



CASE CLOSED

mystery of the missing record antlers solved after 16 years

by Robert O'Connor

In the summer of 1994,

Buffalo resident Nick Gumhalter pled guilty to “possessing wild deer parts while failing to meet the mandatory requirements of the Environmental Conservation Law,” and to “transporting wildlife contrary to the terms of the Fish and Wildlife Law.” While the charges were run-of-the-mill, this was no ordinary case. The largest set of deer antlers in New York State had “disappeared” from a display at the Erie County Fairgrounds in 1978, and as it turned out, Gumhalter may have been involved.

The bizarre case began when an anonymous caller phoned DEC’s then-Lieutenant Robert Lucas on March 21, 1994. The mysterious caller told Lucas (the supervising officer in the area at the time) that he would find an “item of interest” tied to a road sign in a remote area of Cattaraugus County. The caller provided directions to the sign. Lucas assigned Environmental Conservation Officer (ECO) Robert O’Connor to locate and retrieve the item.

What O’Connor found was an extremely large set of shed deer antlers. Neither ECO O’Connor nor Lieutenant Lucas knew the significance of the rack at the time, but the find began an investigation that led to the unraveling of this story.

Hoping for leads in the case, the officers brought the shed antlers to a meeting of other officers, where ECO Jim Rogers, assigned to Niagara County, knew instantly what they were: the set of shed

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antlers that had disappeared from the Erie County Fairgrounds some 16 years earlier. O’Connor contacted Bob Estes, record keeper for the state’s Big Buck Club, to confirm the identity of the rack and to get more information about the circumstances of its disappearance. Estes not only recalled the rack, but remembered how the disappearance had strained friendships and accounted for some hard feelings.

“Bob [Estes] was extremely helpful in fleshing out the story,” O’Connor said. “He had an intimate knowledge of the history of the antlers as they had been in his care when they were stolen.”

Estes told the officer that Joseph Merwin had found the shed antlers on Merwin’s farm in Allegany County in 1938. Estes explained that, during the 1939 deer hunting season, Roosevelt Luckey killed the buck that likely grew the sheds. Amazingly, the same buck provided

two men with historic racks. The “Luckey” buck still holds the New York State record, more than 70 years after it was shot, and according to Estes scored 198 2/8 points on the Boone and Crockett Club system. Estes speculated that if the shed antlers Merwin found in 1938 had been on a legally taken deer, they would have scored 205 6/8, making them the largest antlers on record in North America at the time.

Merwin kept the shed antlers from the “Lucky” buck in his barn for years. A few years after the Big Buck Club began keeping records in 1972, someone recommended having the enormous rack scored, and Merwin loaned the antlers to the Big Buck Club. Shortly before the antlers were to be returned to Merwin, they were reported missing from the Erie County Fairgrounds where they were on display.

While all involved were glad to have recovered the antlers, the circumstances of the theft remained a mystery. Lieutenant Lucas directed ECO O’Connor to conduct a thorough investigation.

“[The investigation] involved talking to as many people as I could about the rack,” O’Connor said. In an attempt to find people who could shed some light on the case, the ECOs contacted the *Jamestown Post Journal*.

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“[The newspaper] ran a front-page story and a photo of the impressive rack, and that generated a lot of calls,” recalled O’Connor. The rack was also shown to as many people as possible. One of those people was retired ECO Don Malmrose, who recalled seeing photos of the unmistakable and distinctive set of antlers. Malmrose put O’Connor in touch with the person who had shown him the photographs. Thanks to this tip, the case took a turn for the better.

“I interviewed the witness who claimed to have seen the antlers in Nick Gumhalter’s possession, and I was able to fill in a lot of the blanks,” O’Connor

said. “The witness gave me a good statement with a lot of facts he could personally attest to.”

According to the witness, the shed antlers had been taken from Gumhalter’s residence and brought to a party where several photos were taken of the rack. ECO O’Connor now had enough eyewitness information to contact his suspect.

The officer called Gumhalter and requested a meeting. Gumhalter agreed to meet, and quickly accepted the terms of a plea deal offered at that meeting. Although Gumhalter never confessed to stealing the sheds from the fairgrounds, he admitted to being employed at the fairgrounds when the antlers disappeared. He also admitted to possessing the sheds shortly after they were reported missing.

James Clayton



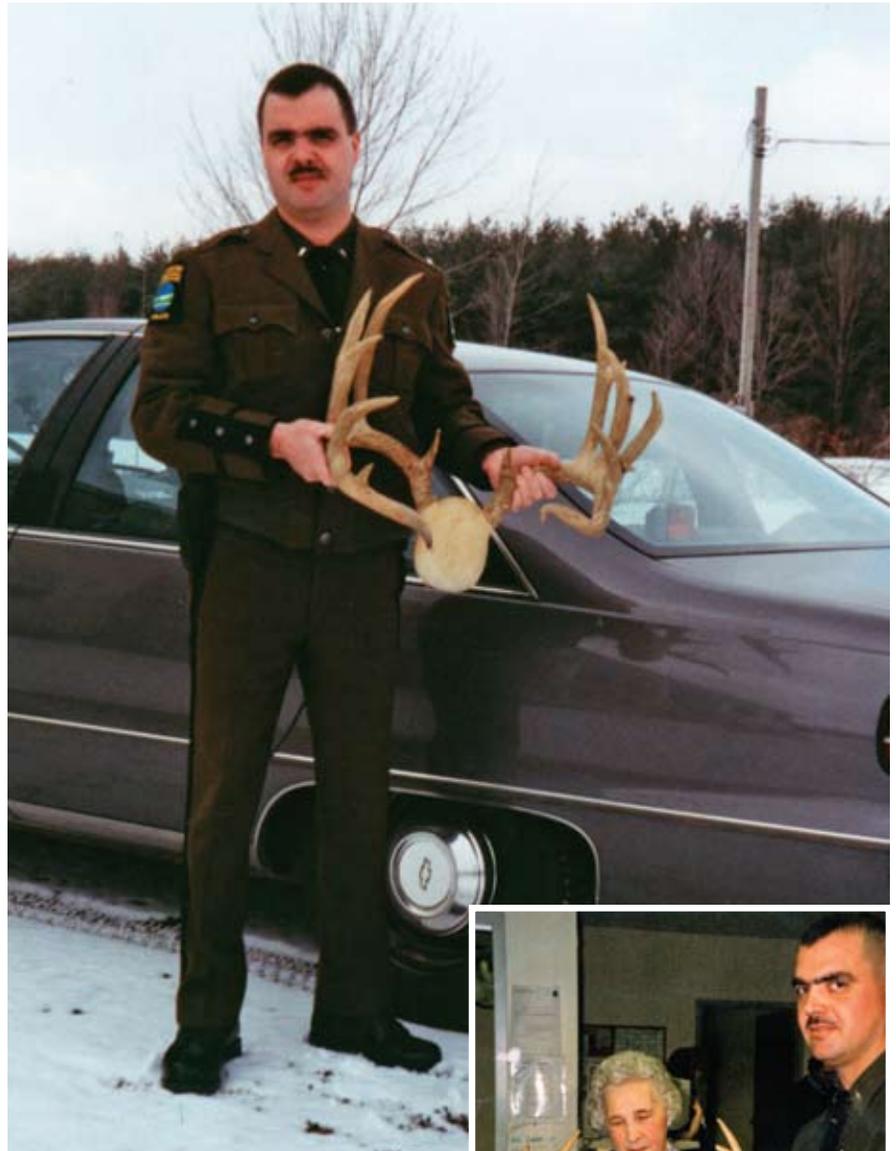
In 1938, Joseph Merwin found the large set of antler sheds (on left) that later disappeared from the Erie County Fair. The following year, Roosevelt Lucky felled the prize buck (on right) that likely grew the sheds.

During that same meeting, Gumhalter told ECO O'Connor that some day he'd tell him the whole story behind the disappearance of the sheds. Sadly, however, Gumhalter passed away before revealing what really happened.

In the spring of 1995, the antlers were returned to Mrs. Phoebe Merwin, the widow of the original finder, Joseph Merwin. Mrs. Merwin later donated the antlers to the Department of Environmental Conservation.

More than 30 years after the "Luckey" buck's shed rack was stolen from the Erie County Fairgrounds, the story of the antlers' strange journey seems almost as unlikely as the rack itself.

Robert O'Connor is an environmental investigator in DEC's Buffalo office.



DEC photos

Lieutenant Robert Lucas was the supervising officer when the mysterious sheds were discovered by ECOs in 1994. After the antlers' strange story was investigated, the sheds were returned to the original finder's widow, Mrs. Phoebe Merwin, who later donated them to DEC.



Bill Banaszewski

White-tailed bucks shed and regrow their antlers each year. Antler growth is nourished through a network of blood vessels contained in a soft smooth skin called velvet. The velvet is usually shed by September; the antlers are generally shed in mid-winter. The size of the antlers typically increases with a buck's age up to about five or six years, but nutrition, overall animal health, and genetics also play important roles in antler development.

People sometimes find sheds on the forest floor. The best time to look for sheds is in late winter and early spring. However, antlers are a source of calcium and other nutrients for rodents (including mice, voles, porcupines and squirrels) who feed on them, and this can make finding sheds difficult.