Cause You're My Best Friend
by Chase Currie

Introduction

Flashback 40 years to the 1970s and there was a song by Queen titled, "You're My Best Friend"; remember it? Interestingly enough, this same song may hold some merit regarding deer behavior and social dynamics. More specifically, it may help describe the relationship some bucks have with each other during the non-breeding season. Bucks usually spend late spring through early fall in small groups referred to in the deer world as "bachelor groups". These are groups of bucks that travel together, and in most cases follow the same schedule on a day to day basis; often times feeding and bedding together. Bachelor groups may

Bachelor group of bucks in early October.

contain bucks of all ages, and at times, even include yearlings.

During the spring and summer, testosterone levels are at an annual low; however, bucks within a bachelor group will establish a pecking order, and in turn, develop a social hierarchy. This social hierarchy may reduce the severity of fights during the breeding season. So, what causes this bachelor party to end? Ironically enough, the same factors that bring a wild weekend in Vegas with the boys to a halt also change the dynamic of a bachelor group for bucks; testosterone and the opposite sex!

Separation of Bachelor Groups

Bucks within bachelor groups begin sparring with each other as testosterone levels rise in late summer and early fall. As the severity of these sparring bouts increase, the loser, or subordinate buck, will often groom the forehead region of the more dominate buck after sparring. Research indicates that this behavior may help subordinate bucks associate the outcome of the sparring bouts with the odor of a dominant buck's forehead gland. Furthermore, this behavior may allow bucks to maintain familiarity among one another once bachelor groups separate. As the rut approaches, most bucks will separate from their bachelor groups and go their own way.

During the rut bucks expand their home range in search of receptive does. Furthermore, as illustrated in past Deer Associate Enews articles, bucks make abnormal movements (excursions) of several miles or more outside of their home range. As the rut draws to a close and testosterone levels decrease, bucks will begin to habituate back to their home range. In doing so, a buck's efforts will shift from the rut back to feeding. So, after months of lonely rambling, is it possible that some bucks long for their summer time friends? Do bucks form a bond with other bucks during time spent in a bachelor group that helps reunite them after the rut? In other words, do stable bachelor groups occur in the deer world? Go back to your high school days, it would be like reuniting with your high school buddies over the summer after a semester long trance with your girlfriend!

Stable Bachelor Groups?

What is a stable bachelor group? For the purpose of this article, a stable bachelor group is a group of 2 or more bucks that reunite in successive years following the rut. In other words, the same bucks "bachelor up" each year during late spring to early autumn. Are stable bachelor groups even possible after months of breeding, fighting, and rambling to and fro?

Although little research has been done to study this phenomenon, camera data indicates that some bucks will reunite each year following the rut (Figure 1); thus forming stable bachelor groups. As indicated in Figure 1, some bucks may reunite each year for 3-4 years. Managers who use trail cameras as a tool in their deer management toolbox may have also observed the same phenomenon. While not all bucks re-group each year into stable bachelor groups, there seems to be a relationship among some bucks which brings them back together each year. The relationship may be driven by several factors, albeit unknown; however, one thing is clear, a deer's social world really isn't that different than ours.

Figure 1. Trail camera photos from 2011-2014 each year in early September illustrating a stable bachelor group of the same 2 bucks.

2013

2014