

MORE THAN A SCORE

BUCKY
IHLENFELDT
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OF AUTHOR

For the past eight years, Boone and Crockett Club Official Measurer (OM) Bucky Ihlenfeldt has visited several Wisconsin schools every year to teach the next generation about hunting, conservation, and the Boone and Crockett Club. Here's why he does it.

I first became interested in records when I was still trying to figure out how to keep deer from smelling me. Why were some hunters so successful? More than a few years ago, we would go to the school library to find a big game records book. We all peered over the shoulder of whoever was in charge of turning those pages. It's funny how we remember those brief moments as kids and young hunters.

Years later, I was deeply immersed in this passion of ranking and measuring big Midwest whitetails as an Official Measurer for the Wisconsin Buck & Bear Club. I also became an Official Measurer for the Boone and Crockett Club and Pope and Young Club. As a measurer, I take a trip down memory lane with each hunter's

hunting story. This is one of the greatest benefits of being a representative for these organizations, but there is always more. And that led me to ask, "What else can I do?"

I sometimes see the younger generations watching as we measure at local and state sports shows. Then they whisper to each other, and I think, "That's it!" I love to engage in conversation as I approach them and ask, "What questions do you guys have? Want to learn how this works?" It is then that I connect with the next generation. Honestly, it made me thirsty for more!

So, I reached out to local schools in northeast Wisconsin and offered to help familiarize their students with how and why we measure and enter trophies into records, all while teaching

the backbone of the whole thing, which is conservation.

I was very nervous walking back into a classroom with today's youth. It became easy once I set some ground rules. "I took vacation time to come and spend time with you," I explained. "All you have to do is pay attention and have fun." I tell them how the data we collect provides biological harvest and general location information, creating a conservation record. That record is a snapshot in time, and it paints a picture of the current state of wildlife management and the health of our wildlife herds across North America. "We are citizen scientists," I tell them.

When I come into this classroom today, I'm much more organized than I was years ago. The class consists of a handout, which is a

follow-along test. We go through it together with a slide show, and their participation is mandatory to answer the questions on the test. The slideshow is a collection of facts and data going back to the days of Theodore Roosevelt when he and other members of the Club understood that protecting big game with laws and regulations was paramount. I also discuss how the Club established a system to measure and record these animals, creating the records-based system that is used today. We then discuss the basics of measuring typical and non-typical deer antlers because nearly all these students are familiar with Midwest whitetails.

I have a small mainframe 10-point whitetail I have altered somewhat that





depicts how and where to measure the main beam length, tine lengths, smallest areas of where to get the four circumference lengths, and then inside spread. As we find the data, they add that to a score sheet and follow along.

I add some abnormal points that I can install and remove, which really helps visualize the difference between typical and non-typical scoring practices. It makes the topics more understandable when the students can inspect a deer antler or a bear skull I usually bring along, again trying to keep their attention for the short time I have to convey this message.

When I spend time in the classroom, that's my chance to explain that buying a license, participating in hunter-harvest surveys, and having an animal scored is playing a part in conservation. This is a chance to encourage these youth to step up and be part of the future of wildlife conservation. I explain why it's important to get behind something they believe in. By joining these national, state, or local organizations, we are part of citizen science, which is essential to ensuring proper wildlife management. Maybe along the way, I will see them again with their trophy and another great hunting story.

Q&A WITH BUCKY IHLENFELDT BY JENN SCHWAB

Bucky is one of our top recruiting Official Measurers, with over 200 member sign-ups. He's also heavily invested in recruiting the next generation of hunter-conservationists, which is why we chose Bucky to be our "test" subject for the inaugural Official Measurer Spotlight series. Read Bucky's take on how to talk with trophy owners and convince them they should sign up as a member.

1. Tell me how you started with the Club and why you became an Official Measurer.

I wanted to get better at field judging, and I had already been a member of the Wisconsin Buck & Bear Club, so I started volunteering for local events, eventually getting certified at the state level. I thought the more deer I handled would help me get more accurate at field judging animals. When I started measuring, I loved it—deer, bears, and the individual stories that came with each trophy.

I applied to be an OM for the Pope and Young Club and Boone and Crockett, hoping to be invited to a class one day. On my 39th birthday, I opened a letter from B&C in my truck at the end of our



driveway. My family wondered what was going on when I started yelling. I was invited to an OM class in Missoula!

The trophies I've seen, the places I've been, the people I've met, and the friends I've made have been amazing.

2. What do you enjoy about measuring trophies? Any downsides or aspects that get under your skin?

I enjoy every aspect of the measuring process—and the challenges. So many trophies are unique. I really enjoy the hunters and the stories associated with their trophies and adventures. At the same time, I get a chance to explain how and why we measure their trophies.

As a volunteer, like all of us OMs, the biggest thing that gets under my skin is the "nets are for fish" comments. One of the best explanations ever was by Roy Grace. He

said, "Do you state the money you made last year based on gross or net?" I think if there was some sort of effort to "debunk" some of the traditional naysayer's comments about our efforts, it would be that we could help our transparency. It's hard to beat honest facts with history and conservation in our background.

I also fear a score sheet being returned with the dreaded red ink corrections. Come on, that's a real concern for us OMs!

3. Tell me about a trophy you've measured that sticks with you, one you won't forget.

This is an easy one. I was contacted years ago to measure a trophy for a gentleman. In his initial call, we discussed the process and where I was located so he could bring his recent trophy to my shop, where I measured all the trophies. At the end of

the call, he asked me if my shop was wheelchair accessible. I told him we could open the overhead door.

The following night, he and his friend showed up right on time. I opened the overhead door, and we were able to get him out of the van and into my shop in the winter conditions.

In true Wisconsin fashion, they asked if I would like a beer they had brought along. "Maybe after the deer is scored," I said. This guy was so proud of this deer he had taken and how he had taken it off the ground with his crossbow. This is one of the guys that brings you a head and has no idea about the measuring process, and we were really having fun. When I tallied the score, I was pretty excited as I reached across the table and said, "Congratulations, your deer has qualified for B&C and the state record books!" Tears between him and his friend and high-fives followed.

It turns out, his friend had picked him up from the hospital that day, stopped to buy some beer, and headed to my place. He had been battling cancer and was in his last round of chemotherapy and somehow talked his way out of the hospital that afternoon. We did some

paperwork, and I only needed a copy of his license before everything was submitted. At the end of the night, we loaded him back up, and back to the hospital he went, with smiles all around.

A few weeks later, I got a call that he had gotten his certificate, and his last cancer scan came back clear. He then asked if I could come to a party that was being held for the deer, with it on display for friends and family. It was his B&C party. I wasn't able to make it, but he sent me pictures of his event. It was really cool.

The following year, there was a small local sports show. I thought he would enjoy bringing his deer to display, so I reached out a few times. I found his friend's phone number, too, but I heard the bad news—the cancer had come back for a short battle, one that he unfortunately lost. The friendship those two had as hunting buddies was epic stuff. I wish I could've bottled that energy between those guys and shared it with youth hunters. I love to share that story.

4. How have you managed to recruit so many new members?

I'm no Phil Herrnberg-er, let me tell ya!

Like Phil and Stan Zirbel, all of us OMs do our best to promote the Club. For me, it's easy to describe the who, why, and what drives me (and us) to promote and volunteer our time and effort with our organizations. I can honestly say that the owner of every single entry I process through my shop that makes the B&C minimum becomes a member.

I measure nearly all the trophies in my shop at a designated table, with my credentials proudly displayed above and my certificates from the organizations I support. I think when they see the level of support I have, it becomes contagious. When hunters bring in a head that doesn't make the minimum, they sometimes offer me a tip for my time. I'll ask them to round it up and put it toward the membership of the group the hunter was hoping to enter, either B&C or P&Y. I explain that I'd rather they tip themselves and become a new member!

5. Where have you had the most luck recruiting new members?

The sport shows I attend. I have no issue standing in the aisle and stopping people to explain why I'm passionate about B&C. When you have support from like-minded people like Carl Frey and Brett Ross, sharing that excitement is easy! Even better is when you have the B&C staff and leadership there; it's great for all membership levels to see how B&C is working hard for the future. Make no doubt, I've had the best teachers. Sharing a wall tent with great guys like Justin Spring and Jack Reneau are some of my best days and conversations.

I also have good luck promoting trophies that I've measured through Facebook, Instagram, and sometimes TikTok. When I share that (with the trophy owner's

permission), it creates the wonder of "What does my trophy score?" with others. It's easy, actually.

6. If someone initially doesn't want to become a member, how do you convince them?

Try common sense. When you put it in terms of what an entry or membership "gets them" versus the journey it's taken to obtain that trophy, it makes the entry or membership an easy investment. If that doesn't work, ask them how they celebrated their trophy or remember their friend's trophy celebrations. There is usually a case of beer or some fine spirits that cost more than a membership, which will last an entire year.

7. What can the Club do to help recruit new members, particularly through the OMs?

The investment the Club and volunteers have made in the booth at Dallas Safari Club and Sheep Show is outstanding! That presence and placement gets us in the right place, in front of people looking to get behind an organization. That's the easy one.

For us OMs, having the available information ready when people have those tough questions is where we are most valuable. If you don't know, it's all available through the B&C website through available presentations, talking points, and even the OM Facebook page. I know Karlie was sometimes tired of me asking for resources like position statements and talking points, but it helps so much! Having the Club engaged in social media is where I think the audience is looking for us.

By the way, I'm humbled to be asked for a spotlight. I'm just trying to pull the rope in the right direction with the rest of my friends and family. ■



Bucky with past Vice President of Big Game Records, Buck Buckner at the Sheep Show in January, 2024.