

FIELD JUDGING TROPHY MULE DEER

By William Smith, DMV

Field judging trophy mule deer is the ability to evaluate the status of a buck's antler composition when compared to others within the species. For sake of comparison, the Boone and Crockett system of score computation is used by the Nevada Wildlife Record Book committee. Therefore it is important to thoroughly understand the scoring principles of the Boone and Crockett system. In other words, what antler characteristics count and which do not. For the purpose of field judging, a record book score is only a standard of comparison – don't turn your back on a giant buck simply because he is judged to fall short of a numerical score. The "trophy" is indeed in the eyes of the beholder, but believe me, any deer that can qualify for official record book listing will make any hunter drool with envy. Hunters interested in learning how to field judge this species can become reasonably proficient.

The acquired skill of field judging this noble species comes as a result of practice and dedication. The more time spent in the field evaluating bucks will serve to reinforce your mental picture of a trophy; thereby, building confidence and speed in your assessment at the time when it counts the

most. Further fine tuning of this skill comes with the hands on measuring of antlers as frequently as possible. To gain maximum advantage the score of the trophy must be known. Without the score you are simply guessing, and that can do more harm than good in refining your judgment skills. When sizing up a mounted head learn a method that you feel comfortable with to tally up the numbers in your mind before asking the known score of that given specimen. The final comparison of the known score to your estimated score will serve as an honest means to evaluate your judging skills. This repeated hands on experience will certainly help to establish your benchmark buck in your mind. Once you have your minimum buck firmly in your mind, you are well on your way to being able to field judge other bucks.

In order to develop the ability to field judge deer, one must be able to infiltrate their environment by means of a thorough understanding of mule deer habits. Nevada's various terrains force the hunter to be proficient in locating bucks living on our most highest of mountain peaks and alpine basins down to the arid desert floors. We must familiarize ourselves with where they feed during the early morning and late afternoon hours, where they bed during the day, and varying intervals of activity throughout the day

influenced by ambient temperatures. Today's hunter has the benefit of high tech optics to enable him to observe and evaluate from longer distances than ever before. Having adequate time to evaluate a buck is critical. There are few things more exciting than watching a true trophy buck in his own world with the knowledge he has no idea he is being observed.

Once you have penetrated the mule deer's environment, maintain your sense of awareness to avoid being detected. Always watch for surrounding deer. The earlier seasons present a situation with the males being in large collective groups – this is particularly true during the archery seasons. As fall approaches, the bucks will break up into smaller groups but seldom will an older buck end up by himself. The “Big Boys” rely on the presence and body language of his companions for warning of impending danger. During the day, if a big buck is spotted in his bed, carefully study the immediate surroundings to determine if other bucks are around. Often times, these undetected sentry bucks can be the spoiler in completing a stalk to the buck of a lifetime. When these monarchs bed down they position themselves with maximum visual advantage for a quick escape if any danger is perceived. It is this understanding of the lifestyle of a truly older-age class buck that will enable you to regularly locate and study them without being detected. The

ability to study a buck when he is unaware of your presence truly puts the advantage in the hunter's favor. Evaluating the animal from different profiles enables you to determine if that buck is one to be passed on or one with trophy potential and perhaps in need of closer evaluation. A buck jumped from his bed and running away in a state of panic presents a difficult shot and requires a "snap decision" as to whether or not he will meet your desired benchmark. Often times such a shot, when successful, can result in disappointment when the fallen buck is approached.

The following is a synopsis of field judging muley bucks based on the Boone and Crockett assessment of antler development ... the same system used for entry within this record book. This system assigns an accumulative final score based upon the sum total of measurements of the inside spread, length of main beams, length of points, and antler mass. By definition, a typical mule deer frame will have four points per side plus eye guards. It is this definition of the typical antler configuration that is referred to by mule deer enthusiasts and scorers as the "main frame". Any points beyond the basic 5 x 5 basic frame are considered to be abnormal points. While always adding character to the overall antler make-up, a few abnormal points can

hurt your final numerical score; whereas, many abnormal points can benefit the final tally and possibly qualify your trophy as a non-typical entry.

The first step in field judging a buck for trophy potential is evaluation of the main frame. If you are looking at a buck with tall antlers consisting of long points and spread outside his ears you should consider closer evaluation.

The next traits to be considered are number of points, depth of forks, and symmetry – right side vs. left. Also note the presence of any abnormal points. As previously stated, abnormal points can be a detriment or bonus towards the final score. If you are looking for record book potential you must thoroughly familiarize yourself with the classification and tabulation of a typical vs. non-typical buck. A college professor of mine once said, “man classifies, nature doesn’t”. The proceeding reference to typical vs. non-typical classification is a perfect example of this saying. Either way abnormal points just “sweeten the deal”.

While sizing up the forks, pay attention to symmetry side to side. I am referring to the question, “do the back forks and front forks match their

counterparts on the opposite side in depth and tine length?” Symmetry is the basis for your final score using the Boone & Crockett system.

The assessment of mass can be difficult in the field. Antler coloration or background in the field of view can often give a false interpretation of antler mass. Light colored antlers can appear thin and the opposite holds true for dark antlers. Against a snowy background antlers can appear to have more mass than a measurer’s tape can give credit for. One reference that can be used in the field is the circumference of the antler when compared to the buck’s eye which will measure about 4” in circumference. Using this as a gauge from which to estimate mass you are now able to estimate whether the bases and main beams are at least 4” in circumference. Heavy bases (greater than or equal to 6 inches) with that kind of mass carried throughout the length of main beams (i.e. 4 to 5 inches) means you are looking at a buck who will score well in terms of mass.

The final consideration is spread – that is the greatest inside width of the main beam. Keep in mind that outside width looks good on the wall, but in scoring inside spread between the main beams is all that counts. It is only one of the 19 measurements that formulates a final score. A buck with his

ears spread in a naturally alert position will have an average tip-to-tip ear span of 20” to 22”. For some deer this can be higher especially in different regions of the Western states. However, particularly with Nevada’s Great Basin strain of mule deer, this 20” to 22” distance is a reliable standard to work with. There are instances when this can change with body size and age class of buck, variables that can be learned and recognized with experience. If you always use this 20” to 22” estimate for ear width your buck is less likely to suffer “ground shrinkage”.

When observed in a naturally alert status, those bucks with record book potential will have inside spread of the main beam exceeding the ear’s width by several inches on each side. Generally, a narrow inside spread is less desirable because it means a short main beam length in addition to fewer points of inside spread credit. If the main beam sweeps forward to a line mentally drawn from the tips of G-2, G-3 and G-4 it is a very good buck. Only a few bucks will achieve the length, but it is highly desirable and the closer you come the better. Typically, main beams protrude out from a deer’s head; then they curve forward and around and point inward again before they end.

After familiarizing yourself with these guidelines and if you are willing to scrutinize a buck to see if he has what you are looking for, then the decision to keep looking or settle for what's in your spotting scope is yours. If you are willing to pick up your optics, repack your personal gear, smile and turn your back on a buck lying totally unaware of your presence because "it's just not there" you've just reached a new pinnacle in hunting.

Remember, big trophies look big because they are! On the other end of the spectrum, if there is any doubt about the quality of a trophy, "it isn't big enough," do not talk yourself into seeing something that isn't really there.