



Shedding Light on Antler Collecting





Participants say it's fun, fulfilling, and potentially lucrative.



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But could “horn hunting” also be harming the very animals that produce this highly coveted treasure? >>>

By Tom Dickson

OPENING DAY AT SUN RIVER WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA BY CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM



It's a few minutes before noon on a mid-May Sunday at the Sun River Wildlife Management Area, and several dozen riders and their horses are chomping at the bit.

The riders have been waiting several hours, along with more than 200 others, for the chance to find a shed deer or elk antler on the 20,000-acre winter range, located at the base of the Rocky Mountain Front west of Choteau. For more than a mile, vehicles line the dusty road into the WMA's south entrance. Also known as horn hunters (though they don't actually find horns), the antler collectors are in a festive mood, talking excitedly as they scan distant hills for a tine sticking up from the spring grasses. Some riders don traditional western gear, complete with black cowboy hats and fringed leather chaps. Others sit on ATVs. Most are on foot. A county sheriff patrols the road while an FWP game warden rides his horse along the foothills, keeping everyone honest.

Then, exactly at noon, a warden opens the gate and the crowd rushes into the wildlife area. One rider, a 20-year-old college student from Whitehall, spurs her horse and races for an antler she had spotted earlier from the road.

Across Montana and the country, spring marks the arrival of migrating waterfowl, emerging morels, and, for a growing number of enthusiasts, the appearance of elk, moose, and deer antlers (called "sheds") discarded a few months earlier by their male owners.

Some shed hunters say looking for antlers is like an Easter egg hunt for adults, a way to



JEFF HENRY

UP FOR GRABS Antler hunting proponents point out that even kids can stumble upon a shed treasure. Looking to purchase such finds are commercial buyers, such as those that set up buying stations in Paradise Valley (above).

JEFFREY RICH

take part in a traditional spring outing. Others try to enhance their collections, looking for particularly big antlers or the highly prized matched pair. Many hunters look for sheds to learn more about the bulls and bucks they may have seen the previous fall but didn't get. And then there are those doing it for the money. They sell their finds to antler brokers, who in turn sell the bone to Asian markets and local craftsmen.

So popular has the sport become across the United States that some kennels train and sell dogs that find and even retrieve shed antlers in the wild.

Antler hunting's growing appeal concerns some wildlife and enforcement officials. They point to increasing problems with shed hunters entering off-limit areas and harassing elk at a time of year when the animals may be weak. "Early spring is when ungulates are at their lowest physical condition of the year," says Tom Carlsen, FWP wildlife biologist in Townsend. "Unfortunately, that's right during some of the most intense antler gathering activity."

Family fun

"We urge our members not to bother the animals too early in the season," says Mark Miller, co-president of the Wisconsin-based North American Shed Hunters Club. "And we also promote shed hunting on foot. You cover more ground on an ATV, but you also miss more sheds."

Miller says shed hunting has been growing steadily since his club was founded in 1991.



HALFWAY GONE? During harsh winters, elk and deer can be weak and vulnerable when they finally drop their antlers. Some wildlife officials worry the animals can be stressed by overeager shed hunters.

The Las Vegas of Antler Action

The world's biggest antler collecting and buying event is Wyoming's Jackson Hole Boy Scout Elk Antler Auction, which is conducted each year the third weekend of May. Only the Boy Scouts may collect shed antlers from the several thousand elk wintering on the nearby National



Elk Refuge. Roughly 10,000 pounds of antlers are auctioned off in downtown Jackson to bidders from around the world. (Some sheds are also used to repair the famous antler arches surrounding the town square.) The scout troop keeps 20 percent of the proceeds and donates the rest back to the refuge. "We use the money to irrigate fields of native grass that elk feed on in the winter," says refuge manager Barry Reiswig. "It's an unusual arrangement, but it seems to work pretty well here."

"It appeals to both hunters and nonhunters, and everyone can do it," he says. "It's a way to enjoy the outdoors in the spring, and kids especially like it."

Thomas Baumeister, chief of FWP's Education Bureau, calls antler hunting a "very democratic" activity. "Even a kid can stumble upon a huge elk shed," he says.

Many shed collectors, says Miller, are hunters who look for antlers to learn more about their quarry's age and range.

"When you find a shed antler, you get a history of the deer," he says. "It indicates where the animal has been and shows that he's still out there and didn't get harvested the previous fall—and that he's growing bigger antlers than the one you're holding."

Baumeister, an avid antler collector, says shed hunting satisfies him the same way hunting does. "And it's inexpensive, you can do it in the spring, and there's always the potential of finding a truly big antler," he says.

Miller, who also hunts mule deer and collects antlers in eastern Montana, says a shed

hunter's ultimate goal is to find a matched set from the same deer or elk.

"That can be as hard and rewarding as shooting a big buck or bull," he says.

It can also be potentially lucrative. Though most shed collectors are just hoping to find something to adorn the fireplace mantle, some are in it to make a profit. With top-grade (newly shed) antlers selling for roughly \$10 a pound, and a single elk shed weighing in at 10 to 15 pounds, a lucky shed hunter in a prime area can make several hundred dollars for a few hours' work.

Don Schaufler of Ennis is the largest antler dealer in North America. Last year his Antlers Unlimited business sold more than 100 tons nationwide. Schaufler says the antler market is greatest in Asia, where sheds are ground to powder and used for medicinal purposes (though not as so-called aphrodisiacs, which come from antlers in summer velvet sawed off living, farmed cervids). A fast-growing market in this country has been among artisans. They use antlers to make knife handles, cabinet knobs, furniture, and the massive chandeliers hanging in resort lobbies and log mansion living rooms.

Some concerns

The growing demand for antlers has some wildlife and enforcement officials worried that overaggressive shed hunters could harm

wildlife. In winter, says Gayle Joslin, FWP wildlife biologist in Helena, deer and elk lose body fat because they can't consume and conserve enough calories. When possible, the cervids bed down in sunny spots to reduce energy loss due to cold temperatures, deep snow, and limited food.

Whether afoot, on horseback, or riding ATVs, antler collectors can spook elk and deer, causing the animals to expend precious energy. Though there's no concrete evidence proving that shed hunters cause elk or deer mortality, "some research shows that elk calves have a lower survival rate when born of cows that lose too much of their body weight over winter," says Carlsen, the Townsend biologist.

Technically, sheds are not considered wildlife, so state and federal agencies have no jurisdiction over their harvest or sale. But they can control access to some public lands where wintering deer and elk concentrate. Though national forests are open year-round to shed hunting, national parks do not allow collecting at any time. And to protect elk during their vulnerable period, FWP pro-

hibits access to the Blackfoot-Clearwater, Beartooth, and several other big game wildlife management areas until May 15. Sun River opens at noon that day; the others open at midnight. (However, FWP opens a few WMAs near Yellowstone National Park on May 1 to move elk off the winter range, where they can overgraze forage, and back into the the park.)



JEFF HENRY

NOT YET FWP delays opening many WMAs to protect late-winter elk.

Some antler hunters won't wait that long. One year in the mid-1990s, a warden marked 77 antlers and placed them around the Dome Mountain WMA between Gardiner and Livingston. When the area officially opened a few months later, more than half had already been picked up illegally.

FWP game warden Bryan Golie of Cascade says he and other wardens enforce the antler hunting openers on state WMAs to provide equitable opportunities.

"These are the public's game ranges and the public's elk," he says. "It's just not fair to the other people who follow the rules and wait until the legal opening date for someone else to sneak out there and steal antlers ahead of time."

No easy pickin's

It's mid-afternoon back at the Sun River WMA, and dozens of horn hunters have returned to their vehicles. Baumeister, the FWP education chief, has just come down from the surrounding hills with his four-year-old son, Alexander. Last year, the pair were lucky to find a winterkilled elk skull with antlers attached. This year, however, they came up blank. "But that's part of what's so neat about antler hunting," Baumeister says. "There's a challenge here of beating the odds, of expending time and energy to find something of personal value."

Mark Schlepp, manager of the nearby Freezout Wildlife Management Area, stands at a check station measuring, counting, and weighing antlers. He says this opener at Sun River was a bit below average, with about one hunter in five finding an elk or mule deer shed.

"On a good year, it's about one in three," Schlepp says. "But this year, the lack of snow kept elk farther up into the mountains. Most of the bulls stayed back there all winter."

Which makes those who did locate sheds today all the more proud of their finds. As the Whitehall college student rides past on horseback, a beefy 16-pound elk antler in her lap, she announces, "This one is going in the living room." 🐻

Find antlers without bothering their previous owners

When: Wildlife officials urge antler hunters to wait until mid-May to keep weakened elk and deer from being bothered. Many big game wildlife management areas don't open until midnight May 15 (noon on the Sun River WMA).

Where: You can find deer or elk sheds where bucks and bulls hung out when they dropped their antlers, which for deer begins in January and for elk begins in March.

Expert antler collectors comb known wintering areas, such as south- or southwest-facing low-elevation slopes and the bottoms of large valleys with little snow. (Elk and deer avoid deep snow, which covers food and causes the animals to burn up energy when walking.)

In early spring, elk and deer slowly move up into forested areas, following the receding snow line and feeding on newly sprouted vegetation. Bulls and bucks lose their antlers along fences, in bedding areas and brushy areas, and while bumping boulders as they lick sand for minerals. The animals feed and

bed on south-facing hillsides during the day and move to north-facing woods at night.

How: There aren't many tricks to antler hunting, which is why even kids can find sheds. Many collectors go to high vantage points and scan the ground with binoculars, looking for telltale tines (which are often not off-white, as you might expect, but brown). Jim Phillips of Three Forks, who has found more than 14,000 sheds since he began searching as a boy in 1958, says his secret is to cover a lot of territory and keep his eyes on the ground. "I'll walk 12 miles a day looking all over the place," he says. "I can't tell you how many times I've found antlers where other shed hunters—good shed hunters—have already been."

Word of warning: Phillips adds that shed hunting can be addictive, and that it can also impede hunting success. "During hunting season, I don't see many deer anymore," he says. "I'm always looking down at the ground."