars are permanent. Jaws with five or fewer teeth (three premolars and two molars) are those of fawns.

Around the time a deer becomes a year old its third and final molar emerges, creating a row of six teeth per side. At the same time, the premolars are replaced. During this period a deer is considered a yearling.

After it has its full complement of adult teeth, the age of a deer is estimated by tooth wear. As a deer gets older, its teeth wear down from grinding food. Though wear patterns are generally predictable, they are influenced by the type of food eaten, soil types, injury and individual chewing patterns. Thus, a deer’s age cannot always be based on wear patterns alone.

For management purposes, the agency places deer into three age categories when collecting harvest data: 6 months (fawns), 18 months (yearlings), and 30-plus months (2½ years or older). Experienced deer agers may venture a guess beyond 2½ years but this is more of an art than a science. □

