

**Ames Plantation
Newsletter - February 20, 2008**

A Look Backwards at '07-'08

If you've ever read Bubba Dickens' "*Tale of Two Seasons*," you'd know that he had it about right:

"It was the best of seasons, it was the worst of seasons . . ."

It is hard to balance individual praise for bringing in young, undersize bucks and at the same time say that one aspect of our QDM program sputtered this year.

. . . as sure as it takes admirable character to bring in a young buck, it is also true that expectations for next year have been diminished by all the young bucks brought in . . .

Genuine mistakes happen. And sometimes mistakes happen to those firmly convinced that they are immune. Of course, this can be funny and it takes a good humored gent to go along with the ribbing. Killing a young buck, or one teetering on the edge of the B&C threshold, has a way of bringing things into focus. Expectations are suddenly tempered with a good dose of realism and unrealistic demands suddenly become just that . . . unrealistic and idealistic. After a goof, a Member understands that no program will be perfect. The best Members are also anguished when they bring a young buck in and few do it twice.

Yet, having so many guilty faces on the board breeds tolerance. Having your picture on the bad or ugly board is not so bad if there is anonymity in numbers. This year, President Lincoln could have had his picture up there posing with a unicorn and not have been noticed.

The numbers on our big buck board increased by 50% over last year, which is about what I had hoped. ***However, our little buck board increased by about 100%.*** I am confident that by killing so many young bucks our program has been set back.

We've got to have fun doing this and we should never do a buck the disservice of B&C regret after killing him. It is a hard thing letting big bucks walk. As a hunter, I know how tough it is and how difficult it is to judge them immediately and correctly.

The Ames experience is different than almost anywhere else in the country. It is not for everyone. However, it is one that is highly sought. Our waiting list attests to that. You are part of something that depends on you for you to enjoy its success. Here, let me commend the true sportsmen who brought in a buck knowing that they had to pay the price and spend a season on the bad or ugly boards. **You have my deepest respect.** *Of course, it's down here on the bottom line after I've spent a whole page fussing.* Life is hard, sometimes.

The Buck Harvest

We killed 58 bucks. Of that, 33 were above 120 -- and 25 below 120. That works out to a .57-to-.43 ratio. **At this rate, for every 100 shooters brought in, 75 non-shooters also are killed.**

Of the 33 that scored above 120:

4 were 2 ½-years-old and averaged 122 B&C

22 were 3 ½-years-old and averaged 130 B&C

5 were 4 ½-years-old and averaged 135 B&C

2 were 5 ½-years-old, one had a broken main beam the other scored 128 3/8

Average score for all mature bucks (i.e., all bucks > 120) was 130.

Scores ranged from 120 to 150 4/8 and 3 bucks scored 150+.

No 2 ½-year-old buck scored over 124.

Of the 12 that scored below 120:

5 were 2 ½-years-old and averaged 114 B&C

7 were 3 ½-years-old and averaged 114 B&C

Of the 13 that scored below 110:

1 was 1 ½-years-old and scored 96 (the highest scoring 1 ½-year-old we've ever seen)

8 were 2 ½-years-old and averaged 99

4 were 3 ½-years-old and averaged 99

We killed two 5 ½-year-old bucks this year. They show that older bucks are out there.

Average score for all 58 bucks was 119.

Overall, we did not even average 120!

Doe Harvest

Our original goal was 180 and we did not hit that. But I did not push it as the season went along because I felt comfortable with how it was going. We ended up killing 167 does and that is enough. I think we did very well in that department.

We killed 250 deer all told. Button bucks made up 9% of the antlerless harvest and that is acceptable, although a few Members account for several percentage points.

What to Expect

The deer herd is resilient and there are good bucks that made it through. We've seen several fine shooters since the season ended; and the biggest buck on Ames at the beginning of the season is still the biggest buck now. He may be un-killable by legal means and will most likely live out a happy life.

But we will never get to the place where enough mature bucks are in the fall population to allow individual Members the best chance to see a shooter, unless *these same bucks are allowed to walk away when they are young*. We have a realistic and ambitious goal for yearly harvest of mature bucks, but we'll not get there, if we continue to kill this many young bucks.

There will be two major changes. One set of changes will deal with Membership and fees and the other a new set of penalties.

Fees and Membership

Among Members, there was considerable concern about having too many people in the woods this year. We heard more about this than any other issue. Therefore, we will take a bit of pressure off of the deer herd and also off of the Membership by lowering the number of Members from 125 to 115. This will mean about 20 less stands in the woods and about 10 less trucks in the lots. Natural attrition within the Membership should account for the 10 we'll miss.

Five years ago, Ames Plantation promised no fee increase for 3 years. We've been able to exceed that time frame by 2 years, but now the time has come to go up. Original plans were to increase fees to \$1,500, but by decreasing the Membership 10 people, it will require \$1,630 per Member to make up for the shortfall.

Next year's Membership will be lowered to 115 and fees will be \$1,630 per person.

Penalties

There will be a new set of penalties associated with killing young bucks. I have lifted the sections from the contract where the changes occur and they are below:

2. There will be a 2-buck limit. Only 2 bucks may be harvested by any Member in a season.
3. If a Member harvests more than 2 antlered bucks in a season, there will be a \$250 **(change to \$500)** fine. Hunting privileges for the season, and possibly Membership status, will be terminated (except as noted under exemption: Guest harvest Regulations: 27:B&C). A "buck" is any male deer with one antler exceeding 3 inches. There will be one other exemption: 1) if the third buck is a spike with less than 4-inch antlers and mistakenly shot as a doe.
4. If the first buck harvested scores less than 120 B & C inches but more than 110 inches, there will be a \$100 **(change to \$250)** penalty.
5. If a second buck is harvested that scores less than 120 B & C inches but more than 110 inches, there will be a \$200 **(change to \$350)** penalty.
6. If the first buck harvested in a season scores less than 110 B & C points, there will be a \$150 **(change to \$300)** penalty, and the Member loses all hunting privileges for bucks for the remainder of that deer hunting season. The Member may hunt does for the remainder of that season.

7. If a second buck harvested in a season scores less than 110 B & C, there will be a \$250 (**change to \$500**) penalty and the Member loses all hunting privileges for the remainder of that deer hunting season.

8. The antlers of any buck scoring less than 115 B&C will be removed at the check-in station and will remain in the possession of Ames Plantation for educational purposes.

There will be one additional change. For quite awhile I have concerned about the misfortune of Members who shot a spike buck early in the year, mistaking it for a doe. As it stands now a spike having antlers more than 3 inches would mean a fine and no chance to continue hunting bucks --or, if killed as a second buck, loss of all hunting privileges. We will change the ruling concerning spikes this year to read: **Any spike buck that is killed having antlers greater than 3 inches and with no branch longer than 1 inch will count as a buck toward the Member's quota. The fine for killing such a buck will be \$100 and, if taken as a first buck, will involve no loss of hunting privilege for a second buck. It is generally understood that any spike buck killed will have been mistaken for a doe. Two such spikes in one season will revoke the privilege for the next season. Seemingly routine or careless harvest of such spikes over time, by any Member, will be a subjective assessment reserved for Ames Plantation management and can call for consultation with the Member and loss of the spike privilege.**

This will help protect folks who are trying to kill does but make an easily made and very costly mistake. We'll try it this year and see if it causes too many spikes to come in or if it leads to more button bucks biting the dust. The bottom line is to use the same care as before.

Tougher penalties mean greater temptations, especially once a mistake is on the ground. There must be more self-policing among the Membership. Cheaters must be weeded out and that sometimes cannot happen unless Members report them. I appreciate information from individuals; but where possible, if several hunters together have information, it is especially helpful. For those of you who think the rules and penalties may test your moral fibre, then Ames is not the place for you. Bad decisions will eventually find proper reactions. There are other eyes and ears in the woods.

Observation Forms

A summary of all observation forms and your own personal hunting log is enclosed. Also enclosed is a copy of wind accumulation from the National Weather Station on Ames. For example, look at December 16th when 79 miles of air moved past the station (it also rained a little over an inch). Obviously the 16th was a windy and unsettled day - at least during some portion of the 24 hours. It probably preceded a front, because we had a heavy frost on the 17th. Now look at December 21st. There was a heavy fog that morning and we had just over an inch of rain. The wind column shows that 7 miles of air moved past the station during that 24-hour period. The 21st was a much calmer 24-hours than on the 16th.

One thing about the '07/'08 season, if deer wanted to get out and take a stroll, they had to do it most of the time in pretty poor weather. It made for hard hunting, but in some ways the warmer temperatures may have been a blessing for a deer herd that had been under stress most of the year.

The usual graphs and other information also are included. Keep in mind as you prowled around through the data that this information is being kept for all past seasons and is beginning to provide the foundation for strong analysis and reasonable conclusions.

Spotlight Census

As this is written, we have been able to run the census only once. Rain, frost-heave and muddy roads have kept us from completing the project. On the night that we were able to go we saw 118 deer and they were distributed over the entire Plantation. This cranks out an estimate of 1,416 deer, which is one every 13 acres or about 50 per square mile. Spotlight census' are not precise and at least 4 nights are needed to say much about anything, so a single night's observations are barely strong enough to say anything more than that the deer herd seems to have plenty of representatives left. We saw a couple of good bucks and one that must of been real fine, to hear a truck-full of folk tell it. We have a good time doing this and I want to say "thank-you" to the Members that help us. We could not do it without them.

Growing pains (Dr. Craig Harper)

Every group worthy of existence has growing pains. So it is with the Ames Plantation Hunting Club. However, before I get into my evaluation of the 2007-08 season, let me remind all members of a most-important point: You should be in this hunting club to **have fun**. If you are not having fun and enjoying the process of **managing** a deer herd, you should consider joining a different club.

Congratulations for making my predictions the past two years come true! You killed 3 bucks that scored 150+ in 2006 and did it again in 2007. You killed 33 bucks that scored 120+ this past season. That is more than one per 500 acres (given a 16,000-acre hunting area). Also, you killed not one, but two 5-year-old bucks! That is right on target after only 4 years of management. Yes, on paper, it is disappointing to see so many 2-year-old bucks killed. But, you must remember, this is a process. And, for many of you, this is something you have never done before. You are learning and, overall, doing a good job. In the next 2 years, I predict the number of young bucks killed will decline significantly as the membership learns to age deer on the hoof and judge antlers more accurately. But, regardless, the program has been highly successful, even with several young bucks killed this past year. **NEVER have so many mature bucks been killed per hunter on Ames Plantation!** So, let's not dwell on the negatives, but concentrate on the positives and what can be done to further our success.

One of the goals of the Ames QDM program is to balance the buck age structure. Thus, one of our objectives is to allow bucks to reach at least 3 years old before they are eligible for harvest. To help identify 3-year-old bucks, we set an antler restriction of 120 inches, which is the average score of 3-year-old bucks on Ames Plantation. If implemented, this restriction protects all but the largest 2-year-old bucks. **Please realize, there is no antler restriction that protects all 2-year-old bucks and allows all older bucks to be eligible for harvest. That is why it is so important to learn to age bucks using body characteristics.** The antler restriction of 120 is in place to help give you another *clue* to age. We have combined the 4-year age restriction with the 120 antler restriction so older bucks that don't score above 120 can be harvested without penalty. But it should be *your will and desire* to allow 2-year-old bucks that score above 120 to walk! Imagine what they will produce if allowed to reach 4 years of age. ***Imagine what the yearling 9-pointer that scored 96 would have become in another 3 years!*** Nonetheless, these are not negatives to dwell on, but shining examples of how good the herd and harvest can be in the future if all bucks are allowed to reach at least 3 years old.

I think it will help the membership realize we are all serious about the management program and that each buck should be evaluated carefully before shooting. Let's face it, we all make mistakes, but we should also learn from them. Continuing to kill 2-year-old bucks and small 3-year-old bucks cannot be accepted.

Although the doe harvest was slightly lower in 2007 than the past few years, that's OK. We are still right on target. Historically, there had never been as many does killed as bucks before we implemented the QDM program in 2004. Since that time, you have killed more than twice the number of does than bucks each year. This has been most beneficial for the herd, and for the hunting. It is common to hear you talk about seeing bucks fighting and chasing does. And the amount of buck sign present is unprecedented. This is because the sex ratio is getting closer and closer to 1:1.

We **will** get there. And I guarantee the quality of the deer and the quality of the hunting on Ames Plantation will be renown within our region and the envy of many a deer hunter who would like to get in such a program. Hang in there; September will be here before we know it. I'll see you then—

*Craig A. Harper
Associate Professor, Forestry, Wildlife, and
Fisheries*

Cutting Edge

I was at the Society of American Forester Meetings earlier this month and heard a talk by Dr. Jerry Tuskan from the National Laboratories at Oak Ridge. He and others are working on biomass fuels and his specialty is using trees to make ethanol. One problem with using trees is the part of the tree that gives it its strength: lignin. Lignin is not well understood chemically and is very expensive to break down during the process of making ethanol. Jerry's work is centered around a tree genus, *Populus*, that contains

aspens. In a nutshell, Jerry is describing the genome and learning what genes control things important to making the species more user friendly. For example, they have been able to manipulate the gene for lignin production, something a tree spends considerable energy to produce; and by turning it “off” they can make a tree grow 18 inches in diameter in 5 years with much less lignin. If you want to read more about it, the work took the front page of the September 2006 issue of *Science*, a space reserved only for the most highly-powered research. It required more than 100 authors.

Even as complex as it is, this is practical and good work and all of us stand to benefit. *I'd truly hate to do without such science, even if I don't understand it.*

Yet, the talk led me to wonder what might be around the corner. Someday, and this will not be tomorrow, in fact for most of us not in our lifetimes, we may see “designer” trees, created solely to produce wildlife foods. This also is good work.

But the talk also led me to consider the uneasy notion and we may be entering an era where our technology will outstrip our moral and ethical abilities to evaluate the application of what we know how to do, especially with wildlife populations. In the new huntsman's world where the old and hard-won values of stealth are being replaced by gadgetry and with each new thing complete with next year's obsolescence, I am forced to ponder an uneasy notion that biotechnology might overwhelm the moral and ethical touchstones that keep hunting balanced between the single-mindedness of the big kill and the gentle amenities that should attend the experience. For each new generation, huge leaps in biotechnology become simply more hair on the dog. Do we risk losing something of value?

Consider this: would you rather kill a large, wild-bred buck on Ames Plantation or the world record buck, held tamely behind a fence and whose genes had been artificially arranged to give him his rack? To my mind, there is something smacking of foppery where breeding programs are designed to give us bucks bigger than ever walked the earth and something freakish to reach in to tweak another species' gene merely to satisfy our own ego.

I'll hope for a 120+ buck on Ames. One that is completely unfettered by my simple wishes, unalloyed and totally wild, a genetic assemblage held together largely because he and his kin have been able to avoid me. Think about that the next time you stand over a buck. Here lies the intelligence of several millennia. The more I think about it, there is something not merely wild and anxious in an old, monster-racked buck that keeps me from seeing him. There is a measuring, almost a dismissal in the way he evaluates my abilities and motions, in the fact that he knows my capabilities and plots my movements and makes his own to match in the smoky mirror of ridges, water and brush. He might scare us if we could see him watching us in the dark.

He is as deeply feral as are the impulses that make the woods so appealing to my own blood. *I'd hate to lose that, even if I don't understand it.*

Parting Shot

My son and I got back from a northern NM elk hunt on the Wednesday before Christmas. All told, we spent a week driving out and back, huntin' and 'sploring. We were told tale after tale of ice, snow and road closings, but plowed ahead like, well, like manic elk hunters, and found things better than predicted or at least passable.

It snowed just about every day we were there, but the mountain road crews knew what to do and a fair amount of experience on slick roads served me in good stead - the people out there take white roads in such calm stride that it is hard not to simply go along with the flow.

It was -8 degrees the day we got up to hunt and that was a tad below what I'm used to. The quality of the western variety of cold is different than here. Cold hurts us more here, maybe because of the moisture. But it is also possible to stand outside a high Mountain camp, looking up at the stars talking about how much less severe the western cold seems . . . and look down to find your coffee frozen solid.

Our tags were for cows and we killed a cow a'piece. The next day we took a side trip to the Mesa Verde to see the cliff dwellings. We ate breakfast near a little town called Montezuma and I should have known better. Coming back that night, on slick roads and as sick as a frog-poisoned dog, I decorated the San Juan National Forest's snow-covered landscape with all manner of alimentary refuse (please, in this century, do not mention the word ..."omelet" ... to me). Back at the lodge I came to the conclusion that my son, Brian, currently in medical school, might not make such a good doctor after all. He told me that it looked like I would not die and then went to sleep. This is a literal bedside manner that seemed to me to be mighty poor, despite its bare accuracy.

Once I recovered a bit, the first thing that smelled good to me was coffee. A few tentative sips from an I-40 truckstop put me back on the road to recovery. It occurred to me that if the word "hunting" had a smell, it would be coffee. Take the crash of footfalls in fresh fallen leaves and the wild and plaintive honk of geese a'roaming south, the anticipation of "opening day" and the first white frost of a young dawn, squirrels that sound like deer and silent deer that step between the leaves, good friends, food and stories and heat shimmering above a wood stove –and mix 'em all together and you'd have a cupful. It is a long time til next season. Here's something to help remind you of the good times . . . and ones yet to come:

*To these the dedicated
coffee hounds
wherever they might
be found.
Let them savor each careful sip
down to settled grounds.
And may the cold nights find them
with feet before the fires
where best of memories follow*

*the keenest of desires,
the aroma whispers upwards
to a mind that never tires,
the heat leans us forward
toward a time yet to come
and anticipation builds
around the joy of purest fun,
so while hunting days are numbered,
they add to more than just a sum.*