



Tips
from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

It was late spring, and a buddy and I were hunting turkeys in the high country near Dallas Divide. Almost simultaneously, we noticed a good-sized shed antler of an elk about 100 yards in front of us. It was a short, but probably humorous foot race between us to see who would get to the antler first.

I collect shed antlers, or sheds as they are commonly referred to, but not for profit or any serious business. I just like them and they make nice decorations around our house, which is definitely “outdoor themed.” I also believe in the spirit of the antler, which represents the spirit and power of the great animal they came from. Since sheds can bring as much as \$14 per pound, there are people who collect them for profit.

As European explorers began traversing the Northern Plains in the mid-19th century, they noted large piles of elk antlers stacked along the banks of rivers in what is now North and South Dakota, Wyoming and Montana. It was said that hunting and war parties of Blackfeet Indians built up the piles over the course of centuries, adding a layer of antlers each time they passed.

Antlers are composed of a honeycombed, bone-like tissue. Male members of the Cervidae family — including moose, elk, caribou and deer — have antlers. Antlers grow from the tip outward. The mounting point on the head, from which the antler grows, is called the pedicle.

In contrast, members of the bovine family, including bison, antelope, sheep, goats and cattle, have horns. Horns are composed of keratin, similar to hair and fingernails. Horns are not shed annually as they continue to grow the entire life of the animal. The horns always grow from the base, rather than from the tips like antlers.

Animals have antlers for various reasons. Most antlers have evolved to facilitate competition amongst other males for breeding rights with females and for dominance against other males. Antlers also serve as a defense tool against predators.

During the fall breeding seasons, known as the rut, males use antlers to display dominance. Females tend to mate with males that have the largest antlers. Sometimes a male will

carry vegetation in his antlers in an attempt to enhance his apparent size, all in the interest of attracting females. Sounds similar to a bunch of high school boys at the bus stop.

After the rut, elk, moose, caribou and deer shed their antlers. Often times, the pedicles are injured from fighting during the rut. Once the pedicles heal, sometimes a couple weeks after shedding, the growth of new antlers begins.

The shedding process can take a couple weeks to complete, while the growth of new antlers can take an entire summer to complete. Antlers shed because of a drop in the testosterone level following the rut. When an animals testosterone level falls, it causes a weakening in the tissue and bone at the antler base, the pedicle, to the point where the antlers drop off.

The shedding process can happen quickly. Antlers that are firmly attached one day can weaken and fall off within 24 to 48 hours. A weaker animal will shed his antlers much quicker than a healthy animal. Often times, a sick or injured animal will shed their antlers. The antlers are not usually shed at the same time, but usually within a few days of each other. I have witnessed an elk knock off both of his antlers at the same time.

While it appears painful, shedding is not. The hole, where the pedicle grows from, may appear red and somewhat bloody for a few days, but there is no discomfort to the animal. Since a bull elk’s antlers can weigh up to 20 pounds per side, I would think it would be a relief to lose that weight from your head for a short while.

Antlers begin to fall after the rut. The time frame varies between different parts of the country. Most shedding starts in December and is completed by April. Older animals shed their antlers before the younger ones.

Female elk, deer, moose and caribou rarely have antlers, but it has happened. Scientists believe that the reason females grow antlers is because of a hormone imbalance, but it is a very rare occurrence. The only Cervidae female to have antlers is the reindeer.

While in the growth phase, antlers are covered in a soft membrane referred to as velvet. Velvet is a layer of skin that supplies the antlers with the nutrients needed to build the bone mass. Velvet contains many substances such as amino acids, minerals, proteins, all needed for proper growth.

The antlers will continue to grow rapidly for two to four months. During the summer, higher levels of testosterone will begin to slow the antler growth. The veins and arteries around the velvet begin to constrict and cut off the blood and nutrient supply to the antler. This process



(Above) Many people collect sheds for fun and, sometimes, profit. (Right) This spirit post stands in honor of all the majestic antlered animals in the outdoors. (Special to the Montrose Daily Press/ Mark Rackay)

is repeated every year for the rest of the life of the animal.

The antler, during the velvet stage, is one of the fastest growing life forms on earth. The antler of a deer can grow a half-inch a day, while an elk antler can grow as much as an inch per day.

Antlers in the velvet stage are very sensitive and soft to the touch. During velvet, antlers can easily be damaged or broken. Antlers may or may not grow back the same way each year. Drought, available food sources, stress and hormones all affect the growth of antlers.

If a velvet tine is bumped or broken during the velvet stage, but stays attached to the main beam of the antler, it can grow at an extreme angle to the rest of the antler. An injury to the left shoulder of an animal will typically result in a malformed antler on the right side.

Once the antlers are fully grown, the velvet will begin to fall off. The males will rub their antlers on trees and saplings in an attempt to remove the velvet. I once watched a mature mule deer buck work on rubbing the velvet off his antlers. He stayed with it for most of a day, and by days end, he pretty well was rid of all the velvet.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife, CPW, has created a closure on shed antler hunting and collection on all public lands west of I-25 from Jan. 1 through April 30 annually.

The purpose of the seasonal closure is to reduce the recreational impacts from shed hunting on wintering big game animals during the time of year when they are most vulnerable to stress. The result of the stress can be decreased body condition, increased mortality, and decreased fawn and calf survival.

Winter can be extremely



difficult on wildlife as body weight is down and access to food is very limited. Shed hunters have been known to chase down animals and run them over fences, all in an attempt to get them to drop their antlers.

Be sure to check with Colorado Parks and Wildlife for the latest regulations on the collection of sheds. The collection of sheds has been under review and changes are in the wings. Visit their website at cpw.state.co.us

Antlers have always carried a spiritual meaning of all that is great in the outdoor world for me. I will always keep one eye

to the ground when I am outdoors, in hopes of finding an antler. My wife feels the spirit of the antler, and is always thrilled when I bring another shed home to decorate the house with. “Oh yipee,” she says. “Something else of yours for me to dust around.”

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press and avid hunter who travels across North and South America in search of adventure and serves as a director for the Montrose County Sheriff’s posse. For information about the posse call 970-252-4033 (leave a message) or email info@mcspi.org.

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When we first...

...moved here years ago, we were so excited that we planted two Colorado Spruces in our front yard as a celebration of our move! We then had 35 foot trees that were overtaking the world, shading everything else that was trying to grow! As a landscaper friend said, “trees have a life cycle, and the end does come”. The day the life cycle came to an end, I had to go inside to shed a few tears because they were such a part of our history here. There are still two smaller trees in our tree lawn that will now be welcoming the birds and continuing the celebration of our life here!

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