



# COVETING THE CROWN

What explains the desire to hunt and possess trophy elk and deer? **BY TOM DICKSON**

**L**ike many hunters, I've always wanted to shoot a big buck and hang its skull and antlers in my office. The thing is, I don't know why.

In fact, I'm not sure why any hunter desires to kill a large-antlered deer or elk and then, after processing the meat, nail the head to a wall. If you don't hunt, pursuing trophies might seem odd, if not repulsive. And if you do, it might be worth considering why so many hunters will crowd around a pickup oohing and aahing over a particularly large bull or buck. After all, we don't behave the same way when gazing at wide-branched trees.

Opinions on why hunters prize oversized racks vary as much as the antlers themselves. The same is true for whether the growing interest in trophies is good or bad for hunting. Many hunters view the pursuit as a noble endeavor upon which North American wildlife conservation was founded. They maintain that trophy hunting represents the pinnacle of hunting achievement, the highest tribute they can pay to big game animals. Yet others point out that the antler scoring system has created intense competition, reducing hunting to little more than golf with weapons. It can lead to addiction and poaching, they argue. And it degrades the hunter's image in the eyes of the nonhunting majority.

Hard as it might be to believe, they're all correct.

**TAKING POSSESSION** A successful hunter appears to wear an elk's massive antlers as he packs out the trophy from Montana's Gallatin Range. Hunters have long been fascinated by antlers, including "nontypical" racks such as the one on the famous Hole in the Horn Buck, found dead in 1940 in Ohio, tangled in a chain-link fence.



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**ABOVE THE STONE AGE FIREPLACE**

Humans have been gawking at big-antlered cervids for thousands of years. Caves at Lascaux and Chauvet in southern France are adorned with images of large-antlered red deer and Irish elk painted by Stone Age hunters 12,000 to 40,000 years ago. Since ancient times, deer in Asia have been hunted for what are still thought to be the antlers' aphrodisiac and other medicinal effects. From the 14th to 16th centuries, European nobles "went bonkers for huge antlers," says Valerius Geist, professor emeritus at the University of Calgary and an international authority on deer and elk. Geist says titled aristocrats lined their manor halls with mounts of massive red deer stags to reflect their property's fecundity. "Trophy deer were an expression of the quality of their land, the ability of a lord to produce something exceptional," he says.



ANAL GALLERY, LASCAUX CAVE, BY LABOGRANURE A BORDEAUX

**ANCIENT INTEREST** An Irish elk painted 17,000 years ago in a cave at Lascaux, France, is the most famous relic of humans' early fascination with antlers. That interest grew in the Middle Ages, as European nobles used antlers to show off their land's fertility. Below: The Hall of Hunting at Vajdahunyad Castle in Budapest, Hungary.

The first comprehensive big game records were published by the British taxidermy firm Rowland Ward, Ltd., in London in 1892. The Boone and Crockett Club (B&C), founded by Theodore Roosevelt and a small group of hunting friends, created a scoring system and began keeping records in 1906. The club's goals were to draw attention to the dwindling number of big game species decimated by market hunting and, if a species went extinct, preserve biological data of the largest specimens for future generations. In the 1950s the club released a revised scoring system of measuring key skull, antler, and horn dimensions that is still used today.



CURIOUSEXPEDITIONS.ORG

For decades trophies were pursued mainly by wealthy sportsmen or hunters hired by scientific organizations such as the New York Zoological Society's National Museum of Heads and Horns. During much of the 20th century, big game populations in the United States had yet to recover, so it was an achievement for a regular hunter to kill *any* deer or elk, much less a trophy. Sporting literature in the 1950s and '60s emphasized woodsman-ship and adventure, not record book entries.

As big game populations grew under modern wildlife management, hunters had more opportunities to pass up small bucks and bulls, knowing they would have chances at larger specimens later in the season. At the same time, eastern and midwestern suburbs expanded into forests, and more western ranches closed public access, creating vast new refuges where deer and elk could escape general hunting pressure and grow large racks. In western states like Montana, wildlife biologists managed some areas for larger bucks and bulls using limited entry regulations. Hunters who gained access to areas off-limits to their competition re-

turned home with trophies exceeding their grandfathers' wildest dreams.

Starting in the 1970s, deer expositions such as state and regional "Buckaramas" began popping up in response to hunter demand to view the nation's growing number of large-antlered trophies. Also increasing was the number of hunters wanting to see their name in "the book"—the B&C records maintained at the club's headquarters in

Missoula, Montana, or those kept by the Minnesota-based Pope and Young Club for trophies taken with bow and arrow. By the 1990s, a booming industry in instructional videos and, later, DVDs promised hunters that by following the advice laid out in productions such as "Muley Madness" and "Incredibulls," they could soon be kneeling next to a trophy of a lifetime. Thick catalogs selling calls, blinds, stands, packs, bows, and other gear began arriving in the mail, offering hunters an edge over the competition. The combination of more information, better gear, and booming big game populations sent trophy entries soaring. Between 1830 and 1959, a total of 113 North American elk were entered in the B&C record books; in the

**Call it "antler envy" (though that doesn't explain why some women covet antlers).**

single decade of 2000 to 2010, the club entered 573 bulls. Pope and Young entries for whitetail bucks have skyrocketed, increasing 40-fold from the 1970s to the 2000s.

**WHAT'S THE APPEAL?**

Hunters

aren't the only ones ogling antlers; just look at the crowds photographing large bulls in Yellowstone National Park. Few people don't appreciate the intrinsic beauty and symmetry of antlers or marvel at unique forms created by drooping tines, mooselike palmations, and abnormally wide spreads. Antlers are also admired for their uniqueness, each possessing its own color, size, and architecture. "Antlers captivate us because they exist in part to awe and convey vitality and strength," explains Jacob Edson, managing editor of *Deer and Deer Hunting* magazine.

Though people have been admiring them for millennia, the purpose of antlers is still not fully understood. Because it takes enormous energy to grow and then carry antlers each year, the structures no doubt provide some evolutionary advantage. In *Deer Antlers: Regeneration, Function, and Evolution*, biologist Richard Goss writes that bucks and bulls use their antlers to advertise fitness to each other and females. But "their ultimate purpose," he adds, "is to enable competing males to test each other's dominance in battle." After facing off, similar-sized males lock antlers and engage in a cervid version of arm wrestling, in which the heavier and stronger animal repeatedly pushes his opponent backward. Bulls and bucks use their antlers also as weapons against each other. Studies have found punctures in the animals' throat, chest, and belly, along with mortal wounds such as perforated lungs and herniated intestines.

It's one thing to admire the gleaming antlers on a big buck or deer. But why do hunters want to shoot the animal? Maybe it's a way for some of us to assert our manhood in a competition of virility. Call it "antler envy" (though that doesn't explain why some women covet antlers as much as any testosterone-fueled fellow). A less Freudian explanation comes from a study in the Midwest. It found that hunters begin chasing trophies as a natural progression from taking smaller, more abundant specimens. "I'd shot so many deer I had nothing left to prove to myself or others," writes John Wooters in *Hunting Trophy Deer*. "The challenge and the throat-squeezing excitement were gone." Some hunters say they enjoy the additional planning, research, aerobic training, and scouting that trophy hunting

**MONTANA MONSTER** Documentation for Wayne Estep's 395½-point Silver Bow County bull, which won the Boone and Crockett Club's 1967 competition. Since the early 1900s, the club's system of measuring key antler dimensions has been the standard used to judge and compare trophy deer and elk.

**OFFICIAL SCORING SYSTEM FOR NORTH AMERICAN BIG GAME TROPHIES**  
**RECORDS OF NORTH AMERICAN BIG GAME COMMITTEE**  
**BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB**  
 Boone and Crockett Club  
 Records of North American Big Game Committee  
 c/o Carnegie Museum  
 4400 Forbes Ave. Pittsburgh, Pa. 15213

*Called in 1/15/68 11000*  
*Parrot*  
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*Tag # 57*

**WAPITI**

SEE OTHER SIDE FOR INSTRUCTIONS

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 Column 4 417 10/8 Address Butte, Montana

TOTAL 21 6/8 Guide's Name and Address  
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often requires. Others do it to extend their time afield. “If I shot the first mule deer buck I saw, I’d be done the first morning of the trip,” says Steve Rinella, host of Travel Channel’s *The Wild Within*. “By holding out for a large representative specimen, I’m able to prolong my trip.”

Interestingly, trophies are not a top priority of most hunters. In surveys, they say they hunt foremost to be part of nature, enjoy time outdoors with friends and family, and harvest meat. Yet most hunters also tell researchers that, if given the chance, they would shoot a large-racked bull or buck and put it on display.

It’s no surprise hunters want to exhibit souvenirs of extraordinary achievements or experiences. People regularly show off what makes them proud—from quilts at county fairs to photos of grandkids on Facebook. Conservation author John Madson wrote that “trophy antlers recapitulate an intense moment of living.” To Geist, trophies are “tangible, artful reminders of all that’s involved in a true and honorable hunt.” Ken Hamlin, retired Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks elk research biologist, suspects that hunters display their trophy to show off something rare they’ve acquired. “It’s like having the scarce stamp or rare coin—a status symbol,” he says.

In *Heart Shots*, her book on women who hunt, Mary Zeiss Stange describes a mounted trophy as “a symbol of the hunt itself: the memory, the story, the lesson learned about one’s relationship with the world beyond the merely human. It is also a testimony to the fact that hunting, good hunting anyway, is inevitably hard work.”

## A trophy that would require most hunters a lifetime to acquire now can be shot in an afternoon.

### SHOWING—OR SHOWING OFF?

To deer hunting historian Robert Wegner, a trophy on the wall “pays noble tribute to the animal. It honors the animal.” But for many hunters, the display is meant to convey as much about themselves as it does the deer or elk. It proclaims: “This hunter possesses the extraordinary skills required to take such a rare specimen.”

Yet a trophy can be acquired many ways, not all of them requiring strong legs, sharp eyes, and insight into the ways of the animal world. The hunter may have been lucky. Or have connections—like an aunt who owns a ranch closed to everyone but family. Many trophies are taken by those wealthy enough to afford top-notch guiding services. The professional actually hunts the stag while the client only pulls the trigger. There’s nothing wrong with that, but what does that trophy signify when compared to one taken by a hunter who spends five days solo in a backcountry wilderness?

In some circles, how a trophy was acquired is beside the point. All that matters

are size and score. Scientists in some states are now breeding deer to create monster bucks sporting misshapen, multi-tined antlers that Geist calls “cancer between the ears” and others deride as “horn porn.” These pampered bucks raised in pens on cattle feed grow antlers with B&C scores higher than a trophy bull elk’s. Videos of one named Sudden Impact, a monster buck that scores more than 500 points, show the deer struggling to hold its head up under the weight of a sprawling antler formation. It and other freakish farmed bucks produce semen that is bought by other deer ranchers, who in turn raise their own top-heavy white-tails to be sold and traded like prized Angus.

Added to this abnormal animal husbandry is the practice of “hunting” pen-reared or fence-enclosed trophy deer and elk. A trophy that would require most hunters a lifetime to acquire now can be shot in an afternoon. Guaranteed “high fence” hunts for bull elk scoring 370 to 390 B&C points cost \$10,000 in Colorado and Saskatchewan. And for \$21,500 hunters can shoot, over bait, what one Louisiana deer preserve calls a “Lifetime Super Monster Buck” scoring 280 B&C points. (B&C officials say the organization doesn’t recognize entries for live animals or big game killed on high-fenced ranches. It also “strongly disapproves” of its scoring system being used by farms and shooting preserves.)

Some antler fans bag their trophy with a credit card rather than a firearm. Reproductions of record book antlers cost up to \$5,000 and can be mounted by taxidermists on any bull or buck head. The genuine article runs much more. The Jordan Buck, for decades the world record whitetail, fetched \$250,000,

# Growing Big Racks

Three things determine the size of antlers: nutrition, genetics, and, most important, age. (For information on a controversial fourth factor—rut avoidance—see “The Lazy Stag” on page 17.)

Nutrition refers to the amount, quality, and proportion of protein, carbs, fat, vitamins, and minerals a buck or bull ingests in its lifetime. Some areas of North America have more nutrition in the soil and vegetation—based on climate, geology, and amount of agricultural land. That boosts antler size and development.

Some deer and elk have more genetic potential to grow larger antlers than others. When pen-reared, these bucks and bulls can be bred like cattle for desirable antler size. But doing that in the wild has proved impossible.

No matter how abundant the nutrition and impressive the genes, a buck or bull in the wild can’t grow what hunters consider trophy antlers unless it lives long enough to reach maturity—roughly five to eight years for deer and seven to ten for elk. This occurs naturally in areas inaccessible to hunters or difficult to reach, such as national parks, suburbs, some private lands, and rugged mountainous areas like the Rocky Mountain Front. For areas open and accessible to public hunting, additional restrictions are required to produce more older deer and elk.

To protect young bucks from harvest, some states have established antler restrictions, such as making it illegal to shoot bucks with fewer than four points on one side. The restrictions have not worked as planned. They are hard for hunters to obey and put additional hunting pressure on middle-aged bucks that still haven’t reached maturity.

A more effective way is to restrict hunter numbers. That’s how Montana grows older bulls in the Elkhorns, Missouri Breaks, and Bears Paw Mountains and boosts deer antler size in other areas. Limiting hunter numbers—usually through lotteries—is also how Utah, Colorado, and other western states create areas with more mature deer and elk.

There’s a price to pay for producing top-heavy trophies. Limited



**EASIER SAID THAN DONE** The most important factor for producing big antlers is allowing bucks and bulls to survive long enough to reach maturity.

entry means some hunters rarely get a chance to hunt those hunting districts. And it puts additional pressure on areas that don’t restrict hunter numbers. Point minimums and other antler restrictions require many hunters to forgo killing smaller bucks or bulls they would otherwise take.

Some hunters say they would gladly pass up smaller bulls or bucks in exchange for more opportunities to shoot larger ones. But many hunters would not, and say such restrictions cater to a minority of trophy hunters to the detriment of the rest.

Elk and deer hunters across the country continue to debate the issue.

while Bass Pro Shops reportedly spent millions on its King of Bucks collection of more than 200 of the world’s largest deer trophies.

### PUBLIC DISAPPROVAL

While some see all the money, hoopla, and weird science as harmless entertainment, others find the growing antlermania a troubling trend. Wegner fears that an overemphasis on trophies could erode public acceptance for hunting. “Most people don’t approve of killing an animal just to put it on the wall,” he says. Studies have shown that only 15 percent of nonhunters disapprove of hunting if the main reason is to procure meat. But 85 percent disapprove when a trophy is the primary goal. Clay Scott, a big

game hunter in Helena, understands that attitude. “Instead of celebrating the hunt, some hunters only celebrate the trophy,” he says. “It’s as if the animal is supposed to reflect some image they have of themselves.”

As with other fixations, antler obsession can turn sour. *Field & Stream* editor Anthony Licata writes, “When bucks become just another way to keep score and to feed an ego, people become tempted to cut ethical corners.” Or worse. Jim Kropp, chief of enforcement for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, says the combination of greed and self-admiration has fueled a poaching problem throughout the West. He cites cases where poachers kill trophy animals—often at night—hack off the head, and leave the

rest to rot. “When people have to have antlers at any cost, that’s where we see the illegal behavior,” Kropp says.

Others worry that the growing craze for big antlers is reducing public hunting access, resulting in fewer advocates for wildlife. “When deer are reduced to a hot commodity to be bought, regular guys can wind up priced out,” writes Licata. Keith McCaffery, retired Wisconsin wildlife research biologist, says that as private landowners sell the rights to hunt big bucks for big sums, “we’re facing the loss of hunting opportunity, a loss of hunters, and a loss of a political base of conservation.”

Whether or not you agree that antlermania sullies wildlife conservation, there’s no

### TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING?

Antlermania has fueled a deer farming industry that produces massive bucks, such as one named Goliath (far right), with racks larger than those on mature wild elk. Antler obsession has also spawned industries in instructional DVDs, identity labels, and other materials catering to the growing number of self-described “addicts.”







**TRANSFER OF POWER** Does the desire to hunt and display trophies come from a longing to possess the animal's power and majesty? To own bragging rights over other hunters? Or is it, as the ecological philosopher Paul Shepard wrote, simply "part of a tradition of venerating the animal"? As the nonhunting majority continues to frown upon trophies, hunters may need to do a better job of explaining why it's so important to them to possess and display exceptionally large antlers of deer and elk.

denying the allure that trophy bucks and bulls continue to hold for many hunters. What accounts for that attraction remains a mystery. For me, shooting a big buck may come from a desire to possess the animal's majesty. A part of me believes that by killing a big deer I'll obtain his power and grace and be welcomed into the natural world. Of course, that's nonsense. With the stag dead at my feet, I remain unchanged—slow, clumsy, forever a noisy intruder in the forest. That may be why I want to retain and display the trophy: to remind myself of how close I came to becoming—if only in my imagination—that thrilling, marvelous creature. I can't possess his essence, but at least

I can own some glorious part of him.

In the end, those of us bit by the trophy bug could learn something from the animals themselves, who seem far less attached to their antlers. At winter's end, after putting so much energy into producing these splendid accessories the previous summer, male deer and elk "jettison their debt," writes author Rick Bass in his essay "Antlers." With rutting season done and the coldest weather behind them, bucks and bulls finally relinquish their crowns. The gleaming structures drop off, like leaves from a tree. Writes Bass, "The richness of the antlers, the extravagance of them, cannot be sustained." ■



JEFF SATTLER



**A CENTURY OF RECORDS**

The world's most famous trophy elk and deer—including the DeWeese Bull, the Mercer Bull, and Basil Dailey's legendary 1903 whitetail—are featured in two new books recently issued by the Boone and Crockett Club. The volumes include vintage photos and memorabilia from the club's historical archives. Learn more at [booneandcrockettclub.com](http://booneandcrockettclub.com).



RICHARD G. TRAHAN

**FERDINAND THE BULL** Wake up, it's time to fight.

# The Lazy Stag

If Valerius Geist is right, the mighty buck or bull I hope to display someday on my wall might not be the battle-scarred warrior he's supposed to be.

Geist, one of the world's foremost experts on deer and elk, maintains that the very biggest antlers are often grown by what he calls a "shirker" buck or bull. "This is the very rare fellow who, most likely from cowardice, shirks his biological duty by not participating in the rut," Geist says. "He can then put all his energy into growing exceptionally massive antlers. I think that most world-record antlers are probably produced by shirkers."

The theory, dismissed by many other biologists, came to Geist after spending decades observing cervids in North America and Europe. He tells of one mule deer buck he followed over several years. The deer was badly beaten in a fight with a more aggressive buck and avoided several subsequent ruts. "During those years of shirking, he grew into a real monster, with a huge body and massive antlers," Geist says.

Geist has studied the techniques of medieval and 20th-century red deer trophy production on European estates. He says that gamekeepers at hunting preserves in the 1930s and '40s deliberately kept red deer stags from participating in the rut so the animals would grow larger antlers. "Good food alone would not do it," Geist says. "They had to prevent rutting activity so the bulls could put their caloric energy into antler growth."

Shirker stags are rarely seen by hunters, explains Geist, "for the simple reason that the biggest bucks and bulls are loners for the most part. They stay away from where you'd expect to find deer or elk."

Geist admits his theory has few fans. "The idea that the very biggest bucks are cowards does not go over well—except with the wives of male hunters. They find it hilarious." ■