

SC antler records remain high in 2023 September 7, 2023

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The S.C. Department of Natural Resources added 200 sets of deer antlers to the state records list during its annual antler measuring in 2023, including two Boone and Crockett Club qualifiers. Each spring SCDNR Wildlife Section personnel make a concerted effort to measure white-tailed deer antlers throughout the state, with a major session during the Palmetto Sportsmen's Classic in Columbia.

A total of 534 sets of antlers were measured during the 2023 cycle. The 200 sets that met the minimum score for entry on the state records list included 195 sets of typical and five non-typical sets of antlers. While not all records were from deer taken during the 2022 deer season, 138 were taken during the 2021 or 2022 seasons.

Racks must score a minimum of 125 points typical or 145 points non-typical to qualify for the South Carolina state records list. Records are based on the Boone and Crockett Club scoring system, which measures the mass and symmetry of deer antlers in two categories—typical and non-typical.

The top typical buck was a 166 2/8-inch Chesterfield County deer taken by Donald Craig in November 2020. Craig's buck is a new Chesterfield County record, No. 14 on the all-time South Carolina typical list, and qualifies for the Boone and Crockett Club's three-year awards period. Tanner Herndon took the No. 2 buck for the 2023 scoring period in August 2022, a 161 0/8-inch Dorchester County deer that is a new county record. The set is No. 32 on the all-time typical list and also qualifies for Boone and Crockett's three-year awards period. Leading the non-typical category was a Williamsburg County buck netting 157 0/8 inches taken by Ty Tilton in October 2022 and a 156 0/8-inch buck taken by James Cassell in Colleton County in December 2022.

The purpose of the antler records program is two-fold. First, because of the great interest in deer hunting, it is a way to recognize outstanding white-tailed deer taken in South Carolina. Second, it provides management information that allows SCDNR wildlife biologists to identify areas that produce quality deer. When particular areas stand out, it is important to attempt to recognize the underlying characteristics that produce outstanding animals.

South Carolina's deer herd is in good condition. After many years of rapid population growth, the herd stabilized in the mid-1990s followed by a decreasing trend between 2003 and 2015.

Since 2015 the population has been stable to slightly increasing. Statewide population estimates put the deer herd at about 700,000 animals, with an estimated harvest of approximately 190,000 each of the last few years. Although the total deer harvest in South Carolina may have trended down over the last decade, indications from the antler records program are that deer quality remains good. This would make sense because fewer deer in the population would benefit from increased nutrition.

Aiken County led the way with 20 record entries in 2023, followed by Orangeburg County with 18, Greenville with 16 and Lexington with 12. Although some of the top counties have relatively high deer populations, some of the top counties have more moderate numbers. It is important that hunters and land managers understand how the density of deer in an area affects the quality of the animals. Areas with fewer deer typically have better quality animals because natural food availability and nutritional quality is higher. Good nutrition is important in producing good antlers, but deer reproduction, recruitment and survival are also directly tied to nutrition.

For all-time record list leaders at the county level, Aiken County remains at No. 1 with 579 entries followed closely by Orangeburg County with 574. Rounding out the top-5 are Anderson with 320, Fairfield with 318 and Williamsburg with 283 entries. If you account for the size of the county, the top counties per unit area of record bucks are Anderson, Aiken, Orangeburg, Abbeville and Calhoun.

South Carolina hunters should recognize that harvesting potential Boone and Crockett bucks is not a common occurrence anywhere in the country. This is particularly evident if you consider that there are only about 17,000 white-tailed deer records listed by Boone and Crockett, which includes entries dating to the 1800s. Similarly, the harvest of deer in the United States in recent years has been about 6 million per year. Essentially, the average hunter stands a better chance of being struck by lightning in their life than harvesting a Boone and Crockett deer. In South Carolina, about one in every 700 white-tailed bucks taken makes the state antler records List.

Currently 8,171 sets of antlers (7,845 typical and 326 non-typical) are included on the South Carolina antler records list. Results of SCDNR's antler records program for 2023 are available at www.dnr.sc.gov/wildlife/deer/2023DeerAntlerRecords.html.