

Understanding the specific communications of deer could help you make contact with a trophy buck.



# CONVERSATIONS WITH WHITETAILS

**T**he first vocal sound I ever heard from a whitetail deer nearly ended my deer-hunting career before it was fairly begun, and thus almost drove me to take up honest work! It came from the throat of my first whitetail buck. I was a tender 13, hunting all alone, and the eight-pointer was very close. This was good; otherwise, I'd never have hit him, given the violent case of buck fever that shook me like a seismograph needle in a high-Richter earthquake. When I finally was able to make the rifle fire, the buck went down in a heap, spine-shot...and he bawled! It was a shocking, harsh, dragged-out sound, more like a yearling steer than a deer, and it horrified me. I never could stand making an animal suffer, and the bawl triggered a wave of remorse and guilt—until I realized that the buck couldn't be suffering, having given up the ghost at about the moment his bawl ended.

I know now that the remorse would have come without the bawl, but at the time it made a very shaken little boy, alone in the woods, sit down beside his first buck and rethink the whole subject of deer hunting or, at least, of deer *shooting*. I put a trembling hand on my deer's body, feeling the warmth of him, and traced in wonder the curve of an antler. There may have been a tear shed, with no one there to see; I can't recollect now. Pride and excitement and joy gradually overcame the regrets, however, as I decided that what I'd done was neither evil nor cruel, but was in fact wholly natural and no cause for misgivings. This is a divide every hunter has to cross sooner or later, but my buck's bawl made mine come a lot sooner.

## NOT NECESSARILY THE SILENT TYPES

The other lesson from that New Year's Eve of 1941 was that whitetails are hardly the ghostly, mute wraiths of the forest they seemed; they have voices, I discovered, sometimes surprisingly strong and strident voices. Many more winters were needed, however, to grasp the extent and variety of the odocoiline vocabulary.

The next lesson came a couple of years later as I loitered on a timbered slope one cloudy morning in November. To my ears came the grunting of a pig—except that this had a distinctly un-piglike cadence and an intensity, an urgency, like no pig I'd ever heard. Besides, there were no free-ranging swine in those woods.

The grunting came on quite rapidly, and as I shifted my rifle muzzle to cover I detected fast-moving footfalls in the dry leaves. Then a buck appeared, moving at a swinging trot, his nose to the

ground like a hound's. He followed a meandering course, tail at half-mast, and grunted about every other time his right front hoof hit the ground.

He was the first rutting buck I'd ever seen—and heard—trailing a hot doe, though my hunting mentors had often described the scene. I was so excited to see it with my own eyes that I completely forgot to shoot as he swept past me and disappeared into the timber!

Those same mentors had rendered recognizable imitations of the grunting, and one of them even said he'd lured rutting bucks with such sounds as early as the 1920s. But this fellow's yarns were sometimes told in chorus with John Barleycorn, with whom he now and then wrestled and lost, and we only chuckled indulgently at his talk of "grunting up" deer. The aboriginal American hunters probably mastered grunt-calling, but this gentleman—one of the best whitetail hunters I ever knew—was ahead of all other white men in my personal experience, using only his natural vocal organs. Ironically, he had no faith in horn-rattling anywhere except in South Texas. Today, 60 years later, both buck-calling techniques are well understood by sophisticated hunters everywhere.

## SNORTS OF ALARM

Of course, few deer hunters complete even their first weekend in the woods without becoming all too familiar with the most common of all whitetail vocalizations, the whistling alarm snort. Both bucks and does do it, but snorts of adult bucks are louder, coarser, lower-pitched and



*Soft bleats are the conversational mode of whitetail communication, with which both sexes and all ages of deer identify themselves and keep in touch at all times of the year.*

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## CONVERSATIONS WITH WHITETAILS

much more rare. The effect on other deer is curiously inconsistent. Some will panic and run as though chased by a cougar from hell...but I've seen others pay absolutely no attention whatever to a deer snorting its head off not far away. There may be different kinds of snorts that say different things too subtly for dull human ears to distinguish. In any case, there are callers on the market that reproduce the snort, although a "heads-up!" call has always seemed to me the last sound I wanted to make in the woods while hunting.

### CONVERSATIONAL BLEATS

Bleats are a different thing—sort of. They're the conversational voices of whitetails, extremely soft and short-ranged. Actually, the line between very soft, high-pitched doe grunts and "bleats" is fine, and the two sounds may differ only in inflection and volume. If you spend a lot of time close to whitetails in the woods, especially in spring and summer, you may hear small talk between a doe and her fawn, for example...or you may not. Many veteran

hunters have never heard a deer bleat, even after decades of hunting.

About the only tactical use for the bleat that I can imagine might be as a confidence call. A doe bleats softly to call her baby fawns to nurse, and the sound thus not only is one of the first a young deer hears in this world, but is always associated with pleasure and safety. Lohman makes a particularly authentic bleater called "K'mere Deer" (I didn't make that up), and I've tried to integrate it into my hunting routines, without much success. It may calm a suspicious deer that has caught an unidentified sound or movement—but so will a soft grunt. Remember, though, just a couple of decades ago we didn't know how to use grunt calls, either!

### A CATALOG OF GRUNTS

That's an art I'm still studying after 56 years. There are different grunts that obviously mean different things, and similar grunts whose meanings change with the occasion. One of these is the so-called "tending grunt," to my ear identical to the trailing grunt except that it isn't repeated as continuously. It's an expression of sexual excitement, rendered at irregular intervals by a buck actually in the presence of a hotsy-totsy

## CONVERSATIONS WITH WHITETAILS

doe. Individual grunts are quite abrupt, short, low-pitched and usually soft, and are never given in a long, rhythmic sequence. As communication, they might inform a rival buck that a hot doe is present, but the chances are he'll already have received those glad tidings via scent or direct observation. It's not too difficult, however, to "grunt up" young bucks by producing seven or eight soft grunts, spaced irregularly over three or four minutes, the sequence to be repeated from the same location not more often than about every half-hour. As with most kinds of game calling, both grunting and bleating are very easy to overdo.

### GRUNTIN' AND GROWLIN'

The last species of grunt I learned is the aggressive grunt—loud, harsh, forceful and slightly prolonged, almost like a brief growl. I learned this "fighting grunt" from a grizzled old Hill Country backwoodsman who contributed next to nothing to the local economy for razor blades, dental services or soap but could, if any human has ever been able to, talk to deer. He taught me to use it during or just before the peak of the rut, to add drama to antler-rattling

performances. I can't swear that it's the ultimate secret to success, though it does make a rattling sequence sound better to me. But then it isn't *me* you're trying to rattle up, is it?

This growl may be a challenge or a threat; it definitely intimidates subdominant bucks and can cause non-estrus does to hightail it straight for the thickets without even a backward glance. For this reason, I never use it except with the accompaniment of clashing antlers.

### THE SNORT-WHEEZE

I learned the whitetail "snort-wheeze" direct from the source. Long-time readers will remember Bucky, the tame/wild, free-ranging whitetail buck that hung around my South Texas hunting camp for several years. Bucky was not reared in captivity and definitely was nobody's pet, but his mother had "raised him gentle" around people. He was completely integrated with the local wild herd and was, in fact, the dominant breeding buck around the camp for a long time.

Once, when the rut was on, Bucky was lying in the shade in the camp yard, and I decided to go give him his favorite snack, an apple. Although the buck had never shown any hint of aggression toward us, during the rut I always avoided threatening his dominant

## CONVERSATIONS WITH WHITETAILS

status—or making myself too good a target. People are injured or killed every year because they take too much for granted around a "gentle" whitetail buck during the rut. On this day, I walked up, speaking quietly to him, and knelt near his head to hold out an apple slice. Suddenly, there came a positively eerie sound that ended in an extended, intense, coarse hiss, almost like high-pressure steam escaping! It was so unexpected and so un-deerlike that I needed a few seconds to identify Bucky as the source. Then I noticed that muscles around his nostrils were ridged and contorted. He was saying emphatically that, apple or no apple, he wanted nothing to do with me at that moment and to get the hell out of his yard!

Without a moment's hesitation, I did exactly that, keeping an eye on the buck (and a hand on my pistol) every step of the way. The snort-wheeze is the final warning before direct, physical attack, unless the wheeze retreats. I know of no one else who's heard it from an unconfined buck at arm's length, as I did, without being attacked—and I will not forget it!

The snort-wheeze isn't too difficult to imitate after a fashion, by a hunter, but why would he want to, except perhaps as a prologue to horn-rattling?

*continued on page 115*



Grunt calls that are small enough to hold in the teeth (like this Woods Wise model) are handy when both hands are occupied by rattling horns. The author uses both tending and fighting grunts in this context.

## CONVERSATIONS WITH WHITETAILS

*continued from page 51*

### OTHER VOCALIZATIONS

This completes the lexicon of whitetail vocalizations likely to be heard during hunting season. Several others, such as the whining of little fawns as they nurse, are summertime events. I think it isn't impossible, furthermore, that there exist variations, permutations and inflections of these basic bleats and grunts that human researchers have not yet recognized as having distinct meanings. There might even be regional dialects; I've joked that my rattling horns, which came from a buck I shot in Mexico, are so effective along the border because they have a Spanish accent, but...who knows? Maybe there really is such a thing in deer talk.

### DEER SOUNDS IN HUNTING

I regard the use of vocal sounds primarily as a refinement in deer hunting. I do carry and frequently use a grunt call, one of the few models I've found that can be blown softly enough to suit me. I mostly produce tending grunts and fighting grunts ("growls") and use it often as a "stopper"—a sound that will almost always make a buck stop whatever he's doing and look.

The grunter, thus, differs from rattling horns in my mind in being an accessory rather than a basic hunting tool. On the other hand, the rattles are of value only around the rut, whereas deer grunt and bleat year-round, making a grunt call potentially useful at any time during even the longest hunting season.

Whitetails, however, do not saunter



While not strictly a form of vocalization, the clashing of antlers by fighting bucks conveys a message to other deer and can be imitated, and augmented by artificial renditions of grunts, to attract bucks during the rut.



*A whitetail buck issues a fighting grunt, or "growl," as a challenge to a rival buck. Note open mouth.*

around the woods grunting and bleating. If they did, we'd hear a lot more of them than we do while hunting. Even in high-deer-density habitat, I hear a deer grunt on fewer than half the days, probably, that I'm afield. True, my ears will never again challenge your average owl for auditory acuity, but even as a kid with the hearing of a coyote, I don't recall any deer choruses. It's also possible for hunters to hear grunts without realizing that unseen deer made the sounds; but with all the grunt-call hype we get these days, one would think most hunters would be on the alert for deer talk.

About that bawl from my first buck: every deer I've ever seen take a bullet to the thoracic spinal cord has bawled...and I've never heard any buck wounded anywhere *except* in the spine, aft of the shoulder, make a sound. That vocalization is not a response to pain, as I assumed in my youth, but is simply diagnostic of that impact...and that's all there is to that. I wish I'd known that back in '41. ■