

A Tale Of Two Antlers

The 2008 deer season had been long and frustrating for Mike Stimmell of Warren, Pennsylvania. Mike is an avid archery hunter who sometimes handicaps himself with a homemade bow and homemade arrows. For practice and for fun, he even chips his points from stone just like Native Americans once did. In 2006, Mike shot a nice buck with his primitive, handcrafted gear.

Mike had hunted all or part of 30 days during the 2008 archery season and had taken a shot at only one buck. The 21-yard shot was a long trek for a slow, heavy wooden shaft — and gave the deer plenty of time to react. And as often happens, the white-tail ducked to load the springs in his legs, and Mike's arrow sailed harmlessly over the deer's back. Mike had blown his only shot opportunity of the archery season.

When rifle season opened, Mike picked up the old Model 70 Winchester that had witnessed many deer seasons in the hands of his dad and his granddad. The veteran .30-06 made lots of memories, and was about to create one more.

On Friday of the snowy first week of the rifle season, Mike put several miles on his tired legs. He saw just two deer, making the week's tally only four. Mike was discouraged and frustrated. On Saturday he hunted the morning, went home for lunch, and dozed off. A slap on the shoulder from his wife brought him back to reality. "Are you going to sleep, or hunt?" Amy was frustrated too, and chased him out of the house.

Mike headed out to State Game Land No. 29 near "Heart's Content." Shortly after 1 p.m., he parked his truck and headed into the woods. About 300 yards from his truck, he discovered a dropped antler — the right side from a nice 8-point rack — lying on top of the knee-deep snow. The buck had been feeding on acorns when the antler was dropped. Mike shrugged, tucked it into his backpack and thought, *This is definitely a reward, and it's better than nothing for such an unproductive season.*

Mike spent the afternoon making a



PHOTO COURTESY OF MIKE STIMMELL

big loop through the bottom of a valley and back up to the starting point. He saw plenty of tracks, droppings and rubbed trees, but not a single deer. Mentally and physically exhausted, he trudged through the deep snow. Just before quitting time, he stopped to take a breather about 75 yards below the top of a hill.

His eyes picked up movement — a nice-sized deer along the crest of the hill. When he found it in the scope, a half-rack buck was looking right at him. His mind processed a dozen thoughts in the few seconds he had to make a decision. *He sees me. Is he going to run? Could it be the buck that lost that antler? Or is it another one with a broken rack? Should I shoot? Can I get a shot off?* His final thought was, *Squeeze!*

The buck dropped in its tracks. A jolt of adrenaline pulled Mike up the hill to the buck. As he took the buck's only antler in his hands, he realized it was a mirror image of the one he had

Mike Stimmell was hunting on state game land in Pennsylvania when he found a freshly shed 4-point antler. Later that day, he saw a one-antlered buck and shot it. Amazingly, the shed belonged to that deer!

found just 50 yards from this spot. Mike pulled the shed antler out of his pack and it fit like a missing puzzle piece. *Thank you, God!* he thought.

This big woods buck had apparently cast the antler at breakfast that morning and was returning just before dark to help himself to more acorns. The 3 1/2-year-old buck field-dressed at 165 pounds. Mike, a high school football coach who had once been a running back, struggled to load the deer into his truck. When he finally flopped it into the bed, the other antler popped off, leaving Mike with an antlerless buck!

The 8-point rack had a spread of about 19 inches, as near as Mike could tell. No one he'd ever known had worked as hard to reunite a shed ant-

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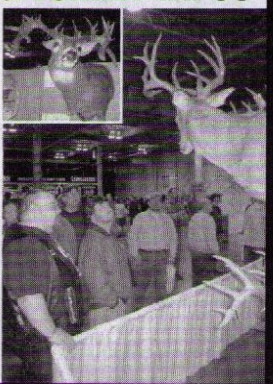
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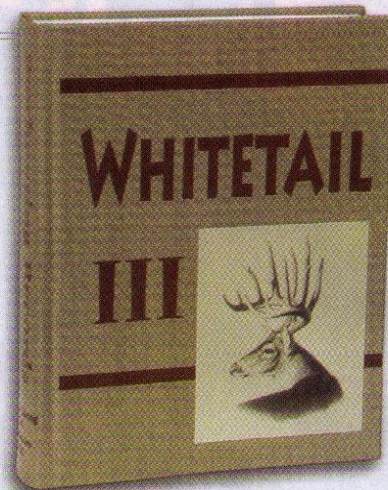


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ler with its original owner, and in the process Mike created a truly unique memory for the wall. One last hunt with granddad's old Model 70 taught Mike that a little extra effort often *can* change your season! 



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