

# FIELD

WHITETAIL  
THE  
THIRD IN A  
SERIES

# JUDGING

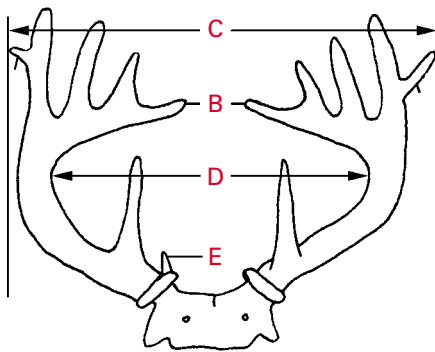
By Jay A. Lesser

You can quickly evaluate antler size by using the deer's ears, eyes, and nose as "rulers."

There has been more written about hunting the whitetail deer than any other big-game species in North America. That is because each year more hunters pursue the whitetail deer than almost all of the other North American big-game species combined. The whitetail deer is certainly the most populous of all of our big-game species and the most widely distributed of all the North American antlered animals. With whitetail numbers reaching all-time highs in most of the places where they are found, the whitetail deer is the number one big-game quarry of an overwhelming number of hunters. These hunters come from all walks of life, rich and poor, young and old, male and female, and almost all of them have dreamed of taking

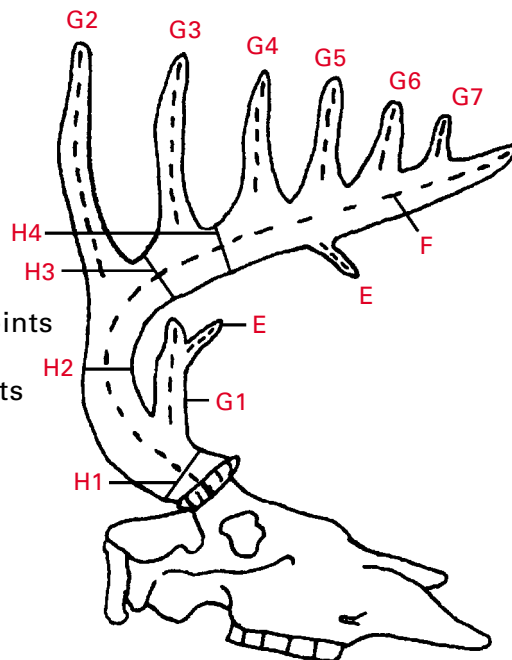
a really large antlered buck, a "records book" buck. Statistically, very few do, but the possibility always exists, and that is incentive enough for most of us to hold onto that dream.

I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to hunt whitetail deer in some very interesting places over the last 25 years and I have taken some nice trophies for the areas hunted. However, out of all those hunts, I have only had the opportunity to shoot a records book buck once. That chance came in 1994 in south Texas. I was hunting on the San Roman Ranch, which is located about 15 miles south of the little town of Encinal in the heart of Webb County. This hunt had come about as a result of a trade that I made with the owner. I had guided him and his son for mule



## UNDERSTANDING A WHITETAIL FRAME

- B – Tip to Tip Spread
- C – Greatest Spread
- D – Inside Spread of Main Beam
- E – Lengths of Abnormal Points
- F – Length of Main Beam
- G – Lengths of Normal Points
- H – Circumferences





When assessing a potential trophy's score, look at the lengths of the main beams, lengths of the points, the inside spread of the main beams, and the mass or circumference of the main beams.

# FIELD JUDGING

deer in Wyoming in exchange for me and a friend to hunt whitetail deer and javelina on his ranch in Texas.

Picking the friend to accompany me was easy. I chose Stan Taylor, my old friend and the owner of Wildlife Creations International in Glenrock, Wyoming. Stan and I have hunted everything from antelope to zebra together and we share the same hunting philosophies. I have always found that a hunt seems to go smoother and is generally more enjoyable if you hunt with someone who takes hunting as seriously as you do. Besides, it never hurts to have one of America's best taxidermists along to help you take care of your trophies.

This was to be a self-guided hunt during the Thanksgiving holiday and we would be the only hunters on the 16,300-acre ranch. As anyone who has ever hunted south Texas

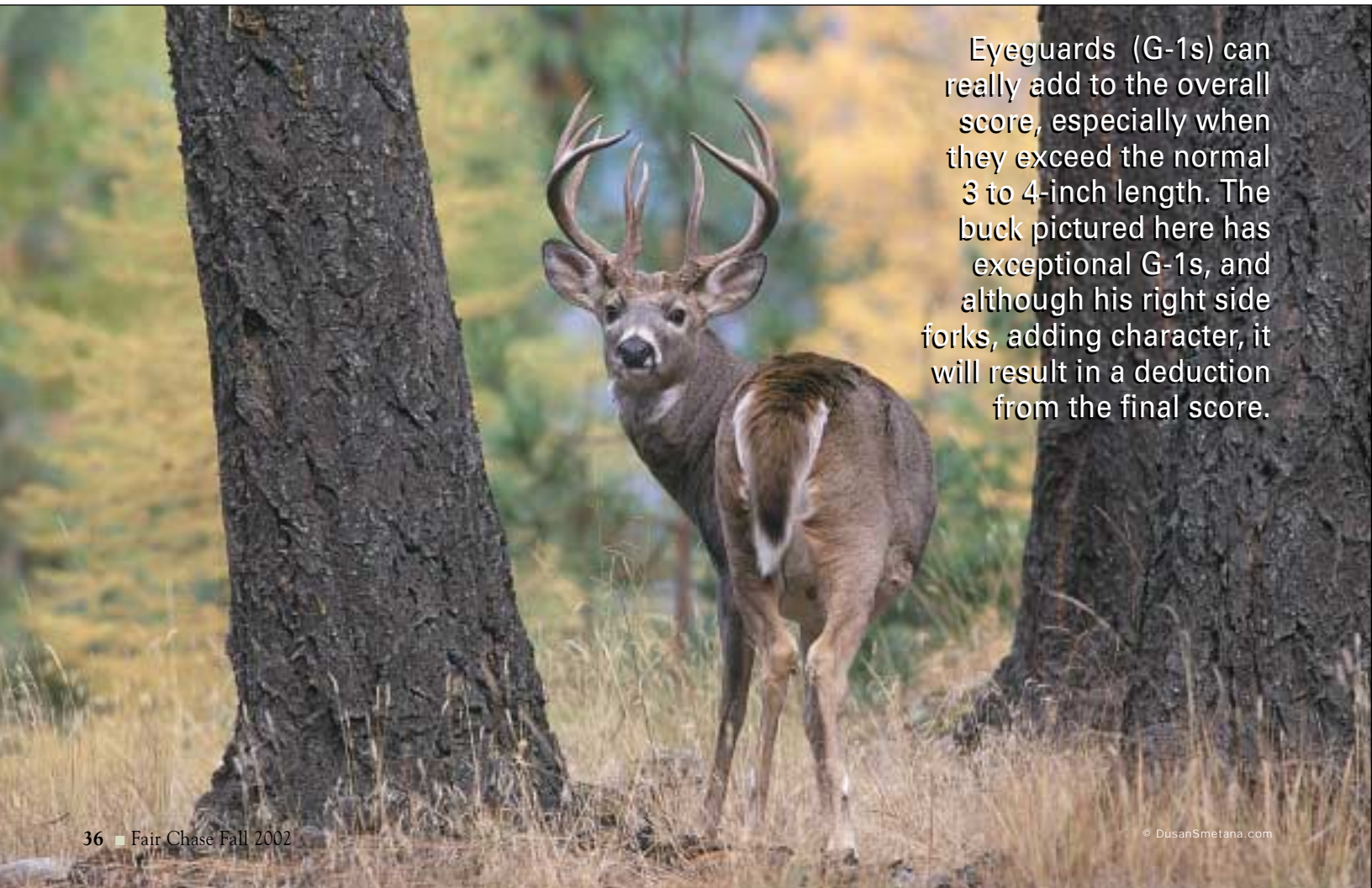
knows, it can be very warm there in November and the rut is still weeks away. Nevertheless, that didn't dampen our enthusiasm because we were getting a chance to hunt a premier ranch in a top trophy-producing area and we would have the place to ourselves.

When we arrived, we were given a detailed map of the area and a tour around the ranch to get an idea of what the various pastures looked like. We were shown where the portable tripod stands were stored and were then left alone to hunt where we chose. I was particularly interested in a pasture with very heavy brush that had just had senderos cut through it for the first time earlier that year. A sendero is a lane or strip about 20 feet wide that is cut and cleared through the thick brush. They usually run exactly north and south or east and west and they are usually spaced a quarter-mile apart. Without senderos in that thick brush country, you would seldom see a deer because of the limited visibility. Stan and I agreed that we would concentrate our deer hunting efforts in this newly opened pasture and hunt our javelinas elsewhere. We each set up a 12-foot high tripod stand on

likely looking senderos located about a half-mile apart. We then picked out a place to park our truck about a mile downwind of our stands so that we could quietly hike adjoining senderos into them each day.

Our daily routine consisted of being camouflaged, cover-scented, and sitting on our stands well before daylight. We would remain in our stands until it started to get hot and the deer seemed to quit moving, usually about 10:00 a.m. Stan and I would climb down and hunt our way back to the truck, then load up and drive to another part of the ranch to hunt javelinas. We would return to the stands mid-afternoon and remain there until dark.

My stand sat on the edge of a sendero that stretched out in front of me for 800 yards before disappearing over a slight rise. To my left there was a small cactus-filled clearing about 75 yards across that was laced with game trails. The predominant breeze, when there was one, came straight down the sendero toward my stand. It was a perfect setup. The first morning that I was on my stand I was amazed at the number of deer, particularly bucks, that I saw moving across the sendero, with most of them stopping long enough to have given me time for a shot had I chosen to do so. It was



Eyeguards (G-1s) can really add to the overall score, especially when they exceed the normal 3 to 4-inch length. The buck pictured here has exceptional G-1s, and although his right side forks, adding character, it will result in a deduction from the final score.

also nice to have the small clearing on my left to watch as the deer moved back and forth through it as well. At about 9:00 a.m., I was watching a 130-class buck in the small clearing with my Swarovski binoculars. After it faded into the brush, I took the glasses down and looked up the sendero just in time to see a large, dark-colored buck walking into the brush about 600 yards away. I didn't have time to get the glasses on it but it looked enormous with the naked eye.

That evening my stand was just as exciting, with most of the same bucks I had seen in the morning wandering by in approximately the same places—including the big, dark-colored buck, but again, due to watching another deer, I wasn't quick enough to get a look at it through my binoculars. Stan's experience for the day had been similar to mine and as we compared notes we realized that while we didn't have the benefit of the rut to help us, we did seem to have some very patternable deer.

The next morning I focused my attention on a place about 600 yards down the sendero. It was much too far for a shot, but if the big buck crossed again, I wanted to get a better look at it with my binoculars. Throughout the morning numerous deer crossed in front of me and I recognized most of the bucks from the day before. Then, as it was starting to get hot and the deer activity was slowing down, the buck made its appearance. Only its head and neck stuck out of the brush at first, slowly looking left and right like a young child at an intersection. Then, apparently satisfied, it stepped into the open and strolled purposefully across the sendero, disappearing into the wall of brush on the other side.

From the first glimpse I had gotten of the buck, it had stood out from the other bucks. Now I could see why. It was a dark charcoal-gray color that appeared almost black to the naked eye. Its neck and chest were thick and heavy, and it had the low-slung belly of an old mature buck. Antlerwise, this buck had it all—long main beams, long tall points, an inside spread width well outside its ear tips and the mahogany-colored antlers appeared to have good mass as well. I did a little math and estimated its score at about 170 points. It was all I needed to see to know that it was the one that I wanted.

On the second afternoon as Stan was quietly walking in to take up his evening vigil, he surprised a buck at close range that darted across the sendero into the thick brush. As the buck passed through a small opening in the brush 30 yards away, Stan

was forced to make a snap decision. He threw his rifle to his shoulder, chose to shoot, and fired, flattening the buck in its tracks. The buck turned out to be a mature 5x6 deer with heavy pearling and multiple character points around its bases. Stan's buck scored nearly 150 points.

I thought about moving my stand down the sendero to get closer to where I always saw the big buck, but the majority of the deer were crossing within 200 hundred yards of my present location. I was afraid that if I moved and disrupted their movement patterns, I might inadvertently alert the big buck and never see him again. So I decided to remain where I was in the hope that it would eventually walk by me with-

in shooting range. Meanwhile, I passed numerous tempting bucks as I continued to see the big buck at least once a day. However, the buck was never closer than 500 yards and my hunting time was running out.

On the last afternoon of my hunt, as I climbed into my stand, I was still undecided whether I should shoot a good buck like Stan's if the opportunity presented itself or hold out to the bitter end for the big buck. I was beginning to feel a bit foolish for passing so many other nice deer, but I really had my heart set on that big buck.

I hadn't been sitting in my stand long when a good buck appeared in the sendero, followed closely by my big buck. They stopped right in the middle of the sendero at a lit-

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# FIELD JUDGING

tle less than 600 yards away and began to spar. I decided it was now or never, so I picked out a brightly colored tree 100 yards this side of them to use as a landmark and I quietly climbed down from my stand and slipped into the heavy brush along the sendero.

I tried to hurry through the maze of thorn brush and cactus on a course parallel to the sendero without making too much noise or spooking another deer that might in turn spook my buck. Fortunately I hit a well-used trail and I was making good time until I had to stop to let a doe walk past. As I crouched, letting the deer saunter by me within 20 yards, I wondered if the big buck would still be there when I arrived. Finally the unsuspecting doe passed, and I



The typical pattern of a mature whitetail's antler development is an unbranched main beam that normally develops from three to seven unbranched points per antler.

quickly made my way to my landmark. Cautiously I crawled to the edge of the sendero and looked both ways to make sure I wasn't going to spook another deer as I slithered out. I slowly belly-crawled a few feet into the open, sliding my pack ahead of me to use as a rifle rest.

My heart sank as I looked at the empty sendero where the buck should have been standing. Just then, the good buck bounded into the open from the dense brush on the left side, stopped for a moment to look back into the brush it had come out of, then whirled and ran into the thick brush on the

right side. Instantly, the big buck appeared! It came out of the brush in a stiff-legged walk with its ears laid back in a menacing posture following the first buck's trail. I quickly slid my rifle into a steady position on my pack, slipped off the safety and found the buck in my scope just as it stopped and

began to rake a tree with its antlers.

I couldn't help but look at its rack one more time, and for the first time I saw clearly the fine detail of its antlers. There was heavy pearling from its burrs to its G-2s, and each of its long brow tines split into multiple points. Overall, the antlers were even bigger than I had thought they were from a distance and then, something happened to me. I got buck fever.

Over my lifetime I have taken numerous big-game animals and I have guided my clients to hundreds of others. I have been excited countless times, but I have always managed to control myself. Not this time. As the buck abruptly snapped his head up to stare in my direction, panic swept over me that the buck of my dreams was going to spring into the brush and be gone, and I just yanked the trigger.

That moment in time is forever burned into my memory. The biggest live whitetail I ever saw standing less than 100 yards from me, staring at another deer down the sendero behind me and my cross hairs positioned six inches over his back.

After it was gone, I just remained on the ground, shaking too hard to stand up. I thought about all the other fabulous trophies I had looked at through my scope with calmness and intent. It was almost embarrassing to be rendered totally powerless by America's most common big-game animal, the whitetail deer.

## JUDGING WHITETAIL DEER

The Boone and Crockett Club recognizes two categories of whitetail deer. The larger and the more familiar to most of us is the common whitetail, which is found in Mexico, all but a handful of states in the United States, and in many parts of Canada. The other is the Coues' deer (correctly pronounced "cows"), a small-bodied whitetail with correspondingly smaller antlers that is found in the deserts and deciduous woodlands of southwestern New Mexico, Arizona, and northwestern Mexico. No part of the Coues' deer's current range is inhabited by the larger whitetail, thus separating the two subspecies.

The first thing you will notice about a large whitetail buck's rack is the overall height and width, followed by the number of points, and mass. When assessing a potential trophy's score, we need to look at the lengths of the main beams, lengths of the points, the inside spread of the main beams, and the mass or circumference of the main beams at four locations.

These things can be quickly evaluated in the field with a few simple calculations. To do this we need things of known sizes to visually compare the antlers to and in this case we will use the deer's ears, eyes, and nose. While this can be an inexact science considering the range of sizes from the diminutive Coues' deer to the bulky giants of Canada, we are going to throw out the biggest and the smallest and take an average of the most common whitetails found in the United States. The average buck, with his ears in an alert position, has an ear tip-to-tip spread of 16 inches. His ears will measure six inches from the base to the tip. The circumference of his eye is four inches, and from the center of the eye to the end of his nose should measure about eight inches. These will be our "rulers" for antler size estimation. If you are hunting in an area that traditionally produces huge-bodied deer, or if you are hunting the little Coues' deer, you will need to adjust your "rulers" accordingly.

## THE TALLY

Assuming you can get a frontal view, estimating a buck's inside spread should be easy. Is he outside of his ear tips? If so, by how much? For example, if his main beam appears to be half an ear or three inches outside the ear tip on each side, then by adding 6 to 16 we find that he has a 22-inch spread.

Judging the length of the main beams is next. A general rule of thumb is to look for a buck whose main beams appear to extend forward as far as the tip of his nose. However, by using this criterion alone, a long-beamed buck might be passed over if you only have a side view and the buck has a wide spread and/or its antlers turn sharply in so that the main beam tips nearly touch. Also, be aware of the buck whose beams tower above its head before sweeping forward as this adds valuable inches to an otherwise average looking main beam. The actual main beam length is estimated using our ear length and eye to nose "rulers."

Next, and to many, the most impressive features of a trophy whitetail

are the number and lengths of the points on his rack. The Boone and Crockett Club defines a point on a whitetail or Coues' deer as "any projection at least one inch long and longer than it is wide at one inch or more of length." Since most whitetails are hunted in or near heavy cover where there may only be seconds to assess

their antlers, we need a quick way to count points.

Points may be quickly counted by assuming that an overwhelming majority of mature whitetail bucks grow a brow tine on each antler and that the main beam tip usually lies almost horizontally. This allows us to count the standing normal points G-2, G-3, G-4, etc., and quickly add that to the number 2 (brow tine and beam tip). With this method you can quickly determine that a buck with two standing normal points per side is a 4x4 or 8-pointer, and with three standing points per side he is a 5x5 or 10-pointer, and so on. Nearly all the bucks that make the records book have at least five normal points per side. The length of the points can be estimated using the same "rulers" we used for the main beams.

The typical pattern of a mature whitetail's antler development is an unbranched main beam that normally develops from three to seven (sometimes more) unbranched points per antler at roughly spaced intervals. Any other points are considered "abnormal" and their lengths are

deducted from the score if the buck is scored as a typical or added to the score if it is being scored as a non-typical.

Estimating the mass or circumference measurements of the antler is where we use our deer's four-inch eye circumference as the "ruler." Compare the antler at H-1, H-2, etc., to the eye. How much bigger is the antler? If it were half again bigger, the circumference measurement at that point would be about six inches.

Ideally, the rack should be viewed from the front and the side especially when judging the main beams. However, this isn't always possible and sometimes you will just have to go with your gut feeling as Stan did. But beware of the rear view, as it can be deceiving. From this angle you get an exaggerated impression of the antler's height and spread.

The most practical way to practice your field-judging skills is to estimate the score of mounted heads. Use the buck's "rulers" to estimate the score, then check your calculations by actually measuring the rack. With a little practice, you will be surprised how close your estimates will become. One last word of advice, when the time comes to shoot, don't bother looking at the antlers one more time. It can cause your nervous system to do strange things. ■



Use a deer's four-inch eye circumference to estimate the mass or circumference measurements. If an antler is half again bigger, the circumference measurement at that point would be about six inches.

Assuming you get a good frontal view, estimating a buck's inside spread should be easy. If the main beam appears to be half an ear or three inches outside the ear tip on each side, then by adding 6 to 16 we find the buck has an inside spread around 22 inches.

