

What *is* a “cull” buck?

Tennessee deer hunters now kill more deer annually than at any time in history. With a burgeoning deer population, it is no longer a real challenge for most hunters to merely kill a deer. Most hunters today yearn for big bucks—“trophy bucks”—and a hunting experience that mimics those seen on cable television hunting shows. Unfortunately, many of those shows have portrayed misconceptions and fostered unrealistic expectations for many hunters. Terms such as “cull buck,” “management buck,” and “trophy buck” are bantered about as if every viewer is able to distinguish them for removal from the population with precision. Sometimes, no, *usually*, it is evident those on TV do not understand these terms either. This has caused much confusion among hunters who are often trying to practice Quality Deer Management.

The terms “cull buck,” “management buck,” and “trophy buck” were first used (and still are) on large ranches in Texas where deer herds are managed to produce an abundance of fully mature bucks (5 – 8 years old), many of which may grow large enough to qualify for the [Boone & Crockett Club’s Big Game Records Book](#). On most of these ranches, deer hunting is fee-based. That is, hunters pay a handsome amount to hunt, and often an additional fee is charged if a buck is killed. The price usually varies per size of the buck.

By definition, “management bucks” and “trophy bucks” are **mature animals** differentiated only by antler size. Neither is taken before the buck is at least 5, and usually 6, years old. For example, a 6-year-old buck that measures (or scores) 145 B&C inches would be considered a “management buck,” and the cost of killing this buck would be much less than a 6-year-old buck that scores 180 B&C inches, which would be considered a “trophy buck.”

A “cull buck” is one that does not meet certain antler criteria within a specific age class. For example, on King Ranch, Kingsville, TX, a “cull buck” is defined as any buck with at least one unbranched antler, any buck ≥ 3 years old with 7 or fewer antler points, any buck ≥ 4 years old with 8 or fewer antler points, and any buck ≥ 5 years old that scores under 130 B&C inches. Age of live deer is estimated based on body characteristics. These criteria are used because bucks that meet these criteria have virtually no chance of developing antlers large enough to qualify for B&C. **These criteria are maintained on King Ranch to provide more hunting recreation, not to influence genetics.**

Prior to implementing these criteria, hunters on King Ranch harvested 300 bucks annually, nearly all of which were considered “trophy-class.” Now, with the culling criteria in place, 1,000 – 1,500 bucks are harvested annually. That is, nearly 80% of the bucks killed are considered “culls.” **The removal of these bucks, however, has not influenced the number of trophy-class animals in the population.** And after an intensive 10-year research project where hunters and managers worked intensively to remove all “cull bucks” as possible on a 10,000-acre area of the King Ranch, culling produced no change in average antler characteristics by age class. This is very pertinent for landowners and hunters on small or large properties.

This research has shown hunters should **not** try to cull bucks with what are deemed undesirable antler characteristics (such as spikes, forkhorns, and “scrub bucks”) in an effort to influence antler characteristics within a given area. Research has also shown yearling bucks with relatively small antlers produce racks the vast majority of hunters would be proud of by the time the deer reach 3 or 4 years old (100 – 130 B&C inches or more). Those bucks may not produce antlers that would qualify for the B&C Record Book, but they are being shot well before they would produce their largest set of antlers (6 or 7 years old) anyway.

Instead of worrying about genetics, hunters interested in larger bucks should allow all bucks to reach at least 3 years of age before harvest. No buck can express his genetic potential until he reaches maturity with adequate nutrition. Every animal is unique and should be viewed with respect. Every mature buck should be viewed as a “trophy.” Age should be regarded more highly by hunters than antler dimensions.

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