

# BUCK FEVER

*If you think it only happens to beginners, don't laugh . . . you may be next!*

I just can't understand how I could have missed that buck five straight times!" said the man we shall call Frank (mainly because that isn't his name).

The rest of us around the campfire glanced at each other in puzzlement. At least two of us had been hunting that afternoon close enough to have heard Frank's barrage of shots . . . but we hadn't.

"Well," somebody said soothingly, "anybody can miss a deer. Especially when he's running."

"That's the funny part," Frank added. "He never did run. Just stood there and looked around while I shot at him five times. Oh, he might've walked a few steps, but he never ran."

More quizzical looks; all of us had seen a whitetail stand still for one or two shots, even at fairly close range, apparently unable to get the direction of the noise. But five shots? It didn't seem likely.

On the next morning, I elected to hunt the same area in which Frank had fired at the "bulletproof buck." I knew the area well, and determined to sit for the first couple of hours, at least, at the same place. It was an oak tree which overlooked several heavily used deer trails and had produced many bucks for us over the years. I was there before daylight, settled comfortably against the oak, tingling with the anticipation that the half-light of dawn in deer country has never failed to produce for me.

An hour after the onset of shooting light, I began to relax, having seen a few does and fawns, but nothing with

antlers. It was then that a metallic gleam in the dead leaves near my right boot caught my eye. I leaned forward and picked up a fully loaded .300 Savage cartridge—the chambering of Frank's rifle! Scrambling around in the forest litter, I found another . . . and another. Finally, there were all five rounds, without a dented primer in the lot. Frank had never pulled the trigger on that buck yesterday; instead, he'd levered five consecutive cartridges out of the rifle's magazine onto the ground, and had been utterly dumbfounded that the deer hadn't fallen down!

I dropped the rounds into my pocket and returned them, without comment, to their owner that day at noon. He didn't believe it. I don't think he believes it to this day. He still thinks I was playing a trick on him, and that he had fired five actual, if ineffective bullets at that deer.

It's called "buck fever."

That's not a very good term for this famous malady, partly because it can happen in the presence of any kind of game and not just buck deer, and partly because it isn't a fever. Another common term is "buck ague," which is more descriptive because "ague" means the shakes, and there's plenty of shaking going on in

most acute cases of buck fever.

But not always. Another friend of mine, a veteran hunter at the time, sat peacefully and watched the first black bear he had ever seen in the woods walk casually by, never suspecting the presence of a man.

"I could have brained that bear with a brickbat," he testified, ruefully, "but I simply forgot that I had a rifle in my hands. Never entered my mind that I was out there specifically to shoot a bear. He walked right by me, not over 30 yards, and I just sat there and watched him."

He also said later, "And after all these years of hunting! I didn't think it could happen to me."

None of us thinks it can happen to us, but buck fever can happen to anyone, usually when least expected. We think of it as an affliction of the greenhorn, and it often is. But buck fever can seize the veteran hunter as well, especially on unfamiliar game. Nor is it necessarily always involved with big game. One of the worst cases of buck fever I've ever witnessed was occasioned by a mere red squirrel,

and in a man who had been clobbering whitetail bucks for 20 years. The poor guy couldn't have hit a brontosaurus perched on that hickory limb, much less a squirrel's head!

Another version of the disease permits the hunter to raise the rifle calmly enough and take careful aim, but renders him physically incapable of pulling the trigger. I was guiding a fellow on a whitetail hunt and had been able to rattle up a really nice trophy buck, to about 40 yards. When the buck's chest was in the clear, I whispered, "Take 'im!" Out of the corner of my eye I saw the rifle come up, and waited . . . and waited, and waited! The buck was getting nervous, and so was I.

"Hurry!" I hissed, but still there was no shot.

That deer stood around and stared at us for a full minute or more, and then he turned and walked—he did not run, he *strolled*—away into the thickets.

I turned on my friend. "Damn it!" I lashed out at him, "If *that* buck wasn't good enough for you, I don't think we're going to find what you're looking for. Why did you let him go?"

"I . . . I don't know," he mumbled. "He was beautiful . . . but I just couldn't shoot." I was astonished to observe that big tears were streaming down the hunter's cheeks, and abruptly realized that it had been a classic case of buck fever. I checked his rifle's safety, and it was in the "fire" position. He simply had not

been able to command his muscles to press that trigger.

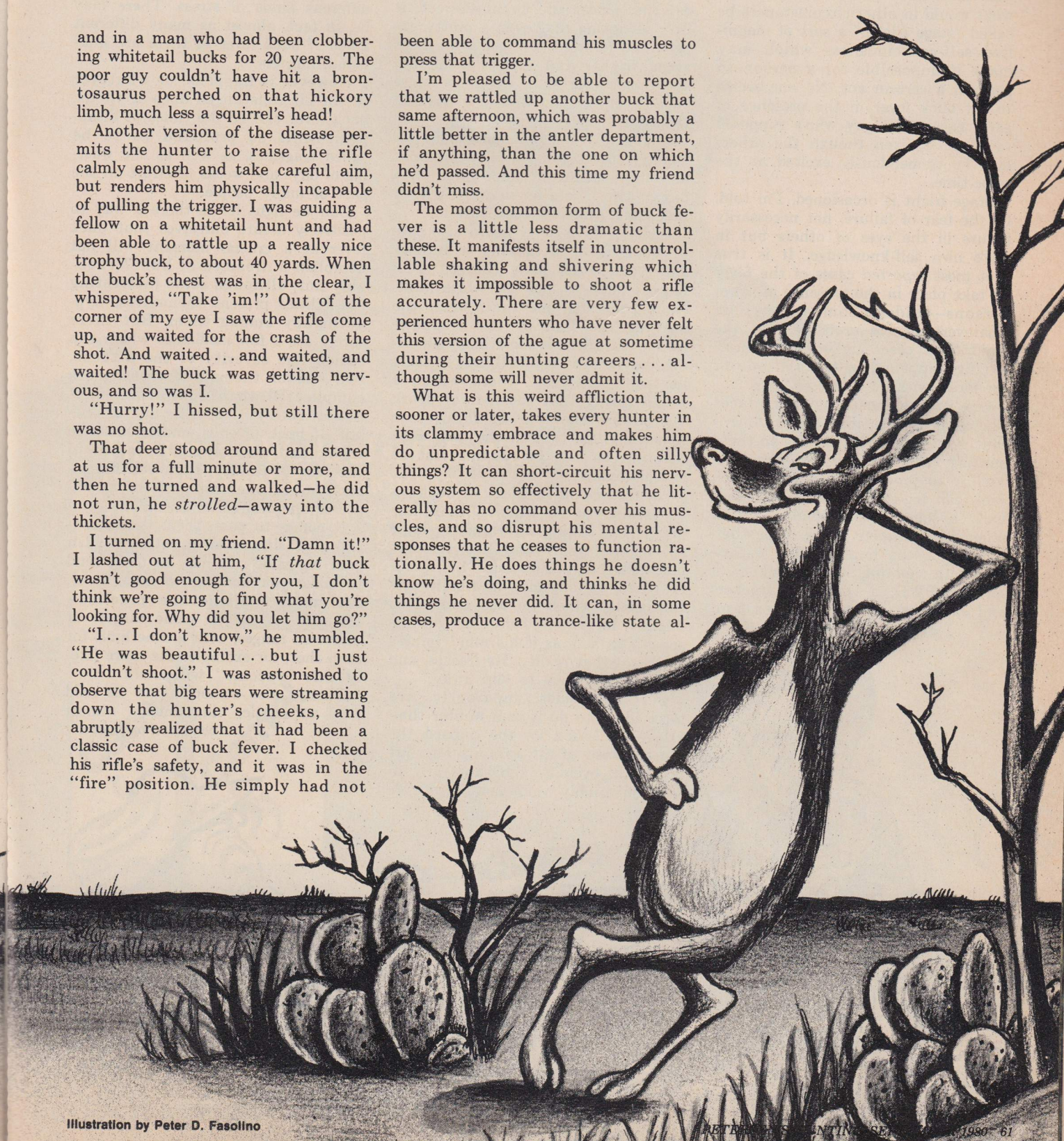
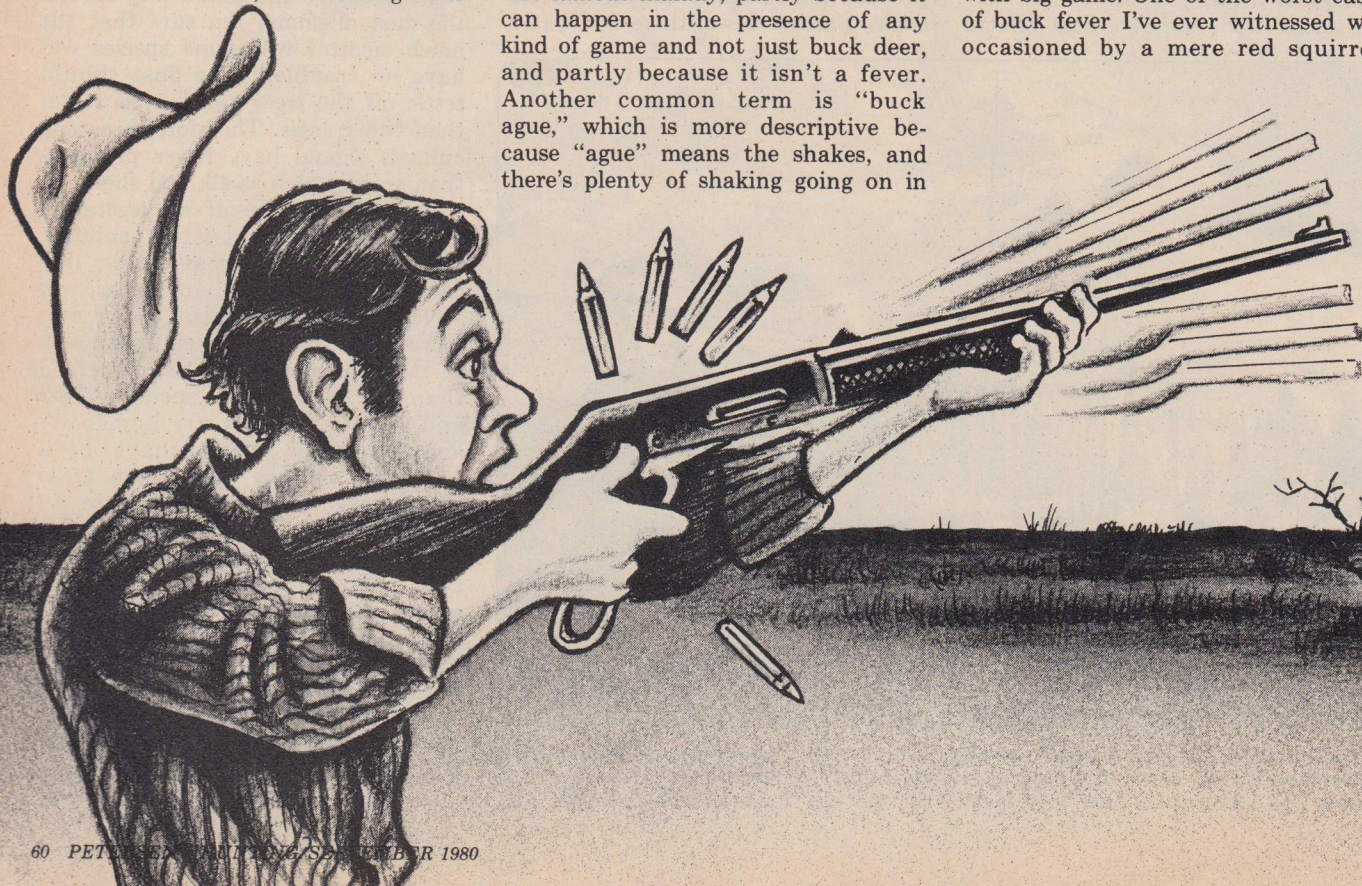
I'm pleased to be able to report that we rattled up another buck that same afternoon, which was probably a little better in the antler department, if anything, than the one on which he'd passed. And this time my friend didn't miss.

The most common form of buck fever is a little less dramatic than these. It manifests itself in uncontrollable shaking and shivering which makes it impossible to shoot a rifle accurately. There are very few experienced hunters who have never felt this version of the ague at sometime during their hunting careers . . . although some will never admit it.

What is this weird affliction that, sooner or later, takes every hunter in its clammy embrace and makes him do unpredictable and often silly things? It can short-circuit his nervous system so effectively that he literally has no command over his muscles, and so disrupt his mental responses that he ceases to function rationally. He does things he doesn't know he's doing, and thinks he did things he never did. It can, in some cases, produce a trance-like state al-

most like deep hypnosis, wherein the victim doesn't hear spoken orders and may not see the world before his eyes as it really is. It can reduce a grown man to a pathetic state of trembling.

Obviously, buck fever is related to sheer excitement, and hunting is an intensely exciting activity. In mild cases, wherein the hunter just can't seem to make the sights settle down on the target, it may be nothing more than excitement. But there's more to



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it than that; excitement alone can't make a man think he fired five shots from a high-powered rifle when he didn't.

A psychologist friend of mine, who is a hunter himself, theorizes that buck fever is an intensified version of what would in other circumstances be called "stage fright," a sort of magnified self-consciousness which may make it impossible for a person to perform a certain act. No one seems to get buck fever in the presence of game except the guy who's supposed to shoot it, even though the others may be tremendously excited at the same time.

Stage fright is occasioned, I'm told, by the fear of failure, not necessarily failure in the eyes of others but in one's own self-knowledge. It is true that most reported cases of the fever do take place in the presence of other persons—guides, companions, or whatever—but it's probable that the majority of cases are never reported, having happened in the solitude of the forest with no witnesses.

One of the most common places where buck fever may strike Americans is in Africa, particularly to those hunting there for the first time, according to professional guides. Much American big-game hunting is essentially a solitary sport, but the first safari is a different thing altogether. It may be the hunter's first experience with shooting before a gallery of sorts, a PWH, a couple of trackers and skinner, maybe a driver, and

possibly a companion or two. Most of these people see more shots fired at big game in a season than the average American will fire in his lifetime on this continent, and they comprise a rather knowledgeable audience, perhaps perceived by the client as a critical one. Under the circumstances, it isn't surprising that even a pretty experienced hunter could get a touch of stage fright, and many of us do, shooting poorer than we know we're capable of for the first few days of the safari.

That's why the professional hunter will try to let you get the kinks out of your shooting on minor game for a day or two before he shows you your first kudu, sable, or Cape buffalo.

Oddly, I have never heard of a case of buck fever attacking a hunter when dangerous game charged. Perhaps it happens, but the white hunters I know tell me that, when the buff or the lion or the elephant comes, the client is most likely shooting, maybe not very well, but at least he isn't paralyzed. From which I would gather that the fear of death overpowers the fear of failure, or something like that. If the dude isn't shooting, he may be running, but he is functioning.

Another common cause of buck fever seems to be when a man has dreamed of taking a certain big-game species for years and has perhaps made several unsuccessful hunts for it. When, at long last, he finally sees this thing, which he has desired so mightily for so long before his gun, he sometimes acts as if his mind refuses to accept that reality. He freezes, and allows his chance to slip away.

Certain species, apparently, are more likely to do it to a hunter than others. In Africa, it's the leopard, the most-missed of all animals on that continent, even though shots are almost invariably very easy. Leopards

are shot at short ranges (rarely more than 50 yards), usually from a rest and with the target motionless and broadside. In these cases, it may be a build-up of suspense that short-circuits a normally cool hunter's nervous system. Shots at leopards often come only after hours of waiting in a blind, absolutely silent and still, during which the suspense can become so intense that it seems to gag a man.

What we are dealing with, then, may be many different reactions to different kinds of stress. There may be, in fact, almost as many different kinds of buck fever as there are individual hunters.

However it happens, or whatever set of circumstances does it to us, buck fever can be the cause of disappointments so profound as to be called tragedies, as well as the wasting of days and weeks of effort on the part of many people.

Can we fight it? Is there a way to positively assure ourselves that buck fever at a crucial moment will not demolish a dreamed-of hunt? Probably not, although some interesting possibilities present themselves, hypnotherapy among them. But there surely are a few medicines which can reduce the severity of the attacks, and one of them is nothing more complicated than *confidence*—confidence both in one's rifle and in oneself. If buck fever is similar to stage fright, and stage fright is rooted in the fear of failure, then confidence must mean one can perform as expected and desired, under stress.

It comes to pass, then, that something as simple as practicing with your big-game rifle may actually tend to make you immune to buck fever. The more realistic the practice—offhand, at realistic game targets at unknown ranges, with a time limit for each shot, for example—the more likely this "vaccine" will work.

There's also something to be said for automatic, ingrained, almost

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mechanical performance involved in firing a rifle at game that offsets the effects of this mental misfire we call buck fever. Here again, practice is an answer. When the muscular responses are automatic, instinctive, they can be performed with surprising efficiency, with no direction at all from a nervous system short-circuited with excitement and panic. Every experienced driver has seen himself perform thus in a roadway emergency; he doesn't have to instruct his muscles to hit the brake pedal hard and swerve the steering wheel when some idiot runs a red light in front of him.

Such automatic responses could save the day when buck fever strikes. The chain of actions—raising the rifle, slipping the safety, nailing down the sight picture, and squeezing the trigger—can proceed even while the emotional and intellectual processes are paralyzed by buck fever... but only if the rifleman has done them often enough, for long enough.

There is also the possibility that the hunter in the grip of the fever might be able to break the trance by some deliberate action, something utterly mundane, like saying out loud to himself, "Don't forget to squeeze the trigger!" Anything, as long as it's completely normal for the moment.

The theory is, as I understand it, that forcing one's mind into a familiar channel in this manner will normalize the thought processes and break the paralysis caused by a psychological overload of excitement, stress, and fear, sort of like replacing a blown mental fuse.

Some hunters may become so blasé that they have no intense emotional reaction when faced with the opportunity to collect a great game animal. I am not one of them, and I must confess that I'm inclined to view with suspicion those who don't react powerfully. After the many, many scores of deer I've taken, I still get a potent jolt of adrenaline at first sight of every buck. I'm just as excited as I was on my first buck, at age 12; the difference is that 40 years and well over 100 bucks taken have taught me how to handle the excitement and how to function in spite of it. When knocking over a great whitetail buck no longer affects me, I will hang up my rifles and take up golf!

And as long as the sight of such an animal in the wild can turn me on as it does, I suppose that I—like every other hunter—am in danger of an attack of the dreaded buck fever. I wouldn't have it any other way!



Illustration by Peter D. Fasolino