

How to Become a Shed Head

By Dan Groebner, AZGFD Wildlife Biologist

Thanks to Mother Nature's desire to have males in the deer family look their very best and most majestic for the breeding season, folks in the White Mountains are provided with ways to make money off the land, decorations for their cabins and one more opportunity for healthy exercise. What are we talking about? Antler hunting, of course!

Every summer and fall, buck deer and bull elk spend considerable energy in trying to grow the largest "crown" of antlers, proven to be a sure way to attract more females. Elk can grow almost an inch of antler per day in good habitat conditions. Mature bulls carry as much as 40 pounds of mineralized bone tissue during the fall, winter and into the spring, just to impress the cows and use in antler jousts with other bulls. Every spring, when testosterone levels drop in the bulls, a weak layer of tissue forms at the junction of the antler and the skull allowing the antlers to fall off without any bleeding or harm to the bull. By growing new antlers every year, bulls can make them larger and longer to match their body growth as well as making a new antler that doesn't have a deformity from a previous year's injury during the growth phase while in "velvet." Large, uniform antler racks are like good looks, a fancy car and lots of money in the deer world! And if you have sharp eyes and a little stamina, antlers can mean lots of money in the human world too!

Locating a fresh shed rack that is heavy and shiny, without rodent gnawing, called a "brown," will likely bring over \$10 and sometimes up to \$15 a pound, meaning that a moderately sized 10-pound single shed is worth over \$100! Antlers have been used in the orient for medicinal purposes historically but recently they have become popular as dog chews, knife handles, lamp bases and chandeliers. Prices may drop as supply catches up to demand but the temptation of big money earned during the spring when hunting seasons taper off draws crowds to the woods.

Some people consider it a race to get into the woods before the rodents or other shed hunters find the recently dropped antlers, with the largest bulls and bucks dropping first, but the most experienced antler hunters wait until the roads are passable so they can get back into some more remote motherloads. The first rule of antler hunting is "Do No Damage" to the wet roads by causing deep ruts or facing a possible \$750 fine and up to a year in jail. That would take a bite out of your antler hunting gas budget and spare time! Counties and the Forest Service have limited road maintenance budgets and can't afford expensive repairs. The last thing they want to do is close a dangerous road because they don't have the funds to fix it. So, the best idea is to avoid the wet muddy roads for another couple of weeks and avoid possibly getting a big fine.

So, once you get all prepared with water, sunscreen, maps, GPS and other survival essentials, with the vehicle gassed up, where do we go? Obviously, you want to look where there are elk and deer signs at the time you're looking. All the bulls and bucks may not have made it to the highest elevations before dropping both antlers, depending on snow depth and spring storms. Look for beds, trails and droppings. Locations near roads get the heaviest hunting pressure and may not hold as many browns as more remote areas. Southern exposed grassy slopes are often used as bedding and feeding areas early in the spring.

Then start the process of narrowing down your search to the next level by looking for places where trails cross washes, fences, boulders or other areas where the animals have to jump and jar their heads. You can see these hotspots from quite a distance sometimes, with some folks even using binoculars to spot sheds on the ground. But the most productive method, according to the experts, is to change your focus to no more than 15-20 feet away and move slowly enough so you can imagine a spotlight that helps you focus on pretty small areas. This technique is used by search and rescue personnel when looking for clues. The reason this works is because the part of the retina in the backs of our eyes which sees with the best definition and recognition is relatively small so, if we make fast, constantly moving motions, we can never let this area of the eye truly focus and recognize the search image we are looking for. Haven't you ever looked for something unsuccessfully, and sometimes with considerable effort, only to find it sitting in plain sight? You obviously weren't focusing well enough.

If you are new to "horn hunting" (which is technically wrong since you are looking for antlers, not horns which don't even shed!), you might want to ask a friend for an antler you can use in the back yard or back woods to help develop that search image for the object you're looking for. Have your partner bury it partially under some leaves and try to find it. Throw it in with some branches that look similar. Look for it in the shade and in the sun. Try it wet and then covered with dust. Don't spend too much time doing this since you're not going to be able to keep the training antler.

Once you get into the woods, start your "purposeful wandering," another technique used in search and rescue. The name implies how to do it which simply means you are always looking around for likely places to find antlers and not walking a strict grid pattern or only staying on a trail. Move slowly, looking mostly down and often behind you to get a different perspective on the ground. Again, limit the focus of your intense search area to the size of a tine, or tip, of an antler. Don't expect to have the entire rack in full view sitting on top of a rock! Serious shed heads employ Man's Best Friend, the dog, to locate the scent of fresh antlers. Training a dog to locate antlers can be done using traditional dog training techniques, taking advantage of the dog's amazing sense of smell. Be prepared to invest some training time and lots of treats.

So how many antlers can you collect each year? As many as your back can haul! This is one natural resource that is not so difficult to harvest, and causes no harm with its removal from the forest, so can be taken without concern. The biggest impact of antler hunting is damage to roads and safety issues with young people and ATVs. Unfortunately, many recent injuries of young people have prompted Game and Fish, County Sheriff's Deputies and Forest Service law officers to step up enforcement of safety laws, including helmets for everybody under 18.

Quote?

Safety use of GPS

Photos

List of buyers

Tribal regs

Tip List:

Ultimate shed heads collect matching pairs, consecutive years.