

# Great Expectations

*During the past several decades the obsession over gigantic whitetail bucks with high scoring antler racks has grown somewhat out of control. Today many deer hunters have become addicted to the challenge of taking a B&C record book buck that will most likely never happen!*



*Deer hunters today have become more and more obsessed with trophy bucks like this huge drop tine 9 pointer. Although this animal is not beyond the goals of many deer managers who practice strick QDM, it would be very unlikely on public or private land where the hunting pressure prevents older age class bucks in the population. Photo by Ralph Hensley.*

The 2005 deer season is over, and a few Virginia deer hunters will tell you they had a great deer season. Hopefully, most will tell you it was average, and a few will say it was awful. The fact is, however, some deer hunters may evaluate their deer season based on great, but unrealistic, expectations. If you are reading this article, I bet you did not kill one of the absolutely gigantic bucks you commonly see on the cover of the deer magazines or on your favorite hunting show. I have even more bad news, you probably never will.

Where do these great expectations come from? In my opinion, they are primarily a product of the deer hunting media. As a general rule the deer hunting media does

not sell and promote average realistic adult bucks but world class gigantic big bucks, and many of these animals are not even "real." The magazines and shows do not want you to know it, but many of the pictures and videos of these gigantic bucks are of deer in pens.

Think about it, if there was a deer that big walking around in the woods in Virginia and someone could get close enough to take perfect pictures or a video of it, don't you think some Virginia deer hunter would have already put an arrow or bullet in it. Of course they would have. Really gigantic adult bucks that do not mind standing still and having their picture taken do not have very high survival rates in the

wilds of Virginia!

This unrealistic expectation mess hit me several years ago at a deer convention when I saw a vendor with a poster or calendar picture of a deer that was so big, I immediately decided the antlers must have been computer generated. As is often the case, I was wrong. That same day I was told the deer was "real" and he even had a name, 30/30. Later at the same convention, in a large public session, I was shown pictures of 30/30 in his pen, was told that he was fed and given clean water every day, and that his semen was collected to sell for captive deer genetic breeding programs. I was even told he was not allowed to breed real does, because they



*This basket rack 7 point yearling buck has a great deal of potential. Hunters that want better bucks in their harvest data should let this youngster walk. Photo by Len Rue, Jr.*

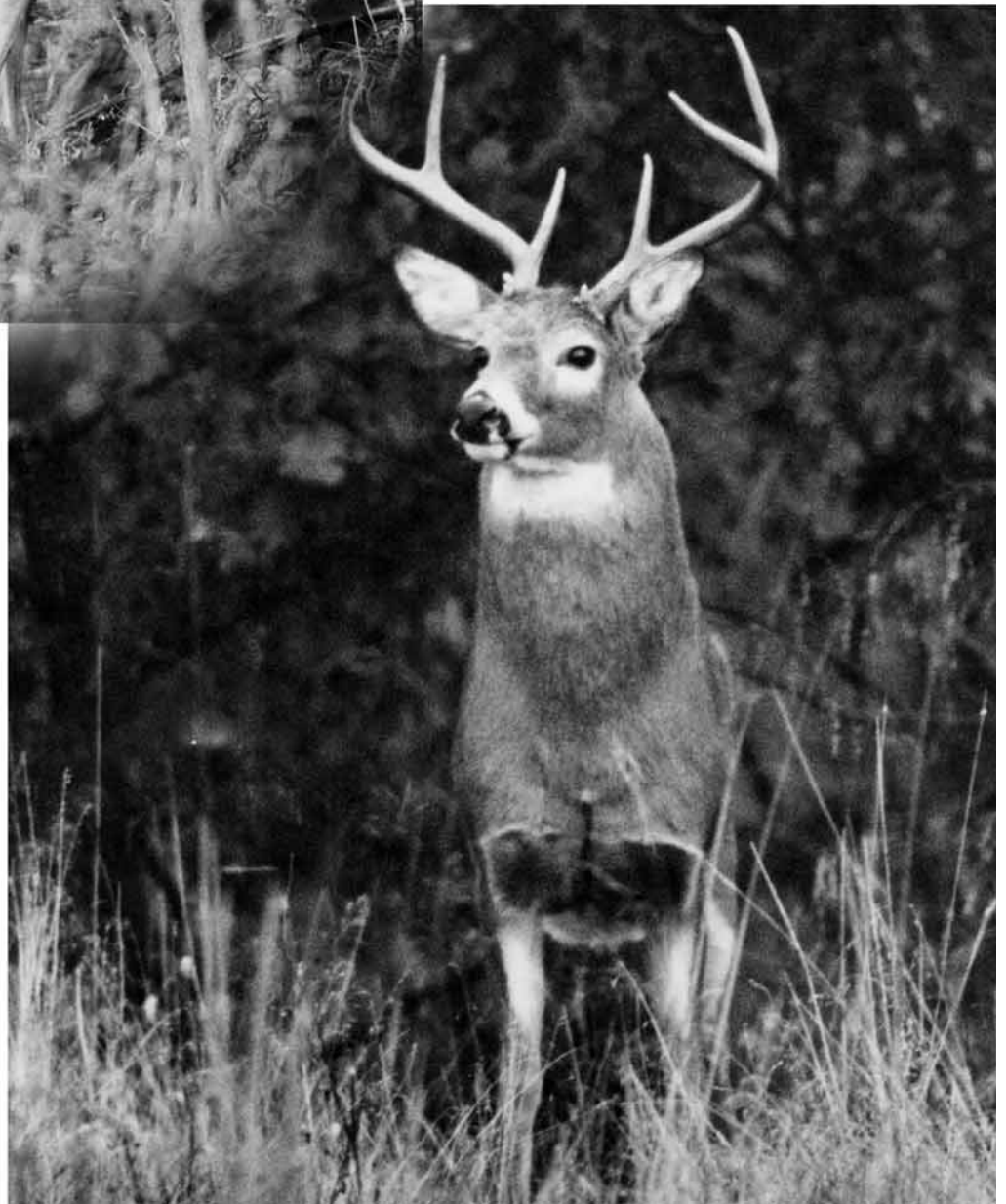
might kick and injure him. I did not know whether to laugh or cry.

That is why I have wanted to write a "great expectations" article for years. A call from Virginia Deer Hunters Executive Director Denny Quaiff finally got me to the keyboard. Denny killed a very nice adult 130-140 class Boone and Crockett (B&C) buck this past fall. When we were talking about the deer, he asked for my opinion and how it related to an article he had just read in the January 2006 *Deer and Deer Hunting* magazine entitled "Reality Bucks" by Charles J. Alsheimer, *D & D H's* Northern field editor. In a nutshell, Mr. Alsheimer noted that killing a 140-class B&C free ranging white-tailed buck was

the best most eastern US deer hunters could ever expect. I agree. The point Mr. Alsheimer made and made well was that deer hunters need to have realistic expectations and not great expectations. So what are realistic expectations for Virginia?

In his article, Mr. Alsheimer noted the antler characteristics of different age classes of deer from his home state of New York. Deer in Virginia are very similar. When a buck is 1-1/2 years of age and grows his first set of antlers, in Virginia on average he will have four points, a

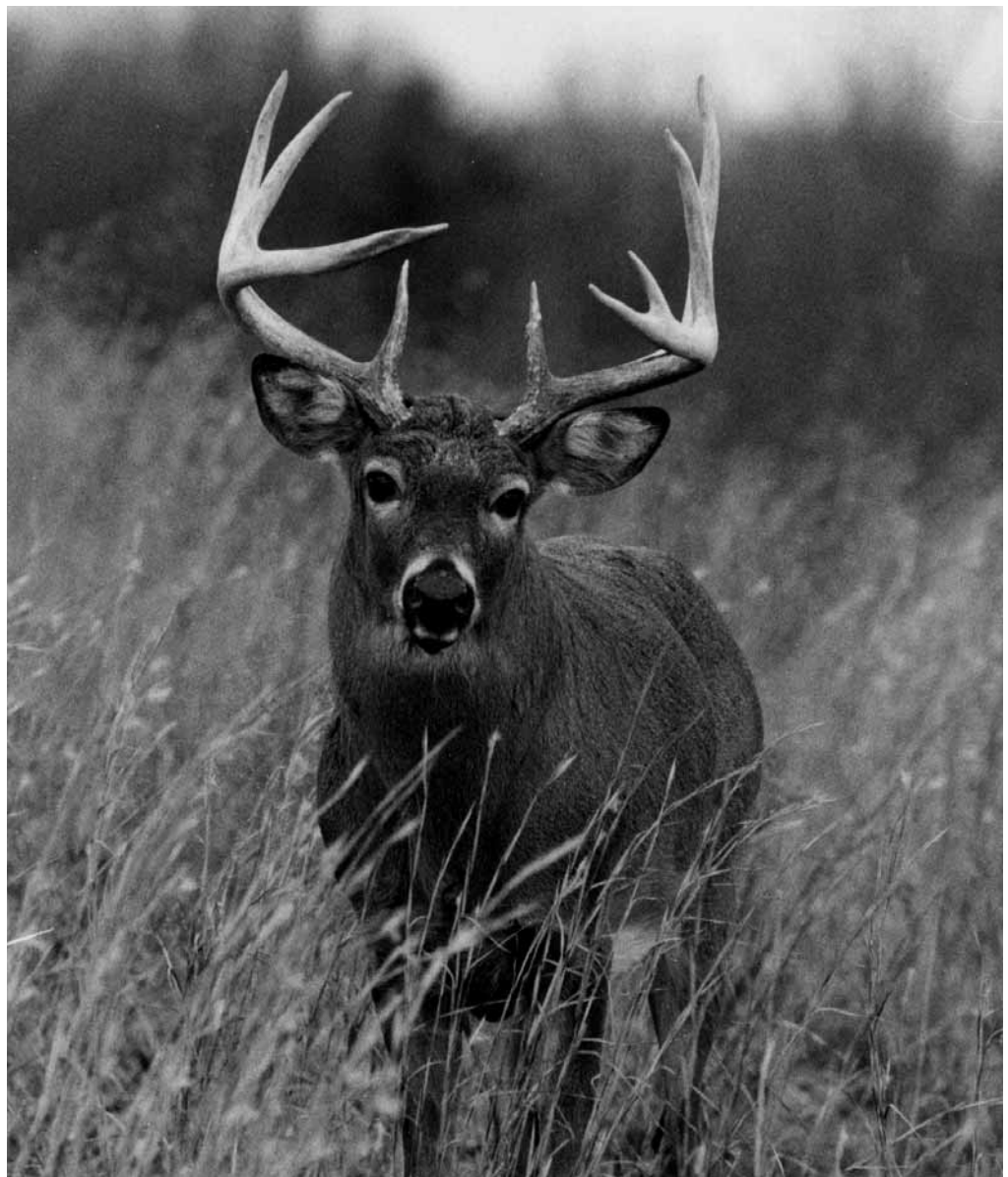
*Most 2 1/2 year old bucks sport 6 to 10 point antler racks. To many hunters, these animals can be quite impressive, with 14 to 16 inch outside spreads. However, when practicing QDM, it is recommended that this age class should not be shot. Photo by Marilyn Maring.*



16mm or 5/8 inch antler beam diameter (~ dime diameter), and just over an 8-inch outside spread. If you want to hunt/kill big bucks, these yearling bucks should not be shot. By the time he is 2-1/2, the average buck in Virginia has grown to 7 antler points, 24mm or 15/16 inch beams (quarter diameter), and has about a 14-inch outside spread. An average 2-1/2 year old buck will probably average about 110 B&C. If you want to hunt/kill big bucks, these 2-1/2 year old bucks should also not be shot. At 3-1/2 and older, he will average 8 points, 29mm or 1-1/8 inch beams, and a greater than 16-inch outside spread. The average B&C score should be about 125. I contend that in Virginia these animals should be shot for two reasons.

First, antler data from across the eastern United States clearly indicates that deer make significant increases in antler characteristics between 1-1/2 and 2-1/2 and again between 2-1/2 and 3-1/2, but then begin to plateau. If you pass up a yearling buck and he survives, the data indicates he will be significantly bigger next fall. The same "return on investment" logic applies to 2-1/2 year old bucks. It does not apply to 3-1/2 and older bucks. They will be bigger, but on average the increase in antler size will be fairly small. In free ranging deer herds, it is very difficult to manage for deer 4-1/2 and older. I contend that it is nearly impractical in free ranging deer management in Virginia (see Table 1).

Second, data from Virginia's Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP) for 222 clubs that had at least 10 years of deer data and indicated that they practiced quality deer management QDM in 2005 indicates that only 6% of the bucks taken on these properties have been 4-1/2 years of age or older. These 222 clubs in 2005 totaled 580,193 acres or 906.5 square miles and averaged 2,660 acres per property. Keep in mind that these are on average fairly large QDM clubs which indicated that they manage for bigger older bucks. The bottom line is the Department's data indicates a QDM club in Virginia can expect to aver-



*This 3 1/2 year-old buck's magnificent 9-point rack is well within the 140 inch range on the Boone and Crockett scoring system. Hunters that hold out for better than this will most likely still have all of their buck tags when the season ends. Any 140 inch whitetail taken under fair chase conditions should be considered a trophy regardless of where you are hunting. Photo by Len Rue, Jr.*

**Table 1. Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP) data for 222 cooperators who have at least 10 years of deer data**

<b>Buck Age</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent Of Total</b>	<b>Average Kill/Square Mile</b> (based on 2005 acreage data)
1.5	890	35.9	1.0
2.5	1027	41.4	1.1
3.5	409	16.5	0.5
4.5	97	3.9	0.1
5.5	25	1.0	0.0
6.5	23	0.9	0.0
7.5	6	0.2	0.0
8.5	0.0	0.0	

**Average 2.7**

age about one 3-1/2 or older buck per 1,000 acres per year. Of course, this is an average; some properties consistently do better, some consistently do worse.

The first thing some QDM proponents (and I am a QDM proponent) will tell you when they see these data is that they know about a QDM property that consistently averages 3-4 big old bucks per square mile per year. I know about these QDM properties too, but to cite them as what is normal or average for QDM results is misleading. The fact is it takes considerable effort and property to raise free ranging deer to 3-1/2 years of age in Virginia. To take them into the older age classes appears to be nearly impossible. If you expect to manage for and kill 4-1/2 year old and older bucks under free ranging conditions in Virginia, you have unrealistic expectations. I recommend that, when you see a 3-1/2 old buck, kill it, just like Denny did.

Do you have great and unrealistic expectations? The fact is, if you are a Virginia deer hunter, you will probably never see, much less kill, a B&C buck while you are deer hunting in Virginia. It takes a score of 160 or 170 to make the B&C book as a typical; 185 or 195 as a non-typical. These are not big deer, these are gigantic deer. I estimate the odds of a Virginia deer hunter killing a B&C buck in any given year at less than 1 in 25,000.

What kind of big buck can you expect to kill in Virginia? What is realistic? Just as Mr. Alsheimer noted, a 3-1/2 year old 130-140 class B&C buck is realistically the top end management goal in most free-ranging Virginia deer herds.

These unrealistic expectations were best embodied to me about 10 years ago when I was scoring a 150+ class B&C buck that had ~14 inch G2 tines. It was an outstanding deer, a deer of a lifetime. While I was scor-

ing and talking to the Franklin County deer hunter and his friend who both admitted that they had each killed a couple adult bucks that season, I asked the hunter how he would have rated his past deer season overall. Without hesitation, he answered, "Average."

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*Editor's note: Matt Knox is the Deer Program Supervisor for the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries and a regular contributor to Whitetail Times. He also is an official measurer for the Boon and Crockett Club, Pope and Young and the Long Hunters Society. Knox has been with the VDGIF for fourteen years. He received his graduate degree from the University of Georgia in Wildlife Management. Knox's study was guided by Dr. R. Larry Marchinton who is nationally recognized for his research work with whitetail deer. Readers can e-mail the author at [matt.knox@dgif.virginia.gov](mailto:matt.knox@dgif.virginia.gov) with questions and comments.*



*Today antler scores are a regular topic of conversation around hunting camps throughout the country. The big buck craze has become an addiction to many whitetail hunters with far less than realistic ambitions. Deer hunters that set their sights to accept nothing less than a trophy like this old massive 8-pointer that is approaching record book status – should just keep dreaming! Photo by Len Rue, Jr.*