Antler POINT Restrictions

A Case of Unintended Consequences?

Excerpted from *ANTLERS: A Guide to Collecting, Scoring, Mounting, and Carving*

By Dennis Walrod

"Antler point restrictions?" That's one of the most inflammatory phrases you could shout in a crowded movie theater these days, especially if the audience there happens to be a group of whitetail deer hunters from Pennsylvania. More than a few of those deer hunters will want to spill your popcorn all over the floor... maybe spill you, too. Another bunch, a smaller one representing the trophy hunters, will move in closer to protect you and even cheer your wisdom. From the balcony, the many biologists who know about the generally dismal history in America ever since 1921 of "managing antlers" would loudly "Boo!" you. Antler point restrictions (APRs) possibly represent the most plausible way to reduce the problematic deer population while using increased antler-size as a carrot-on-a-stick to generate hunter acceptance. On the other hand, it might simply be a method of deer herd management that actually doesn't work (for antlers) but is being forced upon professional wildlife managers by the recent popularity and marketing influences of so-called "quality deer management" advocates. In any case, APRs can be too hot a subject for calm conversation.

Dr. Gary Alt, the biologist who took over the deer-management program for the Pennsylvania Game Commission a few short years ago and who courageously applied APRs there beginning with the 2002 season, often felt the need to wear a bullet-proof vest when he appeared at meetings to sell the APR concept. (Note: I heard him say this at a seminar, but I don't know if he ever actually wore one.) The objectives of managing antlers was to save the Pennsy forest hardwood habitat from a too-large deer population while providing the license-buying public with the well-publicized potential for bigger antlers a year or two down the road. In simplified terms, the APR required in most regions was that to be legal, a buck must have at least three points on one side... those points being one brow tine, one tine over an inch long, and the main beam point. In most cases this would be a six-point

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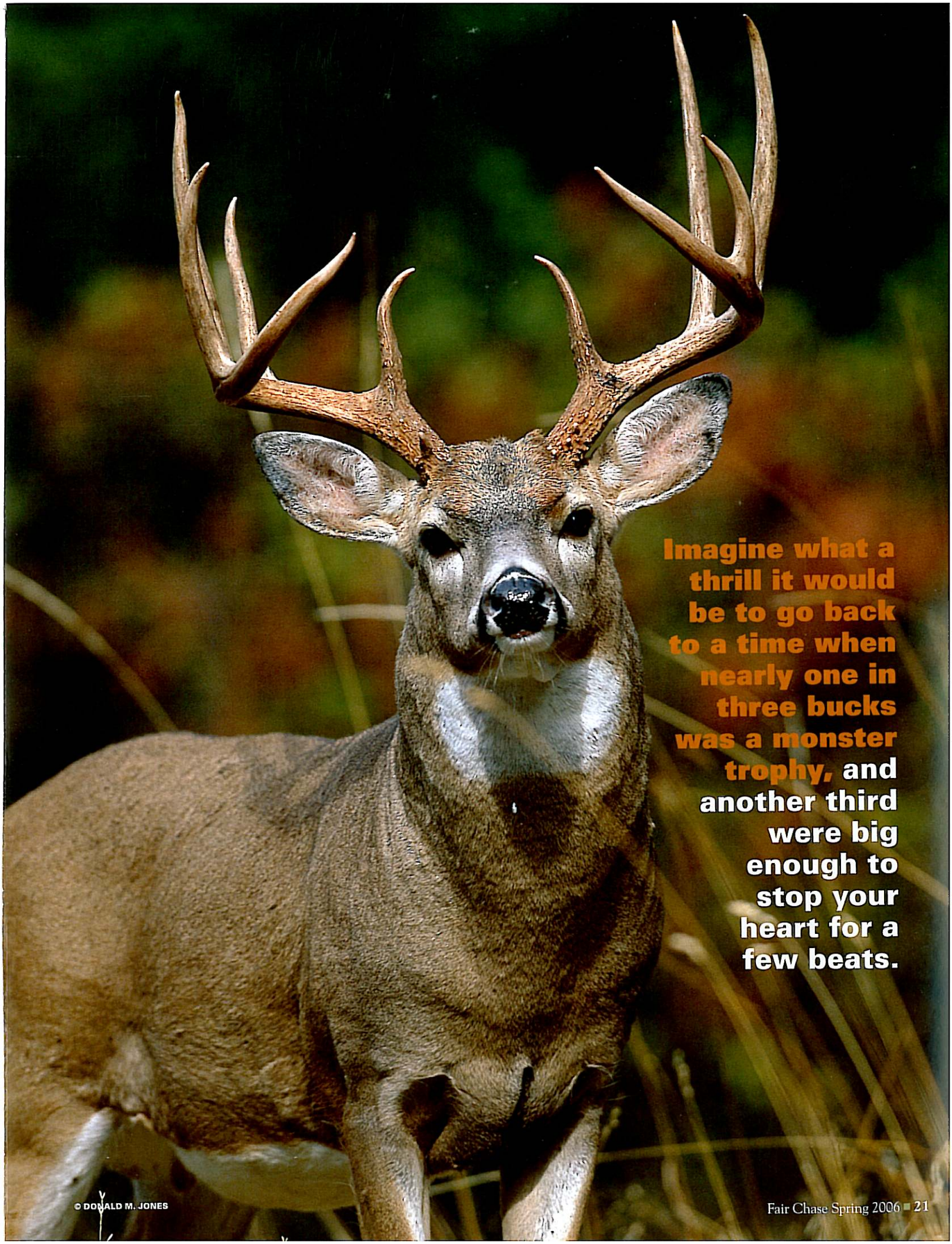
Imagine what a thrill it would be to go back to a time when nearly one in three bucks was a monster trophy, and another third were big enough to stop your heart for a few beats.
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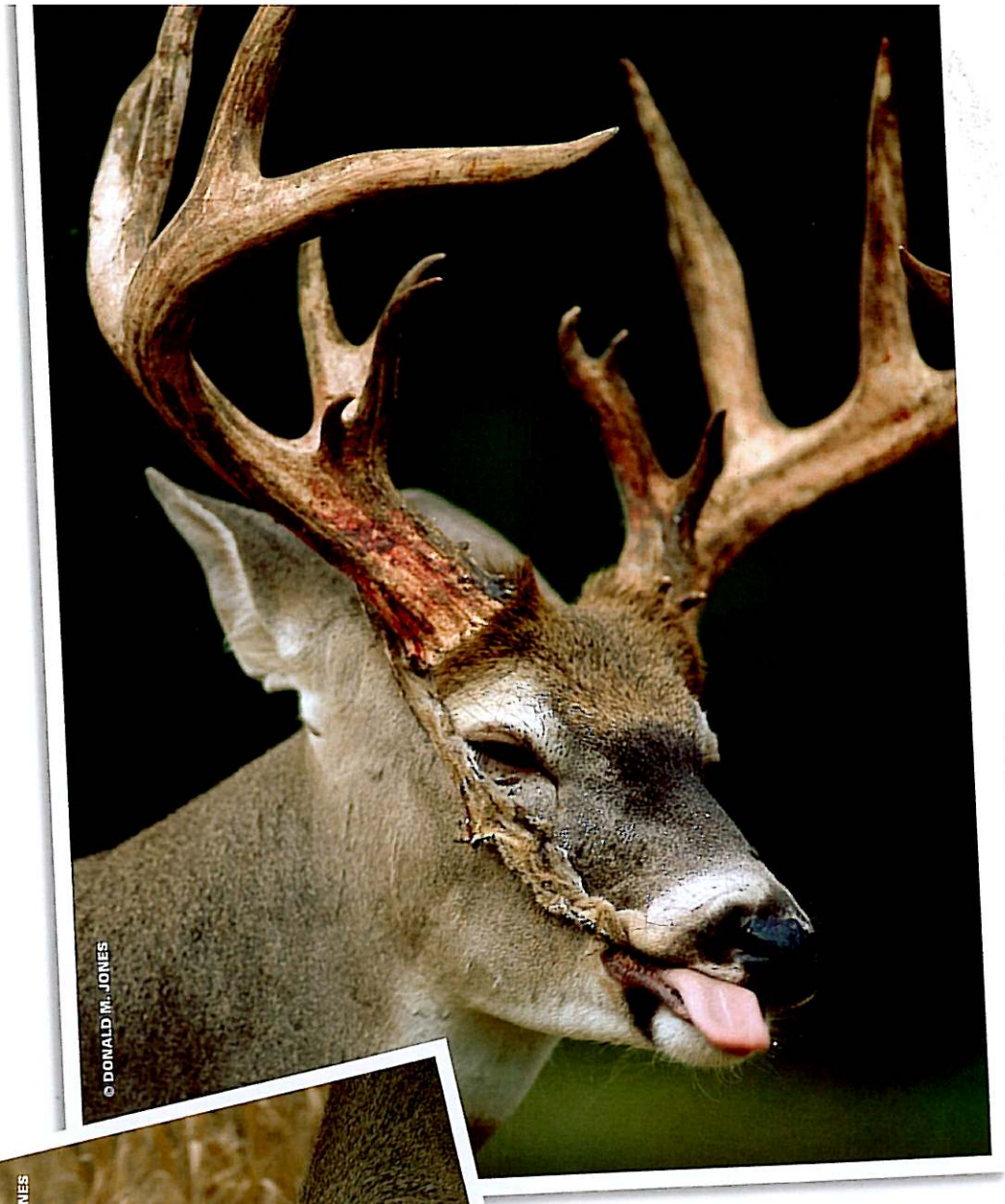

buck, either a well-endowed 1-1/2-year-old yearling or a relatively small 2-1/2-year-old. Regardless, the idea here was to protect more (not all) of the yearlings so that they could survive and mature for the next season.

This might have worked splendidly, and maybe still will, but Alt recently retired early, and the political dust hasn't yet settled. Three years later, many disgruntled hunters claim to have seen very few deer this past 2005 season. One of the main tenets of most if not all APR programs is a reduction of the doe population. This is done for the express purposes of reducing herd size while providing additional food supply for the anticipated increase in the buck population. But there are problems with this approach. For one thing, it's not simple arithmetic that the young (1-1/2-year-old) bucks that were protected will result in a corresponding increase in the total number of 2-1/2-year-old bucks next year. No, not by a long shot. One reason is the reduction of females actually results in fewer buck fawns being born in the spring. In other words, because the birth-rates for male and female fawns is very close to one-to-one, the removal of one adult doe (as an intended substitute for harvesting a young buck) actually results in one less buck fawn born in the spring. If you project that outcome to the following year, and for several years later, there will soon be fewer buck yearlings in the very age class that the APR system is supposed to be protecting. Overall, according to at least one scientific study, if a sufficient number of does are killed to maintain a 1:1 sex ratio, the total number of bucks and does could be reduced by as much as 30 percent. At least, that's a strong possibility, as far as I've been able to determine. Really hard data is equally hard to get, and the applicable math itself begins to hint of chaos theory. Don't forget either, there are no equations for producing larger antlers through selective deer management.

Consider this; one study indicates that in the long run, APRs might actually reduce the overall genetic potential for large antlers. This theory works on the principle that all bucks are not created with an equal genetic potential to produce large antlers in their progeny. In most regions at age 1-1/2 years, a yearling buck is typically a two-pointed "spike" or a four-pointed "fork horn". But some of them are genetically gifted to produce significantly larger antlers at a young age; they might look older, but they aren't. So, when a "three points" APR system is in effect, those young bucks that are genetically superior in their future potential to grow antlers (and to pass their genes on to their own offspring) would be most likely to be mistaken for older deer, and would be targeted, leaving only the smaller-racked bucks to survive. This study further showed statistically that when more than half of yearling bucks are removed from the gene pool in this way, the genetics of the entire population will swing toward smaller antlers. That this can happen is supported

TABLE A. ANTLER FORMATIONS

AGE (Years)	PERCENT	CATEGORY	TYPICAL ANTLERS
1-1/2	60%	Yearlings	Spikes and Fork-horns
2-1/2	25%	Mature Bucks	6 to 8 Slender Tines
3-1/2	11%	Prime Bucks	8-10 Thick Tines, Wider Spread
4-1/2 and over	4%	Trophy Bucks	10-14 Heavy Tines, Massive Rack

by another astonishing fact, which is that in most regions of the United States where whitetail deer are hunted, approximately two out of every three bucks are killed each year. That's not publicized widely for the general public, and probably for good reason. Yes, between 60 percent and 75 percent of all bucks are killed each year. That annually leaves only one out of the three original bucks to breed the next year, and the following year, only one of those survivors will still be chasing does that fall. My point here is that in any commercial breeding program would be damaged, whether it was for guppies, rabbits, beagles, or even high-fence whitetails, if two-thirds of the studs died before their qualities could be determined. For wild whitetails, this happens every year.

Regardless, antler point restrictions are also being considered by many Eastern and Southern hunting groups as a means for altering sex and age ratios of deer. A few states (notably Mississippi, Arkansas, and, recently, Pennsylvania) have adopted APRs on a more or less statewide basis. A few other states, including Michigan and a few other states to a lesser degree, each have regions in which, ironically, wildlife managers are trying to respond to hunter demands.

Table A shows a generalized breakdown of the influence that the age of whitetail bucks has on the other variables of percent of population, the general category of a particular age group, and a very rough description of the typical antlers that each age group usually carries. This breakdown is important to the understanding of the long-term objectives of any APR program. To put the entire matter of APRs in perspective for the readers of *Fair Chase*, remember that even though the World's Record 1993 Milo N. Hanson buck was determined to be a youthful 4-1/2 years old, the vast majority of whitetail bucks registered by the Boone and Crockett Club were 5-1/2 years or older. In other words, even though we as trophy hunters might not personally care much whether or not an APR program results in a population increase of 2-1/2-year-old bucks and saves a few cherry and walnut hardwood saplings that belong to someone else, the fact remains that only two or three years later, there theoretically could be a virtual doubling of Boone and Crockett-sized bucks in the woods, and maybe even more.

So, leaving all that behind us for the moment, let's begin anew by considering what the potential really is for wild whitetail deer for growing antlers, and from there consider how human intervention could assist in the development of that potential. An analysis of more than 3,000 whitetail jaws found during archeological digs of Indian middens revealed that about 30 percent of bucks in those pre-European times were aged 4-1/2 years old or older. Today, only about 4 percent of whitetail bucks are 4-1/2 years old or older. So, in pre-European times, the percentage of trophy-sized bucks was somewhere between six and seven times greater than today. Imagine what a thrill it would be to go back to a time when nearly one in three bucks was a monster trophy, and another third were big enough to stop your heart for a few beats.

There's no practical way that we can manage the return of our modern deer herds to that almost fantastical era of super-antlers. Yes, such managing can be done inside high-fenced enclosures and on a limited basis in a few select, private areas of pay-for-privilege hunting. Most other deer hunters are stuck here in the 21st century, and those of us who have ever seen a 4-1/2-year-old old buck in the wild are still talking about it whenever we can find someone who will listen. Still, deer hunting solely for the venison and camaraderie remains an important American tradition of importance fundamental even to the Second Amendment. There are many of us who would rather put a deer of modest size in the freezer every year, than hunt a lifetime for a single "also-ran" trophy rack to hang on the wall.

A year ago I visited Dean Ziegler at the Deerassic Park Education center near Cambridge, Ohio. As we sat on the porch of the log cabin that also serves as an on-the-grounds office, I asked him what he thought of the various deer management philosophies now being applied. He didn't answer that question directly, but offered his own thoughts on the matter. The most important thing, he said, is that the genetics that control antler development need to be defined by actual competition between truly adult bucks. The larger-antlered bucks usually win the right to breed, and this situation is best accomplished when a natural ratio of one-to-one bucks and does exists. Antler point restrictions probably would work the best if they're set to protect the bigger bucks, not the small ones, because it's when bucks reach age 3-1/2 years that the serious head-butting contests for genetic supremacy begin in earnest. Ziegler told me then about the 1-1/2-year-old buck at his operation that had grown full-sized antlers that scored an amazing 140 inches, proving that if the genes are there, the antlers can be too. The most extreme but also most effective way to manage whitetails for antlers, he said, would be to completely close the season on all bucks for about four years. That would allow four different age-groups of bucks to slug it out and the antler genes would probably be improved. But you try something like that and you won't have any friends for a long time! Besides, a whole four years worth of young teenagers who would have become deer hunters would be lost to us, and we need them. One other way that would be almost as effective and almost as unpopular would be restricting a hunter to harvesting only one buck every four years, although he could pick when the year was going to be when he saw the buck he was after. In other words, he could hunt all four years for bucks, but knowing that he'd lose his right to shoot another one for the next up-to-three years, he certainly wouldn't blow it all on a small-antlered buck. Instead, he'd more likely wait for the Big One and maybe even have more fun doing it that way. ■

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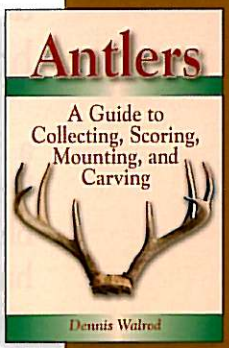

ANTLERS
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There's no question that antlers are hot these days, with collectors paying top dollar for quality racks and everyone from hunters to hikers searching for them in fields and backwoods across the country. Handicraft techniques have moved far beyond the basic trophy mount as well, and one can find antler knives, antler pipes, and even antler chandeliers in shops and homes. Dennis Walrod's ***Antlers*** offers an entertaining and informative survey of all things antler, from their biology to their role in Native American culture to the sordid side of the antler boom. The book is also loaded with practical information and step-by-step instructions for collectors and craftsmen, designed to maximize the use (and profit) you can get out of your antlers.

The book, which retails for $16.95, is available in bookstores or directly from the author at www.denniswalrod.com