

# Trophies roam in Buffalo County

## Reputation for big bucks is nationwide

By **TIM EISELE**  
Special to the Journal Sentinel

Buffalo County is reputed to be a top trophy white-tailed deer hunting county in the nation.

According to the Boone and Crockett Club, which records trophy deer and other big game animals, it is the nation's top trophy antler-producing county when you combine typical antlers, which are symmetrical, and non-typical antlers, which are more irregularly shaped.

As its reputation for deer hunting has blossomed over the years, deer hunting patterns in the county have changed dramatically.

Mark Noll, a dairy farmer from Alma and co-chairman of the Wisconsin Conservation Congress Big Game Study Committee, has long been a part of the county's deer hunting heritage, and an observer of its changes. His great grandfather moved to Buffalo County in 1891, with Noll being the third-generation owner and hunter of his dairy farm.

"We've always been known for large deer, partially due to habitat and genetics," Noll said. "Another reason is that animals could get away from hunters with the rugged terrain."

The biggest change he's seen is in property ownership. In the past, farmers owned the land, but now many farms have been split up as recreational buyers or outfitters buy property. Some marginal farms may not have been profitable, but outside buyers have paid prices that farmers couldn't otherwise get, and now the landowner is no longer a part of the local community.

As a result, some local residents no longer have a place to hunt, since there is little public land in the county. It is difficult for new hunters to find a place to hunt just as it is for new farmers to find a place to start farming.

"It's gotten to a point where you have to be a very, very good friend or relative of the landowner, or have enough money to buy or lease your own property," Noll said. "Woodland now sells



ASSOCIATED PRESS

**Buffalo County** is reportedly the best big-buck county in the nation.

for \$3,500 an acre, and I think back to 1985 when they sold woodland on the courthouse steps for \$63 per acre."

Changes in land ownership have brought changes in hunting. Noll said that, although there is hunting pressure throughout the bow season, there are fewer hunters on the opening day of the gun season.

"It used to be that every farm had a family group of hunters and they started walking and driving deer on opening morning," he said. "It sounded like the opening day of duck hunting season. Now, a lot of those groups are gone and people don't drive deer anymore. They like to sit for the first day or two, but so many recreational buyers just use a stand or build a tower and sit there and they don't move."

Consequently, the deer aren't pushed and they hide in valleys and may never get shot at.

"People also are so afraid that they will push that big monster buck onto the neighbor's place and the neighbor will then shoot it," Noll said. "Even though this is a free-roaming animal, when it's on their property people somehow feel it is theirs and don't want the neighbor to get it."

Feeding and baiting also change deer movements, Noll said.

"Deer don't have to move now with people feeding and baiting, even though there is a 2-gallon limit," Noll said. "I would like to see that changed primarily from the disease part of it. We are the only CWD state or province that hasn't outlawed all feeding and baiting and, as a dairy farmer, I am concerned that deer might get diseases that could be spread into domestic livestock."

Noll said feeding and baiting is also used "defensively," partly to keep deer from going onto a neighbor's land. And the extra nutrients keep the populations higher, which has a negative impact on oak regeneration.

Another trend is the emphasis on quality deer management, which is supposed to include additional harvest pressure on antlerless deer. Noll said somehow people don't want to shoot the antlerless deer.

"I would really like to see people have fun again when they are hunting," Noll said. "This competition for the big buck causes people to be frustrated at small deer and, in the past, it used to be a holiday, with family and friends getting together and having fun. Who got the big buck wasn't the important thing."