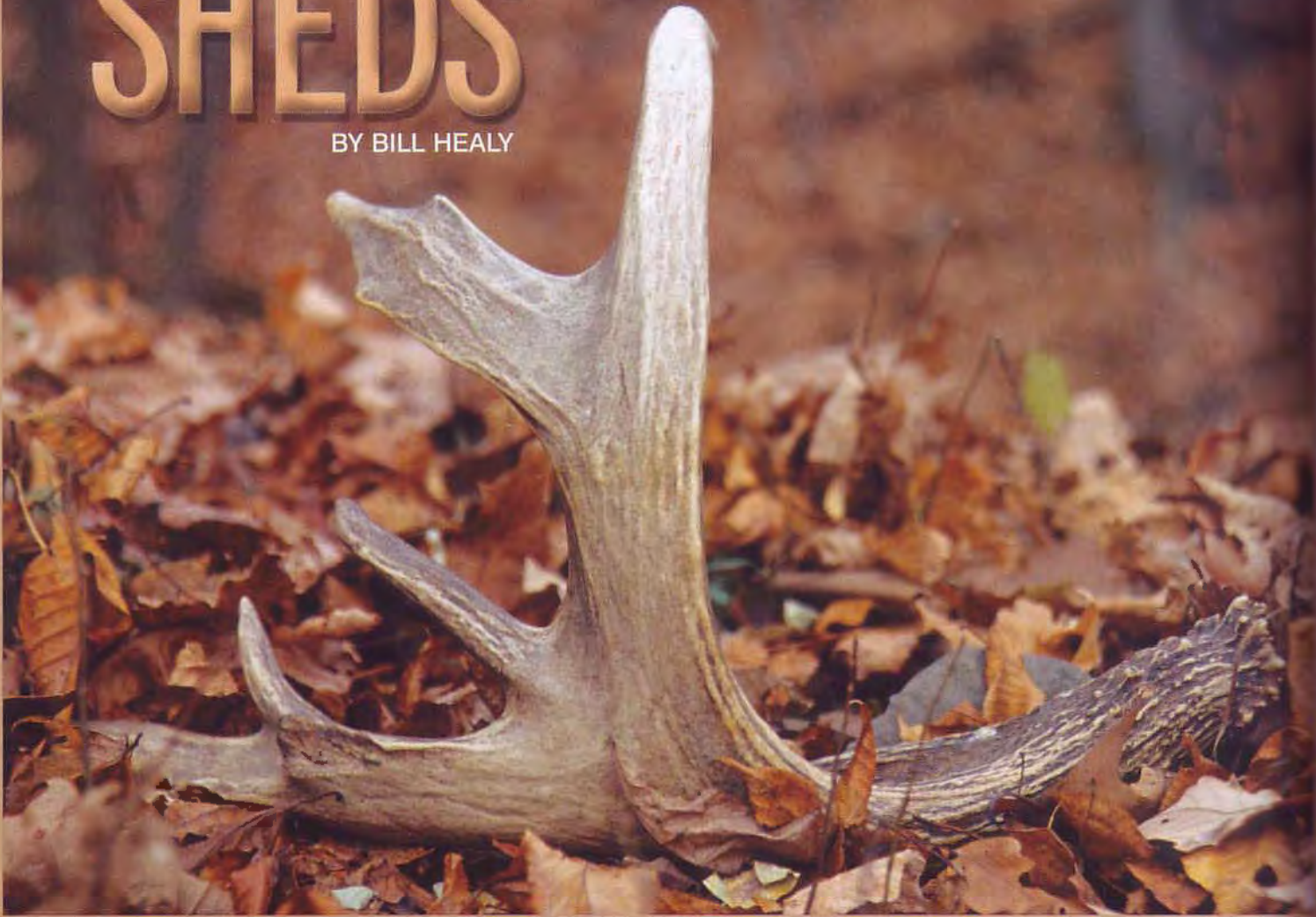


SEARCHING FOR SHEDS

BY BILL HEALY



Stumbling on a shed antler is always exciting.

Bonnie led me to my first shed antler. I was a graduate student at Penn State, studying the food habits of deer in Pennsylvania's Allegheny National Forest. Bonnie was a research subject—a tame, white-tailed doe. Bonnie was trained to wear a harness as I followed with a clipboard and stopwatch, recording what she ate and how long she spent eating each item. We were connected by a 20-foot rope just in case something frightened Bonnie.

The best time to look for sheds is in the late winter and early spring, after the snow has melted and before spring growth has started. The rains and snows have flattened the leaf litter and the trees and shrubs are bare, so shed antlers are most visible.

One spring day in 1965, while watching Bonnie feed, I nearly stepped on a shed antler. I shoved the antler into my back pocket, dropped my handkerchief to mark the spot, and continued observing Bonnie. Later, when Bonnie stopped actively feeding and started looking for a resting spot to chew her cud, I gently led her back to the pen. Now I could look for the other antler. It took about 20 minutes to find my handkerchief and just an instant to spot the second antler. It was hanging in a blackberry bush not two feet from where the first antler had been. "Wow!" I thought. "A matching 8-point rack." That experience started a lifelong hobby, and left me with the naive impression that it is easy to find a matching set of shed antlers.

I have spent many hours looking for the "other" antler since that first find. Finding pairs is rare, and if found, they will probably be lying side by side. Only twice have I found pairs of antlers that were not shed in the same place.



Sheds are more visible when the tines point down.

found antlers on my way back through an area just searched because I had a different angle of view. Wandering back and forth on deer trails works well. Keep looking, and keep thinking about deer antlers.

Search image

The key to finding sheds is to keep thinking about antlers. Look for white or ivory colored objects, especially white curved objects. Antlers that fall with the tines down are easiest to find because the main beam appears as a long white crescent rising several inches above the ground. When an antler falls with the tines pointing up, the main beam is on the ground and usually only the bleached tips of individual tines are obvious.

Looking for white specks will lead you to more bleached branches, bones, and stones than to antlers. A pair of binoculars will save a lot of walking to "faux antlers." I have found sheds by scanning the ground with binoculars, but I use them more often to look at the birds and beasts I encounter along the way.

If you hiked 10 miles and searched a 50-foot-wide strip, you would have covered just over 60 acres, or less than one-tenth of a square mile. That is not a large area in comparison to an adult buck's home range, so plan on a lot of walking if you expect to find many antlers. Even a large antler can be concealed from view by a small depression or log if it is more than a few feet from your line of travel. I have often

Timing is everything

The best time to look for sheds is in late winter and early spring, after the snow has melted and before spring growth has started. The rains and snows have flattened leaf litter and the trees and shrubs are bare, so shed antlers are most visible. Most bucks lose their antlers by the end of February, leaving a fresh supply of sheds that gnawing rodents will not have had much time to find.

The contrast between antler and background is greatest on overcast days. On bright sunny days, reflected light from branches makes it hard to see into thickets, and many bleached branches appear to be antlers. Shed antlers can be found in any habitat type from suburban backyard to mature forest. Look where you find deer sign, and the more deer sign the better.

Antler's fate

Rodents—mice, squirrels, and porcupines—gnaw on antlers to obtain minerals, and can completely consume them. In late February one year, I found what would have been a large set of antlers, but all that remained were the burrs and thin slivers of the main

beams that rested on the ground. A porcupine had eaten the rest. Antlers not found by rodents or people will be covered by leaves the next autumn. Some persist for many years, becoming porous and stained dark brown by decaying leaves.

Antlers have utilitarian values. They can be made into knife handles, buttons, coat racks, candlestick holders, and a variety of other craft items. Hunters use them to "rattle in" bucks, and many antlers are sold to Asian markets. But I don't look for antlers for any practical purpose. Shed hunting is good for the spirit, providing an opportunity to be outdoors and learn about wildlife.

Native New Yorker **Bill Healy** recently retired from a career with the U.S. Forest Service to a farm in rural West Virginia, where he hunts for shed antlers and the deer that grow them.



Antlers

By Dick Henry

Antlers have played a mythical and magical role in our culture since the days of primitive man. Early man found a variety of uses for antlers including tools, weapons, ornaments and ceremonial implements. Unlike true "horns," which grow throughout the life of the animal, antlers are shed and replaced every year.

The annual cycle of antler growth begins in the spring. Increasing day length heralds the coming of summer and greater availability of food—components needed for antler development. The rate of antler growth reaches its peak in mid-summer and by the end of August, antlers have reached their maximum

size. The "velvet" found on the antler during growth begins peeling in late summer as the daylight fades and the presence of testosterone increases. By the middle of September, the antler is a hardened, sharpened bone.

Antlers serve to establish dominance among bucks during the breeding season. At the end of the breeding season, declining levels of testosterone cause the antler to separate from its base or pedicel and the antler is shed. Skin soon regrows over the pedicel and the cycle is complete for another year.

Contrary to popular belief, the number of points on an antler does not correlate to the age of the buck. Fawns in northern latitudes rarely attain a body size that allows them to grow little more than polished knobs for their initial antlers. The first significant antler development in New York white-tails occurs when they are yearlings and usually amounts to single spikes or perhaps a small "basket" rack. A buck's antlers will increase in size each year until he is about 6½ years old. After that, antler mass generally begins to decline. Although usually found only on males, female white-tailed deer will occasionally produce a set of antlers. Misshapen or oddly formed antlers are usually the result of an injury sustained during the antler growing period.

For more information about New York's deer herd, see "White-tailed Deer" on page 15 of the October 2002 issue. For more information on sheds, see "Antlers: Winter is a Good Time for Collecting Sheds" on page 28 of the December 1997 issue.