

In Pursuit of Mature 6-pointers

Mature 6-point bucks are as rare and revered as mature 12-pointers. Despite many close calls, QDMA's founder is still on the hunt for this particular QDM achievement.

By Joe Hamilton

A basic tenet of QDM involves moving more bucks into the older age classes. Benefits include creating a more balanced adult sex ratio, diversifying the buck age structure, and enhancing the hunting experience by increasing the availability of mature bucks with larger bodies and antlers.

One thing we didn't anticipate is that Quality Deer Management (QDM) could increase the number of mature bucks with six points. Before getting discouraged and thinking that your deer herd is riddled with inferior genes, consider the biology of the animal and the effects of your management. Even though a small percentage of adult bucks produce racks with only six points – just as a small percentage produce racks with 12 points – it stands to reason that as the number of adult bucks increases, so does the number with six points. Also, antler point restrictions (APRs)



QDMA Charter Life Member Henry Fair killed this incredible South Carolina 6-pointer in 2008. It was 5½-years old and measured just over 123 inches.

using four points on a side as a minimum are designed to protect young bucks with fewer points, but mature bucks with less than four points on a side are protected as well. My concern is not directed toward herd genetics, which we cannot change through management, but rather the loss of opportunity to harvest a mature buck with an impressive 6-point rack.

I have had an affinity for mature 6-pointers for many years and hold them in high regard. A well-developed, symmetrical 6-point rack is beautiful – even regal. There are several 6-point racks in my antler collection, but they were harvested by someone else. And, the hunting stories featuring the harvest of mature 6-pointers are all those of my hunting companions, not mine. Several years ago I stalked to the edge of an oak flat and encountered a 6-point that would have gone on my wall. The crosshairs settled on his massive chest, but I thought about my two Australian friends who would be hunting with me the following week and the trophy 6-pointer walked away unscathed. Neither the Aussie hunters nor anyone else in the neighborhood crossed paths with that buck, that season.

Over time, voluntary participation in QDM usually takes experienced hunters beyond APRs to a suite of management/harvest options. A simple approach allowing the harvest of mature 6-pointers, for example, is to ask these questions: If he does not have at least 8 points, is he 3½ years old or older? If he does not have 8 points, do his antlers have the mass of a mature buck? If he does not have 8 points, is the beam length that of a mature buck? I omitted antler spread from this list of questions because I have seen numerous mature bucks with a very narrow rack, less than 15 inches. In fact, I'll describe such a buck later in this article.

The 6-point Vein

The deer woods of my neighborhood have served as a veritable classroom throughout my professional career. It is here that I hunted for the first time before my age was in the double digits, and it is here that as a lifelong student my identity has been molded by the noble whitetail. It has become obvious to me that veins of genetic characteristics or traits exist. In these isolated gene pools mature bucks commonly exhibit abnormal points, forked G-2s, and 6-point racks. I chose the term

“vein” because these genetic traits tend to occur in a long, linear pattern.

I have been monitoring two 6-point veins for over 30 years. One exists along the border between the property that is the birthplace of the QDMA and the neighboring plantation. The featured photo for this article was taken of a buck from this vein. The buck, shot in 2008 by QDMA Charter Life Member Henry Fair, was 5½ years old, and his rack scored 123 1/8 Boone & Crockett points. Three others in my collection ranged in B&C score from 112 to 120 points.

The other 6-point vein exists on the northern portion of a large hunting club one county to the south. In October, as I was compiling my notes and photos for this article, I received a call from Melvin McQuaig, the club's president and a QDMA Life Member.

“Joe, the 6-point gene is still alive and well on Log Hall,” Melvin said. “Nancy Jo Southwell shot a 6-point this afternoon that weighed 176 pounds, had an 18-inch outside spread, and was 4½ years old.”

This portion of the property has produced several mature 6-pointers each year for the last 30 years.

Here's a question for wildlife researchers to wrap their heads around. How do these unique antler traits continue to appear over time in localized areas? Is there a chance that females have more influence on antler characteristics, or at least certain antler traits, than we have recognized? It appears as simple as comparing the home ranges and dispersal patterns of females and males, with the smaller ranges and minimal dispersal of females limiting the expansion of these unique traits. Speculation breeds the need for further research.

My Experience with 6-pointers in Texas

Texas has been a home-away-from-home for me since my first visit there in 1981. What's the attraction for nearly 50 return trips? Well, it's a long list starting with Al Brothers and his family, the King Ranch, the Golden Triangle (a Mecca for mature whitetail bucks), Rio Grande turkeys and spring flowers, and many close friends, too numerous to mention here. When my wife Donna and I were married 20 years ago, we headed to Texas to spend time with Al and Claudia Brothers on our “hunting moon” – it was turkey



Dr. Larry Marchinton with a Texas “Slick Six” that had no brow tines and was 4½ years old.



Joe photographed this mature Texas 6-pointer moments before Jason Hart killed it with his bow.



Joe and former *Quality Whitetails* editor James Guthrie stalked and shot this mature, high-racked South Texas 6-pointer in 2002. Joe was watching the buck through binoculars when Guthrie fired.

> >

season and the countryside was awash with blooming bluebonnets.

Of all the Lone Star state visits, those involving encounters with 6-point bucks remain high among my favorite hunting memories. Dr. Larry Marchinton and I visited our fellow QDMA Charter Life Member Al Brothers in the mid-1980s to get a first-hand account of just how QDMA worked. We were on the very South Texas ranch where Al put these new principles to task. Al positioned me in a ground blind where a post-prime buck with a 5x3 rack had been seen. Dr. Marchinton was directed to an oat patch frequented by a mature "Slick Six" – an adult 6-point buck without brow points. The scouting paid off. My buck had a 14-inch rack and was 8½ years old. Dr. Marchinton's Slick Six was 4½ years old.

In 2002, I was with Jason Hart, who at the time was QDMA's Director of Branch Development and now works for Mossy Oak, when he shot a mature 6-pointer with his bow on the King Ranch. I shot first, and "captured" Jason's buck both broadside and facing us with my camera.

During that visit I spent an exciting day with the late James Guthrie, former



This Texas 6-pointer was estimated to be an amazing 10½ years old. Betty Marchinton killed it on the King Ranch while guided by Dr. Mick Hellickson.

editor of this magazine, as we pursued a fine 6-pointer. According to our guide Oscar Cortez, "You'll know it when you see him. His rack is narrow, very tall, and massive!"

Oscar was right, when we first laid eyes on him there was no doubt he was the one. Hours of playing cat-and-mouse

with this elusive buck produced several slim chances to take him, but James commented to me that he had never missed a deer and he intended on keeping his record. As if following a script that we had written, the buck walked into a clearing 100 yards away with only 15 minutes of hunting time left. We stood there shoulder to shoulder, me with binoculars and James with his favorite rifle, for what seemed to me an eternity. The rifle reared and James's record remained untarnished. That narrow-antlered 6-point rack had found a home in Georgia.

Several years ago I had the pleasure of hunting with fellow Charter Life Member Betty Marchinton on the King Ranch. Dr. Mick Hellickson, a QDMA Life Member, was our guide for the morning. He took us to an area where he had seen a sway-backed 6-pointer, an old timer. Within minutes Mick uttered the words that sent a chill down my spine: "That's him!"

Betty was on point and on target. That buck's bleached skull and the trophy jawbone of 10½-plus years are displayed with pride among other hunting memorabilia in the Marchinton home.

The Big Six of Sugar Loaf

He walked in front of two brothers sitting together in a box blind, and the decision was reached to let him walk. Judged by body characteristics to be 3½

MADE FROM 100% RECYCLED MATERIALS

BIG GREEN TARGETS

SEE OUR ENTIRE LINE OF TARGETS VISIT US ONLINE

NEW

Big Green

MAGNUM PRO

Crossbow Rated To 350 FPS Field Point Target

WITH New No-Tear DuraShot™ Face

www.BigGreenTargets.com

MADE IN THE U.S.A.

© 2013 Big Green Targets



This 6-point buck was "captured" last fall by a cell phone camera on a private property near Columbia, South Carolina. The hunter asked Joe if he should have taken this buck. Joe said, "Absolutely! He is 4½ or 5½ years old and has a beautiful rack. The combination of body, rack and jawbone make this quite a respectable trophy."

years old and carrying a tall, massive rack with only G-1s and G-2s, he was given a name – a title – The Big Six of Sugar Loaf. Throughout that fall and for the following two deer seasons, he traveled the haunts of my boyhood hunting days along the Cape Fear River in southeastern North Carolina, revealing himself often to the full-time scout, a trail-camera, and only once more to a hunter who passed him up in hopes one of the kids would have a chance at him. He produced a larger 6-point rack each year, and the timing of his movements could have given him a nickname – the Night Owl – because of his propensity for nocturnal activity. By the time he reached the age of 6½, there were two obvious changes. His rack sported an extra point – a short G-3 appeared on his left beam. Most importantly, he was showing up from time to time after sunrise, so he was huntable!

I was sitting in an elevated stand on a powerline right-of-way late one October afternoon in South Carolina. An hour into the hunt and my neck was beginning to pay the price of repeatedly turning left then right. It was like watching a windshield wiper. A vibrating cell phone in my



QDMA member Steve Guyton of South Carolina with the Big Six of Sugar Loaf.

pocket provided a respite from my vigil. Steve Guyton was on the other end, so I answered in anticipation of pending news about the Big Six of Sugar Loaf. An out-of-breath caller responded, “I got him! I got him!”

In the final, unwritten chapter of this

legend, the hunter expressed a degree of sadness as he glanced in the rear view mirror at his quest with the Sugar Loaf tract in the background.

“I felt as though I had robbed the property and my fellow hunters of something special, and suddenly realized that it was as it should be,” Steve said. “The Big Six of Sugar Loaf had run his course and already there were other special bucks that had been named.”

He has been granted a prominent position on the wall of the Chapter One cabin at Sugar Loaf.

My hunting future pales in comparison to the days I’ve hunted, but the quality experiences increase exponentially each year. If this trend continues, perhaps a mature 6-pointer will come my way before the last sunset.



About the Author: Joe Hamilton is the founder of QDMA, one of 37 QDMA Charter Life Members, and he currently serves as QDMA's Director of Development. He's also a wildlife biologist with numerous awards to his credit, including the Southeast Deer Study Group's Career Achievement Award and the Budweiser Outdoors Conservationist of the Year. But he still hasn't killed a mature 6-point.

DO YOU HAVE A WHITETAIL SLAM?

IF YOU'VE HARVESTED A BUCK IN ANY OF THESE SUBGROUP AREAS, YOU CAN REGISTER YOUR BUCK ON-LINE NOW!

WIN FREE WEEKLY PRIZES
WIN FREE MONTHLY HUNTS
START A FREE SLAM PAGE
EARN YOUR SLAM AWARD!

- Seminole
- Dakota
- South-Central Plains
- Northwestern
- Northern Woodland
- Southeastern
- Gulf Coast
- Desert Cores

Free monthly e-mag!

REGISTER on-line to WIN!

WHITETAIL SLAM.com

"The ULTIMATE Deer Hunting Challenge Now has a Name"

WHITETAIL SLAM
WHITETAIL TERRITORIES
 Maintaining the Integrity of Subspecies
www.whitetailSLAM.com