

Antlers - Part #2

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Right now in the cold depths of winter, deer and moose are struggling to survive. They are metabolizing their fat supply at an unprecedented rate and in March and April starvation will claim many of them. It is hard to believe that by early September a full grown bull moose can weigh over 1,300 pounds and on his head he may be sporting a set of antlers that is six feet wide and weighs over 50 pounds. A mature buck can weigh over 300 pounds and have a set of antlers that tags him as the most popular big game animal in the country.



But how did they do it? How did they grow a huge set of antlers, and prepare their bodies for the physical rigors of the rut, followed immediately by the cruel depths of winter? The answer is food, food, food; and it all begins in the spring.

In early spring and through the summer, both sexes of the deer family must quickly make up for winter's deficits. The males will be growing their antlers and putting on muscle mass for the rut. The females will be giving birth (sometimes to triplets), lactating and raising the young. To do this deer must consume not only calories, but lots of minerals as well, namely sodium, potassium, and calcium. The primary early spring mineral source for deer and moose is the salt along the roadsides. Here they literally suck the salt out of the soil. Moose are most notorious for their roadside sightings, however if you stop the car and examine the mud wallows you will find plenty of deer tracks as well (heads up while driving in the spring). I know one forester who had a moose lick his truck from bumper to bumper consuming the salt stuck to the vehicle.

As summer progresses and the landscape greens up, moose and deer move into the forests and wetlands to consume nature's bounty. Minerals are critical for antler growth and lactation and this need is now supported mostly by aquatic vegetation. Most of us have seen moose or deer up to their necks in ponds and swamps. This is partly for relief from the swarming flies, but mostly for the aquatic vegetation that has a high mineral content. Once while camping near a swamp in Maine, my father and I listened to a female moose feeding in the swamp. I was lulled to sleep that night by the sound of this moose blowing bubbles in the water.

Summer is also a time for protein which is critical for all animal life during this time of demanding growth. All ages of deer and moose are ravenously consuming pound after pound of high quality plant protein. Deer are known to eat over 70 different kinds of food; though I think it may be more than that. If you have ever watched a deer or moose feed through the forest you will quickly realize that the world is their dinner plate.

By the end of August antler growth has stopped, lactation is slowing, and body growth is also slowing. They must now prepare for the breeding season followed by winter hardship. During the rut a mature male deer may travel up to ten miles a day, picking fights and looking for love around every mountain. Females are much smarter than that and save their energy for survival. Fat and protein are the key nutrients of fall which are gained mostly by eating acorns, beech nuts, apples, berries, agricultural crops, clover, grasses, legumes and browse. Moose tend to

stick with browsing woody plants, and there aren't many small trees a moose won't eat (ask any forester or Christmas tree grower). These foods not only build fat supply, they are also the foods that moose and deer eat all winter, especially browse.

The foods of hunting season are the ones we most commonly associate with deer; however, these foods really are just the tip of the iceberg. It takes the nutrition of a variety of foods eaten throughout the year to enable them to grow their antlers big and strong to help them dominate during rut and endure the hard winter.

Look for my article next month...bobcats in my backyard!