The story behind the world-record whitetail

Jan. 2, 2019

By Gerald Almy

The year 2018 marked a milestone for sportsmen. November 23 was the 25th anniversary of a momentous occurrence in deer hunting history. That was the year when Canadian farmer Milo Hanson harvested a 213 5/8-inch Boone & Crockett typical whitetail, setting a new world record.

The buck broke a record the Jordan buck had held for close to 80 years. Now 25 years have passed without another deer knocking it off its throne, confirming just how incredible this massive 14-point typical was.

For younger hunters who weren't around and didn't read the accounts back when Hanson connected on his amazing deer, here's the true account of how that buck was harvested. Milo was gracious enough to tell me the story of how he bagged the great buck during a telephone interview. Here it is, with details straight from the record holder's mouth.

First, a bit of background. Milo lives in a remote agricultural area of northern Saskatchewan. Farming is a quiet life, so he looks forward to getting together with his neighbors for the deer season each fall. Sometimes he hunts alone, but often he meets with a few friends and they put on drives through the wood lots and brushy ravines dotting the Canadian farmland.

A hunter all his life, Hanson is well aware of the superb quality of the area's genetics and habitat. The soil he farms doesn't just grow good crops, it also grows some of the world's largest deer.

"We have ideal whitetail habitat," says Hanson. "It's mostly fields and rolling terrain with a mix of cover – ravines, tall willow patches, aspens and brush. Each quarter section probably has a third of its land in low areas with cover. That's where the big bucks hang out. There are plenty of good places for them to hide."

There's also no shortage of food for the large-bodied Canadian whitetails. "On our farm we grow canola, wheat and barley. There's also alfalfa and a few pea fields. They graze on a little of this, a bite of that."

Milo isn't a trophy hunter and wasn't preoccupied with finding the biggest deer in the world. But like most of his neighbors and friends back in 1993, he was intrigued by an elusive buck that had been sighted in the area with long main beams and a super-wide spread.

"A neighbor of mine got a shot at him on opening morning, but missed cleanly," Hanson said. "That just made him more of a challenge."

"We hunted him for nine straight days, but conditions were tough. We saw him twice, but couldn't get a shot. We had no fresh snow, so we would lose his tracks after a while."

The situation changed for the better on the night of Nov. 22. "That night we had new snow," recalls Hanson. "It also turned real cold. The next morning, it was about 15 below zero. Conditions were perfect."

Early that morning, John Yaroshko and Hanson teamed up with Walter Meger and Rene Igini. The hunters were excited, because they had seen the huge deer entering a willow thicket.

Three hunters spread out around the perimeter of the willow thicket while Rene found the buck's tracks in the new snow and followed him through the cover. Hounding him like a beagle on the scent of a rabbit, Igini pushed and pushed. Finally his persistence paid off.

Just ahead, at the end of the willow patch, the buck burst out at a full gallop. Bullets flew wildly, but

the buck escaped unscathed.

As the morning unfolded, they relocated the big whitetail and pushed him out again. This time the deer ran past Milo and John. Both hunters fired and missed as the buck ran broadside, 150 yards away.

Heading toward the area where it ran, Milo caught a glimpse of the deer's massive antlers in a willow thicket. He couldn't see the body for a shot, but soon it broke out in a hard run, 100 yards away. Aiming through the 4X scope he squeezed the trigger of his .308 Winchester lever-action and the bullet connected, hitting the deer.

"He went down," says Hanson, "but got back up and ran over to an aspen bluff."

Racing toward the spot, Milo peered down and saw the buck in the timber. Aiming carefully, he held on the buck's shoulder and squeezed the trigger.

The biggest typical in history was down for good. Not wanting to take chances, Milo fired a final insurance shot to anchor the deer.

It was a group effort, but finally Milo and his neighbors had taken the huge-racked deer – a whitetail for the history books.

The animal carried 14 long symmetrical points and had a 27-inch spread, topped off with incredible mass. Amazingly, the buck was aged at just 4 ½ years, and Milo said the body was not particularly large compared to other typical area bucks.

"I never thought about a world record when we walked up to the buck. I did figure he'd win all the local contests around here."

"For the first week, no one brought up the possibility of the buck being a record. Then my friend, Adam Evasenko, came back from a moose hunt. He measures the local deer for hunters. He said: 'You've got a possible world record.'"

Following the 60-day drying out period, a trio of scorers measured the buck at 213 5/8 B&C net. It had 28 4/8-inch main beams, and amazingly only 3 1/8 inches of abnormal points. Hanson's buck broke the record held by the Jordan buck for nearly eight decades by over 7 inches.

Two and a half decades later, his record still stands.

Award-winning outdoors writer Gerald Almy is a Maurertown resident.

For late winter sport, hunt deer antlers

Feb. 19, 2019

By Gerald Almy

The buck's long main beam and sweeping tines seemed to glow with their own inner light on that gray, drizzly day. It was one of the most impressive racks I had seen in many years of hunting. It was definitely a large deer for Shenandoah County.

There was something different, though, about this encounter from other deer hunting experiences I've had. It happened in March. And instead of a brace of antlers atop a buck's head, it was just half of a rack – a single five-point antler resting softly on a bed of oak leaves, left there by a male deer that no longer needed it.

But while the buck had no use for it, for me finding that cast-off antler was exhilarating. It let me know

this deer was in fact still alive, traveling these woods and slowly beginning the process of creating yet another set of antlers. And this year they would likely be even bigger than the impressive rack he carried during the last season.

If you don't think hunting for shed antlers can be exciting, you've probably never given it a serious try. I started hunting for sheds near my home west of Toms Brook in Shenandoah County many years ago, and every year it seems I become a more avid antler hunter.

I'm not the only one. Shed hunting has become so popular that guided week-long "shed hunts" in prime areas with food and lodging included can cost $2,000 or more. But don't let that scare you. You can also hunt for antlers by yourself or with a friend in your own hunting area or on public land for free.

The reasons why searching for shed antlers is so popular are easy to see. It's the perfect way to extend your interest in deer and your time spent "hunting" for them. And it's a good way to get exercise and keep fit after the season is finished. Shed hunting can also be a great family participation sport.

But one of the major attractions of this activity for many of us is the pure challenge of it. The feeling you get when you spot a bone-colored antler protruding from a bed of fallen leaves brings a special joy that's hard to describe. To me, the experience is a lot like spotting a small buck while hunting, one you just plan to watch and pass up before moving on.

Shed hunting is more than just fun, though. It's also valuable for helping formulate hunting strategies for the coming season and making management decisions such as what bucks to harvest and which ones need another year or two to mature.

Finding sheds lets you identify deer that are still out there to challenge you next fall. But it also helps, along with trail cameras, in estimating the density of the buck population and age structure of those animals. You can also take notes on genetic traits such as long or short tines, main beam shape, and those fascinating, odd points that make some animals non-typicals.

The most important practical information I get from sheds regarding specific animals is a good estimate of age. Measuring the main beam is helpful, but most important of all is mass. By seeing the exact mass of a rack, in your hands and under the tape measure, you can usually tell accurately how old a buck is, based on circumference measurements and ages of past deer you've harvested in that area.

You can also test and improve your field judging skills by shed hunting. Here's how. Estimate mass measurements, tine length and main beams for bucks you capture images of on trail cameras or see in the field while hunting. Write it down.

Then compare this with the actual inches you get when you find the shed and measure the real thing. This should tell you how good you are and also where you tend to over or underestimate the antler's measurements.

I consider searching for sheds to be "hunting" – just a different form of it. "Catch and release" has become popular among fishermen. Searching for sheds is "catch and release" deer hunting. Find the rack, or half of it, from an animal in your hunting area and you feel in one sense like you've "bagged" him, or at least one of the most intriguing parts of him – a part he no longer has use for.

Grasp the rack in your hands, run your fingers over it and feel the rough and smooth textures. Count the tines, study the abnormal points and stickers, all the while knowing the buck that left the antler is still out there, alive and elusive, challenging you to hunt for him next year. Then his rack will likely be even more impressive, with greater mass, longer beams, maybe extra points, but in the same basic form.

I often combine post-season scouting with shed hunting, doubling the benefits of the time spent in the woods. Note where the shed was and try to pinpoint whether it was a travel corridor, a bedding area or

a spot with winter foods. Mark that on a map or in a journal to reference next year when searching for a late season buck or trying to pinpoint bedding areas and travel routes.

And if you really want to multi-task, carry a light rifle on your back for coyotes you spot and also listen for gobblers and watch for turkey sign as you shed hunt!

Next week: more strategies for finding cast-off deer antlers.

Award-winning outdoors writer Gerald Almy is a Maurertown resident.

Spinners are productive lures for summer fishing

July 2, 2019

By Gerald Almy

Tossing the silver-bladed lure into a swirling eddy near the shoreline of the Shenandoah River, I closed the bail on the ultralight spinning reel. After two turns on the handle, I was rewarded with the sharp stabbing take of a hefty smallmouth bass.

The bass jumped wildly across the surface of the emerald river, but soon I was able to work the olive and brass-colored fish in close and twist the hooks free. With a flick of his caudal fin, the 14-inch smallmouth disappeared into the deep water near the middle of the river.

We have an amazing variety of artificial lures to turn to these days, thanks to computer designing, high-tech materials, and multi-coat, snazzy finishes. But sometimes lures that have been around for many years are just as productive as the new kids on the block. And if you like to collect things, some of these older lures are good investments, especially the rarer ones.

Personally I just like to fish with my lures, whether they're old or new. But I particularly like the special thrill of catching bass on offerings that have been around for a long time. One such lure is the Mepps Spinner. This lure was first brought to the attention of fishermen in the United States by an angler and businessman who ran a sports shop in Antigo, Wisconsin. His name was Todd Sheldon.

Todd was managing his outdoor sports shop after World War II when a GI walked in and showed him a handful of Mepps spinners that he had picked up while on duty in Europe. The serviceman generously gave a bag of spinners to the tackle shop owner, who thanked him profusely.

Sheldon thought the lures looked interesting, but didn't have the chance to try them for a while. Then one day when he was having poor luck with his usual offerings fishing the Wolf River, he remembered the spinners and tied one on. Tossing the lure towards a blowdown near shore, he reeled back steadily and was rewarded with the walloping strike of a large trout.

Casting again, he was soon hooked up to another trout, then another. Before long, he had his limit. And they were particularly large fish.

Sheldon was intrigued, to say the least. He traced the spinners back to their place of origin, France, where they had been used for a number of years. Andre Meulnart had invented them in 1938, and they were performing spectacularly for Europeans.

Todd ordered dozens of the lures from the company in France and began selling them in his tackle shop. Word began to get out soon about the wonderful fish-catching powers of the shiny new spinning lures.

Sheldon obtained North American distribution rights for Mepps lures in 1960. Twelve years later, he

purchased the French company and began manufacturing them in his Wisconsin hometown. The company now offers a wide variety of spinners and several other lures. But the most famous and one of the best is still the Aglia Spinner. When Sports Afield magazine used to give out awards for trophy sized fish, the Aglia Mepps always garnered more than any other lure—even the plastic worm.

You can catch any gamefish that swims with a Mepps spinner. I've fooled bluegills smaller than the palm of your hand and pike up to three feet long with these lures. It's important, however, to match the size of the lure to the species you're going after.

For stream trout and panfish, use a size 0 or 1 spinner. For walleyes the best bet is size 2. Bass, steelhead, pickerel, and salmon will strike size 3 or 4 models. Leg-long pike and muskies gobble up size 5 spinners.

The great thing about traditional spinners like the Mepps, Shyster, Rooster Tail, and others is that they are easy for beginners to fish. The top tactic involves simple casting to likely areas and reeling back smoothly. Try different depths by letting the lure sink various times after it lands on the water following the cast. Try slow and deep presentations if the water is cold, faster if it's warm.

Silver is the most popular color, which imitates most minnows and shad forage fish well. Gold, chartreuse and orange are also good. Black or copper can also be productive.

So yes, definitely use the latest high-tech lures on the market. But don't overlook the humble spinner. It can catch fish right along with the most modern baits you can buy, and is especially productive on the Shenandoah River and local ponds and lakes.

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