

Antler Restrictions gone Bad

In this article I want to review the intentions of an antler restriction and talk about some specific properties where an antler restriction is in place that is inadvertently protecting some older Bucks (some for their entire life). If you have not done so already please read my article "[How to analyze your Buck's Antler Characteristics](#)" where I review the study that should be done in order to determine the correct antler restriction if there is one. This study is critical so that a proper APR (Antler Point Restriction) is implemented. It is also important that you do a follow up study every few years to make sure that you are not seeing many older Bucks being protected by the APR. This is easy if you have implemented your own APR because with the use of trail cameras and/or your actual visual sightings you can see if you have any older Bucks that are being protected by your current APR. If you see this then you can change your APR so these older Bucks will no longer be protected. If the APR is determined and enforced by the state then that's a whole different situation. The state should bear the responsibility of making sure that the APR is working as intended and they should change the APR if it is determined that a number of older Bucks are being inadvertently protected by the APR.

Let's first discuss what the purpose of an antler restriction is. The intentions of the antler restriction are to protect young Bucks from being shot by hunters. Even though the best way to estimate the age of a Buck is by analyzing his body characteristics the problem is that many hunters are unable to do this. If you have not done so already please watch my video "How to Age a Buck on the Hoof". Since most hunters are unable to age a Buck on the hoof we need to see if there is an antler characteristic that will protect most all yearling (1 ½ year old) Bucks. The yearling Buck is the easiest Buck to harvest. We use the phrase "Young and Dumb" to describe these yearlings because we see them walking and running around like they don't have a care in the world. We see them before, during and after the rut. I'm sure that if we started shooting them they would become a little more leery but not like an older Buck. I often think about what would happen if we were shooting yearling Bucks. Currently we probably see every yearling Buck that is on our property during hunting season. If we were shooting them there would probably be just a couple of them left at the end of the season. (The couple that wised up) This would completely change the dynamics of our deer population. We would then be like some places where they hardly ever see a Buck over 1 ½ years old. Anyway, if you can protect your yearling Bucks from being harvested then most of them will make it to 2 ½ years old. (Some will succumb to natural mortality) This Buck will not only become bigger in body size at 2 ½ he will also have much bigger antlers than when he was a yearling. As a result of this Buck making it to 2 ½ years old there will then be a better chance that he will make it to an even older age class since he won't be as easy to shoot as when he was a yearling. So basically what I am saying is that if you can protect your yearling Bucks the age structure of your Buck population will increase which will mean that you will have more bigger bodied and bigger antlered Bucks. Many hunters would like to see more of these older and bigger antlered Bucks.

If you are determining your own APR then you may even try to come up with an APR that also protects most 2 ½ year old Bucks on your property. This would allow most of your Bucks to reach 3 ½ years old. This may work in areas that have consistent antler characteristics. Like I said above you better make sure that you do a thorough study to make sure that you are not protecting older Bucks. I am seeing more and more properties that are establishing an APR just because they are hearing that it is being used elsewhere. One of the popular APR's is if the antlers are outside the ears. This can definitely work in many areas but not all areas. Make sure

that you assume nothing and prove everything that you can. Like I mentioned above if you and your group of hunters determine that you are inadvertently protecting some older Bucks then you can change the APR to solve that problem. The other thing that could happen is that you have a severe drought during the year and your Buck's have less than normal antler growth because of these drought conditions. Again, at least you have the flexibility to temporarily change your APR if you feel that your APR is not going to work properly for the upcoming season.

If the state has determined the APR then there is no flexibility for hunters to change it for their own properties. If it is determined that a good percentage of 3 ½ year old and older Bucks are inadvertently being protected by the APR this is not only bad for the Buck population but also the hunter since the APR is eliminating Bucks that could and probably should be harvested. They should not allow an APR that is protecting a good number of Bucks that are 3 ½ years old and older. When I say a good number of Bucks I want to clarify that I'm not talking about an exception here and there. Whether the regulation requires 4 points on a side, a specific outside spread or a certain main beam length the APR should only protect a small percentage of these exceptions. (I would hope less than 5%)

I now want to tell you about an area where this is actually taking place today. There are two counties in the state of Georgia that have an APR that reads a Buck must have a minimum outside spread of 15" in order to be legal to harvest. The first county is Dooly County which was a pioneer in implementing a countywide APR back in 1993. I haven't heard many complaints about the regulation protecting many 3 ½ year old and older Bucks in Dooly County. I actually hunted in Dooly County for a couple of years and I did not see any Bucks with narrow antlers. (But that was only a 300 acre tract) I do find it interesting though that a management area located within Dooly County did change the regulation a few years ago to read 15" outside spread or one main beam measuring 16". The second county is Macon County which implemented the same 15" regulation back in 1997. Unlike Dooly County I have heard several complaints about the 15" regulation protecting 3 ½ year old and older Bucks in Macon County.

Let me give you an overview of what is happening in Macon County, Ga. Macon County is over 400 square miles in size. Just like we have a large variation in our Buck's antler size and characteristics there are other areas in Macon County that are experiencing the same thing. There are definitely some narrow antler characteristics located in various areas of Macon County. Look at the picture of the Buck at the top of this article. This is just one of many examples. Macon County began its APR back in 1997. There were only two options considered at that time. One was 4 points on a side and the other was a 15" outside spread. The 15" outside spread was adopted. The regulation was going to protect most all yearling Bucks and some 2 ½ year old Buck's. As a result of this regulation most hunters (including us) assumed that if we saw a Buck that didn't have a 15" outside spread then he must be 1 ½ or 2 ½ years old. In the same token we assumed that every 3 ½ year old and older Buck must have a 15" outside spread. In 2004 when trail cameras were fairly new we purchased one. As we reviewed the pictures that we were getting we started to become suspicious that we had some older Buck's that did not have a 15" outside spread. We made it a point to learn how to age a Buck on the hoof so we would be better at recognizing these older Bucks based on their body characteristics and not their antlers. As the years passed and we bought more trail cameras we definitely proved that we were seeing some older Bucks that did not have a 15" outside spread. Please understand that this is not a nutritional problem. Our deer are very healthy. In addition to the natural browse available we provide them with food plots, supplemental protein pellets and mineral licks.

As I mentioned in my other articles we have been taking our video cameras with us into the woods since 1996. After we learned how to age a Buck on the hoof we went back through a lot of our video and we were able to identify Bucks that were 3 ½ years old and older that did not have a 15" outside spread. Since 2006 I

have also been making a book each season with pictures of all of the Bucks that we got a picture of. In 2009 we became thoroughly disgusted when I made our 2009 hunting season book of pictures. Without question we were seeing more of these illegal older Buck's. Please understand that we are not talking about 7 year old and older Bucks that may be on the decline. We are talking about 3 ½, 4 ½, 5 ½ year old and older Buck's. The same trend has continued since 2009. After the 2010 season I started putting together some video and pictures documenting these older illegal Buck's. I have put a link to that video at the bottom of this article. I encourage everyone to please watch it and take note of the narrow antlers and the older age body characteristics of each Buck. I felt confident that if I was able to put together enough visual evidence for the Georgia WRD then they would be able to assist the properties that are having a problem with the APR.

Now let me review the complications of what is happening. There are areas within Macon County that do not have any narrow antler characteristics. As a result of this the APR works fine for their properties. Some of these hunters look at the evidence that we have provided and they understand what we are dealing with and they are ok with having the regulation tweaked. They understand that these 3 ½ year old and older Bucks should not be protected. If these Bucks are not harvested then our problem today may become their problem in the future. On the other hand some of these hunters only consider what they are seeing on their own and neighboring properties and they feel that the regulation should not be tweaked. After all everything does look fine to them. There are also hunters that may not even realize that they are having a problem with the regulation. Let's face it there are some hunters that do not use trail cameras. While under an APR getting trail camera pictures and/or video is the best way to determine if you are having a problem with the regulation or not. You should now be able to see why it is so important to do a thorough study before you implement an APR and why you should do a follow up study every few years. Obviously within a single county I am showing you how there can be varying antler size and characteristics.

Here's something else to think about. Since many hunters use the regulation as their management criteria this would mean that good antlered 2 ½ year old Bucks that have a 15"+ spread have a target on their back. So now they're taking out these younger Bucks that may have great antler potential. On the other hand these older Bucks are being given a free pass because they have narrow antlers. Many hunters don't realize that they are looking at an older Buck. Every season there are 3 ½ year old and older Bucks that are not being shot because they don't have a 15" outside spread and then a young 2 ½ year old Buck is shot simply because he did have a 15" outside spread. (This is certainly not proper management for a county under QDM or any property for that matter) Some of these nice 2 ½ year old Bucks might have actually been passed up if the hunter had shot one of those 3 ½ year old Bucks with narrow antlers. I know you deer managers out there understand exactly what I am saying. I hear many local hunters saying that they don't seem to be seeing as many big antlered Bucks as they used to. As a matter of fact for many years Dooly County and Macon County used to be rated the #1 and #2 Big Antlered Buck Counties in Georgia but have since faded way down the list. Maybe part of the reason (or most of the reason) is because of this APR. I totally favor an APR **but** it has to be the right APR!

Is there a resolution to the problem? We did a lot of research on our yearling Buck antler characteristics using our trail camera pictures. As I mentioned above we also reviewed our video and trail camera pictures of 3 ½ year old and older Buck's. As a result of this research we determined that none of our yearling Bucks had a 16" main beam but most all of these older narrow antlered Bucks did have a 16" main beam. As a result of this we could use the same APR that the WRD implemented in the Dooly County Flint River WMA a few years ago. As a result of this finding we contacted the Georgia WRD in 2011 and reviewed the problem that we and our neighbors were having with the current APR. We asked them if they could change the APR to read "A Buck must have a 15" outside spread or one main beam measuring at least 16". We had them watch the video that you see below. I can write several pages describing what transpired between February 2011 and February 2013 but let

me just say that the WRD decided that there wasn't enough interest or support to recommend making a change to the current APR.

In summary, when implementing an APR you must consider if any 3 ½ year old and older Bucks are going to be inadvertently protected by the APR. If so then what is an acceptable percentage. If you protect less than 5% of your 3 ½ year old and older Bucks then that's not too bad but what if it's over 25% or 35%. There would be something terribly wrong if this is happening with your APR. I will use the term that I used in one of my other articles which is "*Reverse Management*". This is where you are actually shooting many of the Bucks that you should let walk and you are letting Bucks walk that should actually be shot. So remember, if you have an APR then make sure you monitor your Buck population by using trail cameras or maybe video cameras to make sure that you are not inadvertently protecting many older Buck's.