

# SERIOUS

**I**F YOU SPEND TIME outdoors, you've likely stumbled across a half-dozen or so whitetail antlers over the years, but never the piles of sheds you might hear of others finding.

So how do you go from tripping over an antler on your way to your deer stand to filling your day pack with sheds?

The secret to upping your antler game is no secret at all: you just need to commit to making shed hunting a serious pursuit.

Be patient. It takes time to learn the basics of what to look for and hone your skills. You can't expect to find a lot of antlers right away.

But if you put the work in, you'll start to see the rewards. And from one year to the next, by building on what you've learned, refining your shed-hunting process and maximizing your search efficiency, you'll come away with more and more antlers.

The first few winters I started getting serious about sheds, my results weren't much better than stumbling across them. I began reading up on shed-hunting and added a few antlers to my collection. But it was what I learned along the way – things that don't come up often in shed-hunting articles and videos – that's taken me to the next level.

This past season, four or five years after I got my start, I found over 25 antlers including a gorgeous matched 9-point set.

And such success could be yours, too, if you decide to get serious about sheds.

A lot of materials on shed hunting repeat many of the same basic tips – and they'll help you. But here are some others I've come up with.

## HUNT ANTLERS, NOT DEER

Every year I make a point of shed hunting on all the properties where I have hunting permission and I've found a few antlers there, but not many.

Eventually it dawned on me: wouldn't it make more sense for deer to be in places where no one can hunt them?

Last year, I smoothed over my hair, brushed up on my manners and knocked on some doors. I met some amazingly kind people, had some wonderful conversations, and ended up with another antler or two.

There was the couple with the artsy, refurbished farm home, and 10 acres of brushy woods behind the barn.

Once I clarified that I just wanted to hunt for antlers, not the whole deer, the woman gave me permission outright. When her partner came home halfway through the conversation, he initiated some friendly bartering – asking for half of my finds in exchange for permission.

I played along, and haggled for rights

# S SHEDS

BY PAT OELSCHLAGER



COMMIT & CARRY HOME ARMFULS

to decide which antlers to keep or turn over. We shook hands and then I took a quick walk through the property.

In half an hour, I found two successive years of sheds from the same buck. I handed over the older one, and everyone walked away happy.

Other landowners also gave me the go-ahead. I wrote down all of their names, addresses, and phone numbers in a notebook and I'll be making the rounds again this year.

## UNDER THEIR NOSES

Deer hunters might hunt where big bucks live, but they won't get them all.

And if the woods are quiet after deer season, those bucks are left to peacefully drop their sheds in plain sight.

Two of my best shed spots are heavily hunted.

I found the first by accident one April, while scouting for turkeys on state forest with my cousin. Driving deep into the valley on a gravel road, we parked near

the driveway to a hunting camp to get out and listen for toms.

My cousin got out ahead of me, and before I knew it, he was hollering for me to come over. When I reached him, he was holding a big 4-point side.

We promptly forgot about turkeys and began the search for the matching antler. Fifteen minutes later, my cousin had it – and another, smaller antler – in his hand, and I was more jealous than a good cousin should be.

The following year, I returned to the same spot, conveniently “forgetting” to invite my cousin along. Sure enough, it paid off, with a big 5-point side!

Another time, I was back in the area for a work event in March and asked a buddy to come shed hunt with me. He picked up yet another antler just beyond the cabin inholding.

The bucks in the area must know enough to get scarce when deer hunters are there, but they don't pass up the wind-sheltered valley with its thick stands of



# SHED-HUNTING BASICS

There are tons of articles and videos out there on where exactly to look for antlers, how to train your eye to find them, how to train your dog to find them, even how to “train” friends and family to brave the freezing cold and find them with you.

I've read and watched a lot of these, and you should, too! Here's the quick version of tips and tricks:

## SEASONAL HABITAT

Pay attention to the types of habitat deer are using in your area in late winter.

There are plenty of commonly heard tips for shed hunting that all hold merit. Check the warmer south-facing slopes and look under big lone pine trees and dense stands of conifers that

provide good bedding and shelter in snow and brutally cold weather. Pay attention to available late-season food sources including harvested crop fields, blackberry and raspberry thickets, regenerating clearcuts and late-dropping soft mast trees.

## TRAIN YOUR EYES

Once you know where to look, you need to learn to better recognize antlers. Get a jump-start on antler recognition by studying pictures of sheds on the ground, or take a walk and toss an antler in front of you in different types of cover.

Pay attention to the curves of the antler contrasted against its surroundings.

My first few serious shed seasons, I spent a lot of time walking through cover, wondering if I was



The author admits he was jealous when his cousin picked up a big 9-point matched set, and another antler, on a turkey-scouting-turned-shed-hunting excursion on public land. The next year, when the author “conveniently forgot” to invite his cousin along, he picked up a nice 5-point side. These finds all show heavily-hunted tracts might offer good shed hunting, as well.



walking right past every shed and missing them.

Now I cover ground quickly, with confidence that I will see at least a good number of antlers there.

Eventually you'll begin to notice things like tiny rodent skeletons or small broken-off antler tines that assure you you're not walking right by sheds.

## LOOSEN UP

No, you aren't allowed to knock antlers off of a buck, but pay attention to obstacles that can.

I've read article after article about checking fence crossings, creek crossings or anything a buck might have to jump over that will cause his loose antlers to pop off when landing.

One of my go-to spots is a back-to-back obstacle scenario: a creek crossing right next to a crossing on a busy road. I can't say for sure that the antlers come loose while the deer are jump-

ing, but I've found one or more sheds there four out of the past five years.

While I've never found an antler at a fence crossing, last spring, my dad's hunting buddy Ray found two matched 8-point sets, 10 yards apart from each other, along a stone wall right next to his cabin. It can't hurt to check.

## DO YOUR HOMEWORK

The best time to scout for sheds is late January and early February, when deer tend to herd up and follow their winter patterns.

Scouting at this time of year, when many bucks still are carrying their racks, will increase your success after their antlers start dropping.

A walk through the woods a week or so after fresh snowfall will give you a pretty clear picture of where deer are bedding, feeding and traveling most. You might even find an early shed or two before rodents or other shed hunters get to them.

hemlock and white pine in the cold and snow.

I've also scooped up sheds on a piece of public property that's edged with walking trails. While many might overlook the brushy hilltops, the ladder stands I found showed me the area was hunted hard.

I thought about writing the spot off, but decided to walk the thorny thicket out the hillside to an overgrown goldenrod field thick with saplings.

I spent two or three February evenings exploring the area after work, and jumped several nice bucks – and found a huge matched set, as well.

I went back several more times that season and found some smaller antlers in the surrounding area.

By the following year, I'd moved about

two hours away, but returned to the spot on a Sunday in early March.

I spent about four hours in the area and walked away with 8 antlers including a small 6-point set and the big 9-point set, found right in the same area as the big match from the year before.

## OVERLOOKED PARCELS

You also might find shed-hunting opportunities on publicly owned or preserved land. Most places have local land trusts, open-space preservation initiatives, or something similar that sets aside undeveloped land for the public.

Many of these places are listed on county or township websites, though they can be hard to find.

My favorite spot like this is a county-

**The author nabbed the big matched 9-point set below in a thicket surrounded by tree stands. While the area is heavily hunted, it's paid off in sheds, and these antlers were picked up in nearly the same spot as a huge matched pair the previous year. Meanwhile, overlooked public properties often are shed hotspots. In one year, the author found five antlers from five different bucks, all within 100 yards of each other in such a place. And, more amazingly, all were left sides.**



owned parcel that's marked with yellow-and-black signs that resemble "Posted" signs.

It's open to the public, though its primary purpose is to provide stream protection and flood control, not recreation.

I first explored the parcel in late January and saw seven or eight bucks moving together through the field at dusk. I went back several more times in January and mid-February, found where the bucks bedded, and kept circling back until the antlers started to fall.

I ended up with five antlers from five different bucks – all within 100 yards of each other. And all of them were the left side shed!

The Internet can be your best ally in finding these overlooked shed-hunting spots.

County and township websites often contain open-space maps. Online tax maps can help you identify property owners from whom to seek permission.

The Game Commission mapping center is a great resource for finding information on Hunter Access properties. And there are commercial mapping sites that also can help in finding property.

No matter where you go, be sure you have permission to be there and can take the antlers you find.

Some parks ask users to "leave only footprints, take only pictures."

Contact the appropriate authority before exploring a new parcel to make sure you know what you can and can't do.

## HUNTING EFFICIENT

Nowadays, I split my shed hunting into three distinct phases: pre-season scouting, pick-up missions and exploration.

I scout primarily in January and February, but I'm always thinking about sheds, especially when I walk new land.

I'll keep an eye out for deer sign while rabbit hunting or hiking with friends, and spend a little time nosing around. I get



**For all the sheds the author worked hard to find, one found 10 yards from a driveway remains his biggest.**

right in the thick cover until I find where the deer are at that time of year, and when shed hunting I'll focus on these areas instead of skirting around the edges.

Over the past several years, I've learned the most productive shed hotspots on a good half-dozen reliable properties.

I've narrowed in my efforts in these areas to a few acres or less, and generally spend a short amount of time walking them during the peak weeks in mid-to-late March.

If I don't find anything on a first trip, I'll wait a few weeks and do a second or third run-through.

If I know or suspect a spot is getting other shed-hunting pressure, I go earlier and more often.

But I generally wait until late March or early April for prime spots with no pressure, and only visit them once.

Finally, in between my high-percent-age collection trips, I'll always make a few forays into uncharted territory. I often pick up a shed or two, and narrow down the areas where I'd want to focus if I return the following season.

## **LUCKY & GOOD**

I've found a fair number of really nice antlers through hard work and intentional searching, but my biggest shed to date was found 10 yards from the driveway while rabbit hunting a friend's small property the week before Christmas.

My brother-in-law and I had just walked past the chicken coop, where the landowner had left a big 5-point side



lying. Looking up, I said, "Hey, Dan, that's funny, doesn't that clump of grass over there look just like that antl – holy smokes, look at that thing!"

I've heard the biggest bucks sometimes drop their antlers early after a hard fall running does, and sure enough, here was a massive 5-point side, freshly fallen in the third week of December!

In the time since I learned to look for them, I've found sheds anytime from turkey season all the way through June and July.

Any time I go for a walk in the woods, there's always a little part of me doing a quick scan for anything and everything remotely antler-shaped. I spend a lot of time staring at vines and weather-bleached branches, but it pays off.

Now that I've got a few years' worth of antlers, I've had to come up with creative ways to use them. With coffee tables and window ledges just about filled, I've had a lot of fun making lamps, wine racks, pendants, and other knickknacks for myself, family, and friends.

Now with just a few more antlers I'll be on my way to a chandelier! **Gn**