

Backyard Briefs

A weekly column

By Judy Jessop, A Nature Conservancy Volunteer

It was dusk, late in the month of August, as my father and I walked down the hill behind his home. He had just closed up the chicken house and we headed toward barn chores. The field rolled out before us toward the woods and on its borders a herd of white-tailed deer grazed. One sighted us and his tail flickered caution to the rest, then all heads were up. Framed in that tense moment, before they bolted for cover, stood seven bucks with plump, velvety, well-developed antlers.

Horned mammals, such as cows, goats and sheep, grow permanent horns that continue to lengthen throughout their lifetime. The deer family however, has antlers that grow rapidly in summer and are often elaborate racks, in time for "rut" (mating season), in late October or early November. The racks are then shed between early December and March as part of the annual cycle of antler growth for male deer.

This cycle begins in the spring, triggered by the lengthening of daylight. A gland in the base of the skull signals antler growth to begin, and two fat thumbs of velvet poke up from the frontal bones of the head. While antlers are growing they are soft to the touch, fir covered, and equipped with veins and arteries to promote rapid growth. They are true bones with an inner supply of blood for bone growth, and an outer supply for the velvety skin. The size and number of points that the buck develops depends somewhat on heredity as well as other factors. Of great influence are how well the buck weathered the previous winter months and how nutritious the food is that he eats while the antlers are growing. Yearlings, if well fed, can develop six and eight point racks in their first year of antler development.

Mid and late summer triggers an increase of the male hormone, testosterone. As this hormone increases it stops antler growth. By late August and September the blood flow to the antlers decreases and the velvet sheds. What remains is the bony rack we are accustomed to seeing in the fall.

Just recently my father told me of a rare sight he was lucky to observe. Two bucks, each with fully developed antlers, nibbled at acorns in the companionable quiet of a late October afternoon. Such peace will soon elude these bucks for rutting season is about to begin.