

Antlers, horns and their place in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge

by Robin West



boy with moose antlers

Biologists, wildlife watchers, and hunters have always been fascinated with the antlers or horns that various wild animals possess. At this time of year, when many folks are out looking for a “spike-fork/fifty” moose, it seems like a good time to discuss this topic.

“Spike-fork/fifty,” of course, refers to the regulation about what a bull moose must have in the way of antlers to be legal game. Specifically, the antlers of the male (only male moose have antlers) must have at least one of the two antlers with only one or two points, or else the distance between both antlers at the widest distance is at least 50 inches.

Bull moose with at least three brow tines on an antler are also considered legal. Given the difficulty that can arise in estimating a 50-inch spread on a moose under hunting conditions, the conservative approach in determining legality of larger bulls has given rise to the saying, “Count to three or leave it be.”

Excellent advice to all hunters, of course, is to always be sure of your target, the safety of the shot, the legality of the animal, and the surety of your ability to make a humane kill before deciding to pull the trigger or release the arrow.

Unlike moose, both male and female caribou have antlers. Old caribou males have much larger antlers than females of any age, but yearling bulls frequently

have antlers that look very similar to those of older cows. Antlers are grown and shed each year, whereas horns grow for the entire life of the animal. Moose, caribou, deer and elk have antlers. Sheep, goats, musk oxen and bison have horns. About half of the bull moose in their second year of life will have a spike or forked antler. The remainder of these yearling bulls will have small palmated antlers.

Antlers, even though shed each year, generally are grown back larger each subsequent year for several years. This may change if an animal lives to be old, and often the antlers of very old animals are smaller than when they were in their prime.

Since horns continue to grow throughout the life of the animals that have them, the horns will get larger each year of life, unless broken off. Most growth, however, occurs within the first four or five years of life and then annual increase diminishes.

A legal Dall sheep must have a full-curl (360 degrees) horn, and this amount of growth will generally occur between age six and eight, although some rams never attain a full-curl horn. Sheep that are eight years or older, as aged by their annual growth rings, or with broken horns, are also legal game. Ewe sheep have horns as well, but they never grow very large. Like with caribou, it is easy to mistake a yearling male ram for an adult female sheep if you only look at what is growing on their heads.

The various horn/antler size and configurations provide good tools for game managers to provide hunting opportunity while protecting wildlife populations from overharvest. For example, the “spike-fork/fifty” moose regulation allows for large numbers of hunters to participate in a long hunting season while assuring that a significant number of bull moose will remain after the season to breed. Other ways to manage game, when faced with large numbers of hunters, are to have much shorter seasons or a limited number of hunting permits.

Antlers and horns are believed to serve primarily as a show of dominance for breeding males. Older bull moose and caribou tend to shed their antlers in the late

fall, while younger animals often carry theirs into the early spring. Within weeks of the shed antler coming off, a new velvety knob will appear, and antler growth will be rapid during the periods of lush vegetation in spring and summer. Around the first of September, the velvet will harden and will be scraped from the antler by rubbing on brush and small trees.

Looking for shed antlers in the spring is a hobby shared by many Alaskans. The “sheds” make great curiosity pieces and are good raw material for a whole host of wonderful crafts. General national wildlife refuge regulations (applying to all refuges in the United States) do not provide for the removal of antlers, bones, horns and other natural items without a permit.

However, as long as collection is for limited personal use and not for commercial purposes, we have used our discretion to allow shed collecting here at the Kenai refuge. Our logic has been that since we allow the hunting of these animals (and the removal of the entire beast—hide, hoof, horn and all), we will allow the limited removal of their parts that may be found.

This is an attempt at a reasonable interpretation

of the regulations that recognizes the ecological value that bones and shed antlers provide to critters such as voles, squirrels and porcupines, as well as the discovery value to visitors who stumble across an old moss-covered antler overgrown with wildflowers, and the value to individuals who take an antler home and display it on their mantle or make a belt buckle or knife handle for a special gift for a friend or family member.

The fragile ebony horns of a mountain goat, the rugged amber-colored horns of an old Dall ram, the polished mahogany of the majestic bull moose, all define a great deal of what these creatures are, how they live and how they are viewed by people. Horns and antlers, whether attached to living animals, as part of a cherished trophy, or discovered among bleached bones or as a shed atop the tundra, all contribute to the many treasures of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge.

Robin West is the manager of the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call 262-7021 or see the website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.