



AGEING TAHR on the Hoof

By Bre Lewis

As still as a statue, the stunning blond-maned bull stood amongst the smaller, duller-coloured feeding nannies. The magnificence imparted by his leonine mane and grizzly-like bulkiness was accentuated by the plainness of the surrounding nannies, truly marking him the king of the mountain. His thick golden mane bristled on its end as he stretched his neck out and tossed his head back in majestic display. Like a bodybuilder trying to hold a flex, the bull's movements were stiff as he endeavoured to walk in order to stay near his nannies, yet at the same time retain his pose and posture.

As impressive and awe-inspiring as this rutting ritual is, it can be equally frustrating to tahr hunters, because this stance, in concert with a puffed-up mane, hides the real key aspect used to evaluate tahr - their horns.

You'd think tahr would be easy to age on the hoof because of their definite age rings, and

for most bulls at a close distance, they are. On the other hand, from further away or where horn damage makes these rings indiscernible, a tahr's age can be more difficult to judge. In particular, it can be hard to determine between mature and old tahr because of similarities in bulls' faces, capes and bodies. ►

ABOVE:

Indistinguishable ridges, like ripples from a tiny, rapidly fluttering fly in water, characterise this old bull!

HUNTING :: TAHR

Tahr's horns are where the most defining aspects of their age can be seen, and these differences are relatively significant. However, the smaller size of tahr horns, when compared to a red stag's antlers or even a fallow buck's palms, makes the differences between them much smaller - often, the aspects studied differ by under an inch!

That being said, from a close distance, examination of the age rings, or annuli rings, on tahr is an easy and reliable way to determine their age. At further distances, or if damage to

the horn or glare from the sun and heat waves prevent visualising their rings, features both of the cape and shape of the horns can help us classify a bull's age.

CATEGORIES

Tahr have a longer lifespan than red and fallow deer, with bulls often reaching fifteen years of age and nannies even reaching twenty. I personally know of an 18-year-old nanny still producing offspring!

We don't consider a bull to be mature until it's seven years old. For this article, we'll classify bulls under seven years old as 'young', seven through nine years old as 'mature' or 'prime', and ten years old and over as 'old'.

AGE RINGS

On an overcast day, even at 400 metres, the ridges of age rings can be distinguished through a spotter. Even if the exact age can't be counted, the location and separation of the age rings allows categorisation of the animal.

Large gaps between the deep-gutted annuli indicate that the animal is still young. Once shorter-spaced age rings form at the base of the horn, the animal is in its prime years.

Generally, the horn growth seen each year remains decently spaced until around the bull's seventh year when rings often reduce to under half an inch apart. If many indistinguishable ridges or bumps stack up the length of the front of the bull's horns like ripples from a tiny rapidly fluttering fly in water, you know it's an old one!

Study a few photos - or even better, bulls in the flesh - and you'll soon develop an idea of

BELOW:

A magnificent bull in his rut display.



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LEFT:

The kid tip (first six months of growth before winter) and following year account for the first annuli (first 18 months). The winters after that are also noted.

RIGHT:

Damage to horns can make annuli rings difficult to count on the hoof.





Although we most commonly refer to younger bulls as lighter in colour, often 5-year-old bulls can appear darker because they lack the contrast that older bulls have between their mane and body.

the spacing between the lower rings of both prime and old tahr.

These age rings, or annuli, are actually caused by the termination of horn growth over winter. The first noticeable ring depicts about 18 months of the animal's life because it includes the kid tip, which represents the growth during the first six months of life before winter. In tahr, the annuli rings are excellent indicators of age. False rings, caused by the termination of horn growth for a reason besides winter (an injury or extreme lack of nutrition) are not common.

Even still, damage to the horn, whether chipped from a fall or worn from years of living in the scrub rubbing against bush, can make age rings on the front of horns difficult to discern on the hoof. Luckily, the shape of the horns as well as aspects of the cape can help us categorise the bull's age. Then an accurate age can be pinpointed using the age rings on the more sheltered backside of the horns once the animal is harvested!

CAPE

From a distance, a mature cape is the first thing to notice when in search of prime or old bulls. Young bulls have lighter capes with a nanny-like grey cape when a kid, developing into a longer shaggy grey with some age and finally, a mature bull cape with a lighter mane and darker body at five years of age.

Although we most commonly refer to younger bulls as lighter in colour, often 5-year-old bulls can appear darker because they lack the contrast that older bulls have between their mane and body. Along with the less intense contrast, the light stripes on young bulls don't reach as far back on their bodies as those of a mature bull. Generally, a bull

with these 'skunk stripes' reaching back to the level of his hind leg will be at least in his prime (seven years old).

As well as the colour, the length of the hair on the cape provides clues to age. Prime or old bulls have manes that not only drape their neck and chest but also sweep down between their front legs, hanging low between their knees. The bulk of the massiveness the mane portrays is continued posteriorly over their back and behind their shoulder as well, giving them their iconic grizzly-like appearance. Young bulls lack this length and mass, and their manes, though full around their face and neck, don't extend as long down or as far back.

Nevertheless, capes should not be relied on absolutely. On several occasions when judging bulls with wet capes, I've foolishly dismissed a mob as immature simply because they appeared scragglier with what had appeared to be darker, more youthful manes. Inspection with the spotting scope later revealed that they were old and mature bulls, and their ►

TOP:

This young bull is still with nannies after the prime rut has passed. His skunk stripes do not reach over his hind legs. Note, also, that his horns start to go back immediately after leaving his head.

BELOW:

This mature bull's skunk stripes continue much further down his back.



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RIGHT:

This 15-year-old bull still had a great cape!

wet manes had thwarted my better judgment. The opposite can be said once bulls begin rutting. A puffed out six-year-old bull during their winter rut can appear to have the same grizzly-like fullness of an eight-year-old bull. Injured, sick or extremely old bulls too can regress to nanny-like capes.

Hunting with a client in the scrub, I glimpsed a dusky grey, short-haired tahr. Assuming it to be a young bull, I didn't give it much thought until I chanced his head through my binos at 100 metres. Age rings stacked like a coin wrapper of pennies up the entire front of his horns! His body was a skeleton. I'll never know if the limp in his step was from injury or simply starvation - my client missed the shot, and despite almost daily checking and glassing that area, I never found him or his body again.

My boss had a similar encounter years before.

He talked a European client into shooting an extremely aged bull next to a beautifully maned, mature-looking bull. Fearful the client would assume he was suggesting targeting the obvious bull, he told the hunter to shoot the 'nanny' next to the bull! That 'nanny' ended up being a 16-year-old bull naturally reaching the end of its life! The client, who admired age and character over anything, was ecstatic!

On one of my first tahr hunts, we hunted a bull that similarly looked like a nanny. He stood on the beech edge, slightly nosing around, but never actually feeding. He looked dazed and was obviously sick. Unlike the other cases, he was not an old bull - only eight - but had some disease that played hard enough on him to cause him to lose his mighty mane.

Although perfectly healthy, a blond bull, who was in fact light-coloured all over and not only in his mane, frequented a valley I monitored regularly. I watched him for a few years, and though he was in his prime, he stayed unusually blond all over year around.

While judgment based on capes is not absolute, capes can help focus or dismiss attention on entire mobs as well as individuals. Before and after the rut, it's uncharacteristic for prime or old bulls to congregate with a mob of juveniles. Therefore, if there are many immature or young (five- or six-year-old) bulls in the mob, it's less likely that it'll also hold older bulls. This doesn't mean there can't be a few stray younger bulls in with mature and old tahr, but you're less likely to find mature tahr in a mob where the majority are young.

The distances and terrain to be covered in tahr hunting lend to lengthy stalks and huge energy expenditure. The more information that can be gained before proceeding and committing to a particular mob or animal,

LEFT:

Can you tell the difference between the prime and young bulls in this mob? Notice the height on Bull A's horns before they go back. Bull B has tips that can be seen curving down and inward from the side. Bull C is young, and the straight angle of his tip can be seen on his far horn. Bull D is also young as you can see from the angle his horns leave his head and in his shorter cape. The young bull at the bottom of the photo still has an immature cape.



It's important to note that older bulls normally rut for a shorter period than younger bulls; while they're extremely active at the peak of the rut, they don't linger long with the nannies once this short time has passed, but rather return to their bachelor mobs.



ABOVE:

This young bull's straight tips are obvious when viewed from the side.

the less likely time and effort will be wasted. Analysing capes can help allocate these resources to mobs of bulls with mature capes and long skunk stripes where you'll be more likely to find a prime or old bull.

On the other hand, during the rut, bull mobs split up and a myriad of aged bulls may be in the vicinity of an old bull rutting nannies. In these situations, individuals need to be considered more closely rather than simply assessing the mob, and capes can offer little insight to age other than being physically mature. A view of the horns' shape can offer a much more accurate indication as to the bull's age.

HORNS

Even in situations where the rings on the bull's horns cannot be counted, the shape of the horns still sheds light upon age. Unlike counting age rings, evaluating the shape is not an exact science, because genetics, nutrition and injury can affect the shape of horn growth. But there are a few key features that often positively correlate to age and would give good reasons to follow up for a closer look!

Most importantly, the way the horns leave the head can provide information on the bull's age. If the horns go straight back after leaving the animal's head, they're likely still young. Prime bulls have established a few years growing shorter age rings, which stack up before sweeping back. Old bulls have even more rings stacked, making their horns appear taller and straighter in the front. As stated earlier, the space between each of the tahr's growth rings becomes less and less with every consecutive year. Noticeable condensing occurs after their sixth year followed by another significant decrease to only millimetres around their ninth or tenth year. Of course, the thickness of these rings does depend on the animal's nutrition, but in relation to their other rings, this general rule of thumb can act as a guide.

During one hunt last winter, we watched rutted-up bulls with their fanned manes on

display follow their feeding nannies out onto the open shingle and short scrub faces in the afternoon sunlight. We studied many bulls through the spotter before even leaving the valley floor as the animals fed down onto the more fertile lower reaches of the mountainside. As typical with the rut, their statuesque forms hindered a view of their horns - if only we could judge bulls by their tongues! From our distance, almost a kilometre away, not much could be discerned about the animals' horns even when we were able to sneak views of them, but nonetheless, one bull caught our eye for having horns that appeared slightly taller. After a decent climb and a successful stalk and shot, we reached the fallen bull. Our excitement rocketed through the roof when we learned the height we'd noticed a kilometre away was caused by thirteen age rings stacked up his horns!

The sweep or 'curl' of the horns, too, can give additional clues to age, although there's more variation between individuals with this due to genetics and nutrition, especially in their early years of development. When studying bulls, animals with straight-looking tips when viewed from the side are often young - only five or six years old. Older bulls in their prime have had more years of growth, each year slightly changing the angle of ►

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LEFT:

This young bull has great potential to grow into a real cracker!

horns as they grow and making the tips of prime or old bulls more curled down and inward when viewed from the side.

Don't overlook that old bulls with worn kid tips can also appear to lack the curved shape of older bulls; however, after studying a couple of young bulls, the difference between long and pointy young kid tips, and fat and blunt worn tips of an old bull should be recognisable.

A few springs ago, I was part of a hunt where we were only targeting bulls over 13 inches. We spent hours judging many bulls through the spotting scope before selecting one we thought would break the magic 13. At this time of year, the bulls were mobbed up, so although we found a spectacular individual from a distance through the spotter, we had to distinguish him from the mob after our climb. Unfortunately, our stalk didn't proceed as planned, and the bulls fed down onto us before our anticipated point of intersection - we had no time to set up the spotter to study our bulls. However, our impressive bull was

clearly recognised through the binos due to his great thickness, height, and spread! He was quickly dropped by the .270.

Surprisingly for us, upon recovering the magnificent animal, we found he was only a six-year-old, even though he measured 13½ inches! Can you imagine what lengths this bull might have reached in five or six years? Although he had excellent genetics and feed to grow stunning horns that looked mature from almost every angle, his tips did not angle downward like an old bull. If we'd taken the time to check a few more angles of him before it was too late, we may have had a greater chance of a 15-inch bull this year.

CONCLUSION

We all make mistakes but armed with information and time spent hunting and observing tahr, we're more likely to be able to recognise and respect age as well as length. In years to come, this'll give us more chances at fourteens and maybe even fifteens! ■

	YOUNG (6 YEARS OLD AND UNDER)	MATURE (7-9 YEARS OLD)	OLD (10 YEARS OLD AND OLDER)
ANNULI RINGS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large gaps between rings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noticeable shortening of gaps between rings at the base of horns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small ridges resulting from short spaces between rings monopolise the front view of the horns
CAPE	<p>Under 5 Years Old</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lighter in colour and shorter hair <p>5- and 6-Year-Olds</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less contrast between mane and body • Shorter mane • Shorter skunk stripes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large contrast between blond mane and dark butt • Mane reaches down between knees in the front • Skunk stripes reach back to level of hind legs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large contrast between blond mane and dark butt • Mane reaches down between knees in the front • Skunk stripes reach back to level of hind legs
HORN SHAPE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Horns start back right after leaving head • Horns don't hook back in when viewed from the side 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Horns go up before going out and back • Horns hook inward slightly when viewed from the side 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Horns climb up from head more significantly before going out and back • Horns can appear taller and often wider as well • Horns curl inward more when viewed from the side unless tips are very worn
BEHAVIOUR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobs with other young bulls or tags onto a mature bull mob outside of the rut • Stays with nannies longer after the rut 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobs with other prime and old bulls outside of the rut • Stops rutting after the peak and returns to mobbing with other bulls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobs with other prime and old bulls outside of the rut • Stops rutting after the peak and returns to mobbing with other bulls