

WILDLIFE

Passing the buck increases antler size

by Ken Gee / klgee@noble.org



Noble Foundation research and other institution's studies have demonstrated that antler size generally increases with age. As a result, our most common

recommendation to land managers for improving antler quality on white-tailed deer is to increase the age structure of the male segment of the herd. In other words, let the bucks get older. The most effective way is to pass on harvesting small-antlered bucks. Often the response to this recommendation is "if I don't shoot him, someone else will." This response is particularly common when the property in question is relatively small in terms of deer habitat.

To address this issue, we implemented a study on our Oswalt Road Ranch to document the fate of wild free-ranging bucks. We trapped, ear tagged, attached GPS collars and released adult male deer during the spring of two consecutive years. Each year, we monitored collared bucks through the end of December to determine survival and exposure rates to hunting.

We collared 24 and 28 bucks in the first and second years, respectively. Seventeen survived each year through



the end of hunting season. Causes of death for collared bucks in the first year were one natural mortality, two hunter harvests and four poacher kills. During the second year, causes of death were four natural mortalities, one hunter harvest, two killed by vehicles and four poacher kills.

These results bring to light several interesting pieces of information. As addressed in the March 2010 issue of *Ag News and Views*, 17 percent ▶

| | Year | |
|-------------------|-------|--------|
| | First | Second |
| Collared bucks | 24 | 28 |
| Natural mortality | 1 | 4 |
| Hunter harvested | 2 | 1 |
| Killed by vehicle | 0 | 2 |
| Poached | 4 | 4 |
| Survived | 17 | 17 |

and 14 percent of the collared bucks were poached in the first and second years, respectively. This level of poaching can certainly have negative impacts on management efforts and should be addressed through increased landowner and hunter vigilance, and reporting of suspicious incidents. However, as distasteful and unfortunate as poaching is, it is not a deer management issue – it

is a societal issue.

The good news is that 71 percent and 61 percent of the collared bucks survived through the end of hunting season in the first and second years, respectively. Even though all the collared bucks spent time off the Oswalt Road Ranch during hunting season and were exposed to hunting on neighboring lands, only two were harvested by hunters the first

year and one the second year. Most neighboring properties received at least occasional to moderate hunting pressure. This possibly indicates hunters were being more selective in their buck harvest, thereby allowing more bucks to survive. This is encouraging and emphasizes that passing up small bucks – even on small landholdings – can have positive results. ■