

Outdoors

Buck fever

The dread malady named in the title occurs most frequently with neophyte hunters, often on their first hunt, and appears when they first see – or more particularly, when they first try to shoot — a game animal. The usual effects are sweating and shaking and a hopeless inability to hold the sights on a vital area of the game. The sufferer may be unable to fire the shot at all. Even if he can fire, the most likely result is a ludicrous miss.

The most extreme case of buck fever I've ever seen, however, attacked one of the regular members of the Colorado County hunting lease of which my father and I were members for many years, and its victim was by no means a beginner but a hunter with years of experience.

He returned to camp after a morning hunt to report, sheepishly, that he'd missed a "big ten-point buck" not merely once but with five consecutive shots. This seemed strange to the rest of us for several reasons. One, big ten-point bucks rarely hang around to be missed five times ... or even twice, for that matter. Two, the hunter on question was not known to be that poor a shot and, finally, none of us had heard any shooting from his direction that morning.

Checking the zero of his rifle on a target at camp eliminated one possible explanation by proving that his scope hadn't been damaged or knocked out of alignment.

A day or so later, I chose to hunt from his position, mainly in hopes of getting a look at that big buck. While sitting at the base of the same tree, I noticed a brassy gleam



Photo by John Wootters

Sometimes even an experienced hunter – if he's used to seeing only "Hill Country type bucks" – can suffer a buck fever attack at first sight of an exceptional trophy like this high-scoring six-by-six.

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among the leaf litter and picked up a fully-loaded .300 Savage factory cartridge – the same caliber used by our unfortunate companion. The bullet was firmly in place in the neck of the cartridge case, and the primer showed no sign of a firing-pin indent. Scratching around among the leaves, I found four more loaded rounds in the area to which a bolt-action rifle might eject them.

The conclusion was inescapable: confronted by an unusually fine buck, our buddy had panicked and gone through the motions of aiming, firing, and reloading five times ... except that he forgot to pull the trigger. He earnestly believed that he had missed the deer with five straight shots, and refused to his

dying day to accept any other explanation.

Diagnosis: buck fever.

Non-hunting readers may chuckle at this tale, but buck fever is real and has saved the life of many a game animal. Almost all hunters have come down with it at least to some degree in their careers. I've seen people miss deer by fully 10 feet at no more than 50 yards.

But the fever is unpredictable, sometimes sparing new hunters for years and then cruelly striking them after they have many kills under their belts. Even very experienced hunters may suffer their fist attack only upon first glimpse of an unfamiliar but longed-for species, e.g.: a veteran whitetail hunter upon first sighting a fine bull elk or bear, especially at close range.

Essentially, buck fever amounts to an incapacitating attack of nerves or excitement, especially when the situation calls for the victim to perform. It's a close relative

of stage fright, when an inexperienced speaker or performer is first called upon to face a large audience and chokes up, forgetting his speech. Another term for buck fever, in fact, might be paralyzing fear of failure.

The blood pressure rises sharply, the heart pounds, self-doubt sets in, the muscles quiver ... and the victim suddenly cannot get his act together. None of us is immune, but I've always said that the day I fail to feel at least a little excitement at the sight of a grand game animal may be the day I quit hunting.

John Wootters, of Ingram, 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.