

Shed Hunting Secrets

Are there any, or is it mostly just luck?

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Every year at this time, conversations can be overheard at the local sportsman's club or pro-shop about searching for antler sheds. Whether it's a story about someone who stumbled across a large set of antlers or the more common talk about searching for hours with no success, you can be sure that you're going to hear something about this fast-growing hobby. You won't have to look hard to find an article about antler sheds this time of year. Just about every major magazine will be covering the topic, ranging from the biology of antlers to the best ways to find them. To spare you all of that, I decided to tackle this topic in a more light-hearted manner.

Are There Any Secrets?

When I tell people that I located a few shed antlers, the usual response is, "how in the world do you find those things? I never have any luck." When confronted with the question, I give the usual, "with a little luck and persistence" response. Am I hiding anything by not saying more? In reality, I don't think that I am.

I've found antler sheds when I was looking for them, and I've stumbled across a few by happenstance. The only tactic that I swear by involves simply getting into the woods. Sure, I've tried scouring complete sections of prime habitat, walking trails, and even crawling on my hands and knees in overgrown areas. No one search method has proven to be more effective than the other.

Last spring was perhaps my most successful antler-hunting season. After a later March search yielded nothing, I didn't return to the woods again until the opening day of spring turkey season. Since the birds weren't cooperating, I once again concentrated on finding antlers. In a matter of two hours, I located five antlers, two of which were a matched set, laying perfectly on opposite sides of a trail.

What was the difference this time out? Based on my best guess, I believe I may have been searching too early the first time out. Based on the appearance of the antlers, I would say they had only been on the ground for no more than a couple of weeks.

When to Start Looking

I always get a chuckle when I hear people say that the bucks will be shedding their antlers because of a recent cold snap. The reality is, weather has almost no impact on when deer begin dropping their headgear. The timing depends almost entirely on a given bucks testosterone level. Once testosterone levels get low enough, the area between the skull and the antler breaks down, thus



This pair of sheds was found straddling a well-used trail where they appear to have been carefully placed. A rare find indeed.

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breaking the bond that holds it in place. The health of the animal also plays a factor.

In some cases, the deer may go for days before the antlers fall off, or are bumped off by trees or other obstacles. In others, both antlers will fall off simultaneously, almost like magic.

It is true that if you find one antler, your odds of finding the match are pretty good if you continue to look in the same area. I've read many different rationales as to why antlers often fall off within minutes of each other, but I simply chalk it up to one of the mysteries and miracles of Mother Nature.

In the northeast, I would begin searching for antlers in mid to late March. I've spent countless hours searching earlier in the year, but I estimate more than seventy-five percent of my finds occurred in early April. The key is to not burn yourself out by hunting too early, but not begin searching too late—after porcupines, squirrels, or even other people get to them.

What Do Sheds Tell Us?

Many people not yet hooked on shed hunting may wonder why it's worth your time to scour the woods for dropped antlers. I suppose each person has their own reasons, but for me, it boils down to three factors. The first is post-season scouting opportunity. While looking for antlers, I like to pay attention to other things in the woods that I may have missed during the season. In fact, just two weeks ago I located a primary scrape that I didn't know about last fall.

Second, finding dropped antlers will give you some basic insight into the type of bucks that made it through the season, and some indication about the deer you may see in the fall.

Finally, hunting shed antlers is great exercise. Early spring is a wonderful time to be in the woods, and the temperatures are usually cool enough that you won't get overheated. I always take along a camera and take advantage of the many great photo opportunities provided by this period of revival.

Fallen Antler Frenzy

Believe it or not, there is actually an organization based in Wisconsin known as the North American Shed Hunters Club. According to the group's website, the group was founded for the primary purpose of recognizing shed antlers from the many big game species found in North America. It is an all volunteer organization and the official national organization which documents and records big game shed antlers for all of history in its records book, *Shed Antler Records of North American Big Game*. You can visit their website at: www.shedantlers.org.



This huge shed was found in late February on a western Illinois grain farm