

# Outdoors

## A novel suggestion

Many hunters scorn exotic game animals on grounds that they're not "sporting," meaning, I suppose that they're too tame to be a real challenge. It may be true of some exotics, but definitely not all.

Take the axis deer for example. He was endowed by nature with all the characteristics of a fine game animal – natural grace and beauty, majestic bearing, impressive antlers, succulent flesh, and, yes, the alertness and caution of a prey species.

But, you say, axis wander around in your back yard in broad daylight, eating the azaleas and showing little fear of humans. Right ... and are you saying that the "wild" native whitetail deer don't behave exactly the same?

I contend that if axis stags were treated like whitetails, which is to say subjected to constant, intense hunting pressure for two months each year, especially hunting on foot, they'd quickly become just as challenging to hunt as any whitetail alive. The species, after all, evolved dodging tigers and leopards in the jungles in India and Pakistan, and they'd be long since extinct if they lacked inborn wariness and alertness to danger.

I've hunted free-ranging Texas axis that were every bit as cunning and elusive as the local whitetail bucks. If you

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doubt it, just try hunting them on foot in their own bailiwick, without using corn.

My wife and I hunted for two weeks over a two-year period to collect one specific axis stag, and got him on the last morning. We refused to shoot at or near a feeder or from the car, and I assure you he led us a merry chase and demanded all the woodsman-ship and strategy I could summon up.

It was as exciting and satisfying a hunt as we've ever shared, with a thrilling, last-second climax after repeated defeats. He remains one of my wife's proudest trophies, because we hunted him honestly.

Most Texans have hunted or lived around whitetails all their lives, and have accumulated a library of knowledge of that animal, his habits and reactions. But all we know about hunting axis is driving around looking for one that will stand, or shooting from a blind over a corn feeder.

That's a shame, because



Photos by John Wootters

**The author's wife, Jeannie, shows off her axis stag, hunted by strict fair chase (on foot only, no hunting near feeders) for 14 days over two seasons, supporting Wootters' contention that axis are truly challenging when treated with the same respect as a trophy whitetail buck.**

axis are fascinating critters, with a personality and a complete set of distinctive characteristics all their own. And they represent one of the most abundant and underutilized wildlife resources we have here in Kerr County.

For a quick quiz, do you know when the axis rut takes place, and how it differs from the whitetail mating season? Do you know at what time of year most stags carry hard antlers, and why they differ from the native deer in this respect? Can you describe the axis alarm call and the challenge call of the stags? Can you identify axis rubs and "scrapes" and point out how they differ from whitetails' in both appearance and method of making? Can you describe the axis deer's social structure and relationships? How about the stags' fighting behavior or its preliminaries? Can an axis male impregnate a doe while his antlers are in velvet ... or when he has no antlers? Can you define real trophy-class axis antlers?

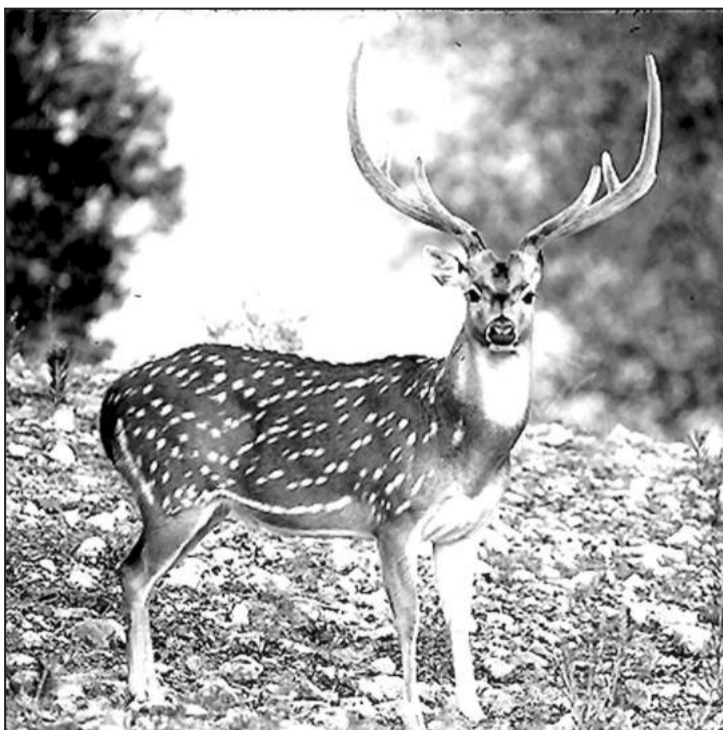
These are just a few of the things that anybody who con-

siders himself a hunter needs to know about the animals he hunts.

When you have this kind of background on the nature of axis deer, you'll discover that the animal takes on a whole new and much more interesting persona. If you choose to hunt him, your new knowledge will help you succeed and enjoy the chase; if not, it will still make your axis sightings – whenever and wherever – richer and more meaningful and exciting.

But you'll never again view an axis as just another common "tame exotic." The deer will be the same as he always was, though; it will be you who has changed.

**John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen's Hunting magazines.**



Wootters says the free-ranging axis deer in West Kerr County represent our most available and under-utilized wildlife resource. This beautiful stag was photographed in his back yard.