

He was born on a mellow day in late May, a fragile, five-pound, 12-ounce bundle of ears, gangly legs, and cinnamon-red fur dappled with white. Even at birth, the little buck was exceptional. His mother had carried him and his twin sister 213 days, a week longer than the normal gestation for whitetail deer, and he weighed about half a pound more than the average whitetail buck fawn.

He was a lusty youngster. Within 15 minutes of birth he had risen and fallen several times, wobbled, stumbled, and crawled to his resting mother's belly for his first meal, while the old doe licked his fur clean and dry. As soon as his sister had mastered her own legs and nursed, the mother deer nudged both fawns to their uncertain feet and led them, toddling, more than 300 yards from the birthplace, where the wetted earth held a predator-attracting odor.

In the midst of a thicket, she saw her babies curled up together in a motionless, scentless, almost invisible mound of spotted fur, and then withdrew some 100 paces. There she lay down in a place where she could watch, but where her own odor would not draw a bobcat or coyote to the little ones.

The pattern was the same for the next week. She left the fawns alone most of the time, returning to let them nurse half a dozen or more times each day.

The little buck grew stronger and bolder, and began to move around to explore the world, rambling many yards from his sister so that his mother would have to call softly to get him to scamper back to her udder.

His boldness might just as easily have killed him, but luck would have it that it saved his life on the day the coyote came. He was about 65 yards from his sibling on one of his excursions when he grew tired and flopped down for a nap. A passing coyote bitch, gaunt and hungry from the demands of her own five puppies, almost stumbled over the doe fawn and pounced on her as she struggled up to flee. The buck was awakened by his sister's last bleats. Although terrified, his instincts forced him to lie motionless. He watched, wide-eyed and uncomprehending, as his twin was torn apart and devoured on the spot. He never forgot the meaning of coyote scent thereafter.

When she returned from the water hole at dusk, the mother doe searched for her babies, and her nose told her what had happened. If she grieved in her way, we cannot know, but her overt concern was for her surviving son, and she called softly, again and again, until the little buck's terror was overcome and he came to her. After nourishing him, she led him slowly away from that spot forever.

He was now the sole consumer of his dam's rich milk, and the buck fawn grew very rapidly. When he was only three weeks old, he persisted in following his

The Real Story Of

By John Wootters

This is the story of a whitetail buck. His name was not Bambi. Being only a wild animal, he had no name. He was unable to think human thoughts or talk and philosophize with other deer. He learned to fear man, among other predators, but could not make moral judgments about "good" and "evil." His dim animal mind could not conceive of the nothingness of death, and therefore it was impossible for him to understand that men were trying to shoot him. Nor could he realize that those same men also made it possible for him to live. He was not a personality, but merely a single, magnificent cog in a great biological machine, the only purpose of which is to make more whitetail deer. He lived a few years and died, unmemorialized . . . but not unremembered. He was not the figment of an author's imagination; he was real.

mother on her foraging trips. She tried to make him stay, even using a front hoof in the middle of his back to push him firmly to the ground, but it was no use. He would bounce up and frisk along behind. As she nibbled on summer forbs and browse tips, he gamboled and explored all the new things he saw or smelled, investigating everything from grasshoppers to a land tortoise to a bleached deer skull in the greening grass. His mother could only watch distractedly, calling him back when he strayed too far.

When he was about six weeks old, the fawn met his own father by chance, at the watering place. Neither was aware of the relationship, of course, but the fawn was astonished; it has never occurred to him that his mother and he were not the only deer in the world. He timidly approached the big buck and was ignored until he sniffed at his sire's groin. The buck gruffly shook his massive, velvet-clad antlers at the fawn, who ran and hid behind his mother. Neither she nor the buck appeared to pay the least amount of attention to each other.

As their travels broadened, mother and son met more members of the local deer herd every day, and the fawn received his earliest social programming, beginning unconsciously to become a part of the herd unit. He also began to wean himself by imitating his mother's feeding habits,

tasting and testing the weeds and shrubs he saw her consume. By age six months, he could have survived without her, although he was still allowed to nurse now and then, and still followed her around unquestioningly.

Then, when he was about eight months old, his whole world began to change, incomprehensibly to him. His mother became nervous, restless, and short-tempered with him, and there was a new smell about her as she approached her estrus period. Suddenly, she seemed to have no further affection for him and tried to leave him alone. When he followed, she turned on him, ears laid back, and drove him away. Desolated, he followed her anyway, but at a distance.

Then, one night when a frosty moon illuminated the landscape, the fawn found himself separated from his mother by another mature buck who glared menacingly at him, his chin tucked in to present his heavy antlers and his ears drooping. The fawn had time only to see the moonlight glinting from those terrible ivory daggers before they were leveled at him in a furious charge. He barely scrambled aside in time, and fled for his life.

For the next three months he was alone and bewildered. Not even his mother, whom he encountered a few times, seemed to know him, and all the other bucks seemed to hate him. To make

Bambi



Age 3 months

matters worse, it was during this period when the woods were filled with stinking, noisy, two-legged creatures whom he learned to associate with ear-splitting explosions. He was frightened badly a couple of times when he blundered into men at close range, although they seemed to make no move against him. He found that, if he was alert, they were fairly easy to avoid, however; they seemed extremely clumsy in the forest, signaling their every move to his eyes, ears, and nose, and sometimes appeared to be blind, unable to see him at all if he stood still.

By January, the madness passed from the adult deer in the herd and things began to return to normal, although the grip of winter made feeding more competitive and living uncomfortable. He had become accustomed to taking care of himself, however, and grew more and more confident as winter wheeled into early spring. In the first week of May, his mother was again looking for a spot to drop the twin fawns in her abdomen, and the yearling buck was preoccupied with the fact that he was now growing a set of antlers. Other bucks now accepted him as a companion, and at last he formed a social bond with three others, including a couple of yearlings like himself.

He was already heavier than they, and

as his new headgear developed through June and July, he sported a forked beam and spindly brow tine on each side, whereas one of his companions was a spike and the other a small forkhorn. The fourth buck in the group was a three-year-old eight-pointer.

The quartet passed the summer together in a lazy, comfortable bachelor club, interacting not at all with other deer of any age or sex. This second social relationship in our buck's life lasted even more briefly than the one he had with his mother.

Shortly after the first of August, all four bucks found it necessary to begin thrashing bushes with their fully grown antlers, stripping away the dried velvet. They were dimly sensing other needs as well, as the decreasing length of daylight stimulated their hormonal systems. Their testicles swelled and descended, and, all at once, they weren't friends any longer. The three yearlings never challenged the eight-pointer, but they often sparred with each other. Our buck found himself the clear winner in these matches because of his superior size and strength, and it gratified some unknown needs to dominate his two age-group peers.

They were, despite his new-found confidence, the only bucks he managed to

dominate that season. When the odor of does in estrus began to drift through the woods, he responded eagerly, and almost got himself maimed when he approached a hot doe in the presence of an older buck. A week later, he nearly got himself killed during the "Season of Humans." He encountered a hunter, heard a thunderous crack, and fled, leaving the man cursing his rifle (whose fault it was not) for the miss. After that, the young buck became more wary and changed his habits slightly when he found that the hunters left the forest at night. He became more nocturnal, and chose his daytime bedding spots with more care and an eye to proven escape routes.

The cycle of antler-drop, budding new rack, and the gentle summer season in company with other males was repeated, except that the larger eight-pointer was not a part of the group this year, having failed to respond quickly enough to the presence of a human during the season. When Indian summer came over the land and the bucks stripped the velvet, our buck polished a set of brand-new, but small, eight-point antlers. This year he found more males he could dominate, but there were still many bigger ones in the herd to deny him what he wanted so badly when rutting time rolled around.

Now, as a 2½-year-old, his antlers were large enough to look good to many hunters, while he still lacked enough experience with humans to avoid them completely. He had several very close calls during the season, and was lucky to survive. But he learned something new and useful from each episode. He almost didn't survive his first encounter with a poacher, however. He had entered a moonlit, winter oat field in January, confident that no human would be around after dark. Suddenly, a piercing light riveted him. Dumbfounded, uncomprehending, the young buck stood there, staring, until he felt a terrible blow to the side of his neck. Although staggered, he was able to whirl and clear the fence in one great bound. As he ran, a dull pain began to burn in his neck muscles, and he fled for hundreds of yards into the dark forest. Fortunately, the poacher's rifle had been a .22 rimfire and the bullet had passed to one side of the vital organs in the neck. The wound was painful, but not serious, healing cleanly in the crisp winter air. Once more, the buck had been lucky . . . but he never again stood for a light at night, and thus saved his life on two other occasions as the years passed.

During his fourth autumn, the lucky buck carried a fair set of 10-point antlers, and he won more of the local pecking-order bouts than he lost. He also succeeded in participating in the rut for the first time. Driven by instinct alone, he made a scrape in the soil and urinated over it so that the urine ran down over the swollen tarsal glands on his hocks. Within minutes a receptive doe caught wind of



Age 1 year



Age 2½ years



Age 4½ years



Age 5½ years



Age 6½ years



Age 7½ years

Bambi

the scrape and approached. After a short chase, our buck bred her. A little later, the dominant buck in that area drove him away from the scrape, and it was the end of his first successful rut.

One more time he made it through the hunting season, growing wiser and warier with each fresh hint of a human in the forest. By now he had gathered his nerve, so that he was able to stand or lie motionless while a hunter plodded past, only yards away, unseeing and utterly unable to scent him even when directly downwind. If the hunter suddenly stopped nearby, the buck learned to explode from cover and be gone, usually before the fellow could lift a rifle. He also developed the knack of sneaking, nose outstretched and antlers laid back along his neck, almost crawling on his belly, through ground cover so short that most hunters would not believe a whitetail buck could traverse it unseen.

With one more turning of the seasons, he came into the full pride and power of maturity. By now he weighed almost 275 pounds, with deep, square shoulders and hams and powerful neck. He had reached his full growth, and the nutrients not required to maintain his metabolism, which had formerly been channeled into increments of bone and muscle, were now utilized in antler growth. His rack was nearly twice the size his previous adornment, with 13 long points (including three non-typical tines) and heavy main beams spreading a full 23 inches across the inside curve. The bases were gnarled and beaded and furrowed, mahogany brown, with circumferences exceeding 5½ inches.

When the annual autumn exercises began, he knew that only a few other bucks in the whole herd might dare to stand against him. Most of those in his own age class were already dead—victims of predators, automobiles, barbed-wire fences, hunters' bullets, poachers, disease, winter kill, or any of a dozen other

Photo Essay By Dinny Slaughter

Dinny Slaughter, a free-lance photographer residing in Front Royal, Virginia, was fortunate (and skillful enough) to obtain these photographs of a single white-tail buck over a 12-year period, encompassing the buck's entire life cycle. Though not a "pet," the buck was nicknamed "Slick," and lived his entire life span in a 50-acre enclosure that included pasture, woodland, and swamp. During his 12-year span, he was often not sighted at all for six to eight months at a time, though he was never subjected to hunting pressure. At the end, he was found to be suffering and in extremely poor condition, as the photos show. His life was then ended to preclude further suffering. Slaughter's remarkable photos show not only the development, maturing, and aging of a typical whitetail, but also what inevitably happens when deer are not hunted. An autopsy of "Slick" revealed that he was suffering from pneumonia, pericarditis (bad heart), tricohezar (hairballs), and pododermatitis (foot rot). In the final photos the end is very near.

causes. Of his classmates remaining, he was by far the strongest.

Until now, he had never traveled more than about a mile from his birthplace, and then only once, when he had followed a doe in estrus. His chosen home ground was almost impossible to penetrate by hunters, and offered food, water, and cover. Only the resistless urge to follow a hot doe could lure him out of his fortress, especially during the hunting season.

In spite of this, the big buck was now in greater danger than ever before, not only because his breeding activities would demand that he expose himself more than in his younger years, but because he had attracted the attention of a hunter who understood the game of hunting trophy bucks, and who had already made up his mind to hang that great rack

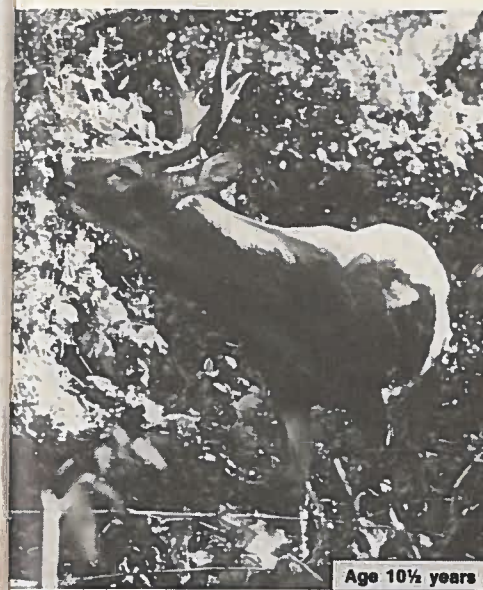


Age 9½ years

on his wall. The buck's long-established habits and early-warning systems were not quite as effective against this man, and he was taken by surprise on a couple of almost-fatal occasions. He survived nevertheless, once by his now-legendary luck and the other time when he crossed a dirt road before the headlights of the man's car, because this hunter was a sportsman and not a poacher.

The buck had by now survived enough seasons that his armor was almost complete. His life was ordered according to patterns which had saved him time and again over the years. He had attained a level of alertness and wariness which seemed to the man hunting him almost supernatural, but which was in reality no different from that attained by his forefathers before the two-legged predator replaced the mountain lions which roamed this land for a million years.

And, as he survived, he fulfilled his biological obligation to his species, im-



Age 10½ years

planting his sperm in the wombs of 19 different does.

During the sixth rut of his life, he served almost two dozen females, and lived in spite of two bullets aimed at him which missed. One was at very long range, and he heard the snap of the bullet passing but not the distant boom of the gun. The other was when he thought he heard the clash and rattle of antlers as two strange bucks fought inside his own territory. He rushed to the scene, but—by luck—burst into the clearing exactly behind the hunter rattling the antlers, passing within two long steps of the man and startling him so badly that he fired almost from the hip. That bullet missed by 10 feet, but he never again charged the sound of fighting bucks.

By now, his years of experience had made evasion of ordinary hunters almost child's play, and of the skilled ones only slightly more difficult. He never let his guard down now, day or night, summer or winter. He heard and heeded every sound, every wafting scent. He noticed the flutter of a bird's wing at 200 yards, and the scurrying of a dung beetle in dry leaves at 20 paces.

At the peak of his powers, however, the



Age 11½ years

hand of death was already on the buck. In his mouth, the molar teeth were worn near the gumline from chewing a coarse cud in this sandy country. He was forced to ingest more forage and chew longer to process enough nutrients to maintain himself in prime condition. This was the first year in which his famous antlers failed to increase in overall size; indeed, the tines were slightly shorter and more crooked. He was still sexually dominant, partly because during the rut he ignored his hunger in order to perform his genetic functions. It cost him dearly. Several younger bucks—one a prime, five-year-old son of his—were willing to challenge him this season, and defeating them (as much through cunning now as by sheer power) left him utterly spent. By the end of the breeding season he had lost almost 30 percent of his autumn weight and he was limping from an antler wound in his left shoulder which refused to heal properly. There were fresh, bleeding wounds about his grizzled face and neck from the battles, with the young warriors.

Once, very late in the season, the man who had sworn to shoot him walked past the great buck as he lay behind a dead-fall, not seven yards away. The buck was simply too stiff to rise, and he stretched his chin out on the ground and remained frozen.

Even then he might have lived to grow one more crown if the winter had been mild, but January turned extremely nasty, and February was even worse. Relentless cold, driven by searching winds, sapped the old buck's energy. Forage resources deteriorated as the deer herd fought to stay alive. Even the secondary and tertiary foodstuffs grew scarce, until the buck was gnawing coarse bark from the trees and ingesting twigs the size of pencils. With his teeth almost gone, he was starving. He grew more gaunt daily, until his hide hung on his emaciated frame like a baggy suit on an old, old man.

His ancient enemies found him before starvation, however. A pair of coyotes, as desperate for food as he, passed downwind and somehow sensed his weakness. They circled, cringing, and he heaved himself to his feet to face them. When they attacked, he fought them as gallantly as his physical resources permitted, striking savagely with his forefeet and fending off lunges at his throat with still-dangerous antlers. Unlike the breeding battles he had fought for so many years, this one was to the death, but, before he went down, he left his marks; one coyote lost an eye and most of an ear to a slashing hoof, and the other wore a long, deep gash along the ribs for weeks. They earned their meat that day.

In easier times, the prairie wolves might have found him too much to handle, but their empty bellies made them brave, and finally they pulled him down and began tearing at his groin while he still kicked feebly.

By sheer chance, the trophy hunter stumbled across the great buck's scattered bones almost a year later. He recognized the distinctive antlers instantly. Suddenly bereft, he sat down on the ground beside the skull for a long time, alone with his thoughts and the remains of this animal he had tried to collect for so long... and that he had loved so much.

Then he rose and wiped his eyes, glanced around out of habit at the now-empty landscape, picked up the bleached skull, and started the long walk back to camp.