

Nature Week at Heritage Village - Sept. 27th

Antlers

As we approach fall, and, soon enough, deer hunting season, I thought I would end my summer of 2015 Nature Weeks with a quick discussion of deer antlers. We have a nice display in our Nature Center.

Deer shed their antlers annually during the winter and start regrowing them in the spring. This is the only mammal bone structure to regrow annually. The new antlers are covered with "velvet," a covering over the growing bone and cartilage that supplies blood and offers protection to the growing structures. Antlers are one of the fastest growing tissues known to man, growing as much as 1/2 inch per day. Once the antlers reach full size, by late summer, the velvet begins to fall off and the buck rubs off the remainder on trees, building neck muscles at the same time. By summer's end the bone is hard and dead. The antlers play their role in mating season and then are shed in winter. Once they hit the forest floor they are eaten by small rodents as a source of calcium. In oak forests they are quickly devoured by squirrels, but they are gnawed on everywhere by porcupines, mice and rabbits.

As the deer get older they grow bigger and bigger antlers reaching maximum size at around 5 or 6 years old. Antler growth is a function of a combination of age, genetics, and diet. Small antlers can result from old age, poor nutrition, and small parents. Calcium is important in the deer's diet. Deer eat a wide variety of vegetable matter including shoots, leaves, grasses, legumes, acorns, corn and even mushrooms and poison ivy.

Big antlers are advantageous because they are used in sexual selection both in male-to-male competition for females, and by females in their mate choice. They are disadvantageous in attracting the attention of deadly hunters.

The velvet is often harvested, dried, and sold for medicinal uses. The Chinese used this powder as far back as 206 B.C. More recently the Russians, in the 1980s, developed more scientific uses and the FDA approved its use for arthritis in 1999. Still under investigation are its use for immune stimulation, anti-aging effects and beneficial effects for blood and circulation. The Chinese and Korean use it for impotence and Russians bodybuilders use it to build muscle and nerve strength. Clinical data on these uses do not exist.



With the same number of points these two racks show the difference nutrition can make.



Buck rub, a tree used to rub off velvet

HAPPY HUNTING

It has been a fun six months of writing Nature Week. I appreciated hearing from so many people interested in our nature. I want to again thank Lorie Axtell for all of her wonderful photos. She was a joy to work with. Please stop by the tiny Nature Center at Heritage Village and look through our miscellaneous collections.



**MACKINAW
NATURE
CENTER**

by Sandy Planisek 2015
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