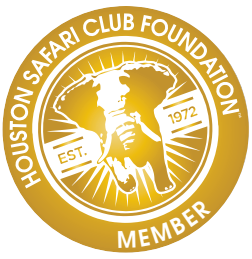


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# A Dream BUCK...

## The Old Fashioned Way

By John Wootters—Originally published in Petersen's Hunting, June 1991



Jeannie Wootters takes a bow with her huge buck. Following up on a hunch born from a lifetime of whitetail experience, she followed the buck to his lair where her determination paid off.



ON

December 19, 1990, on a private ranch in Webb County, Texas, several momentous things came together. One was a 150-grain Nosler .308 bullet and another was a big

64-year-old whitetail buck. The buck is the biggest whitetail ever taken by my own true ladylove. She hunted him honestly, fairly, skillfully, with love and passion... and all by herself.

Her name is Jeannie. We called the deer “the early buck” because our only sightings of him in two seasons had been very early in the morning. Both times he’d appeared in the gray dawn near our camp house, and we’d been there to see him only because, for one reason or another, we’d chosen not to go hunting on those mornings.

The answer to the obvious question is that we didn’t shoot him on those occasions, although the season was open, because we’ve declared a 50-acre “trap” pasture around the camphouse a sanctuary. Any deer inside that fence is safe. In this case, the temptation to waive that self-imposed restraint was almost overpowering because the buck’s rack was one of the four or five biggest ever seen on Los Cuernos (in Spanish, “the antlers”) Ranch.

This deer was impressive even in 1989, a high, heavy, wide, symmetrical 10-pointer that would have scored close to 150 Boone and Crockett points. I thought then that he was already mature but would probably become an even better trophy if he lived another year or two. If one of us had caught him outside that trap fence during hunting season, however, you can bet he’d have been lucky to get one minute older!

As far as I could tell, the buck didn’t actually live inside the trap fence. The little sanctuary pasture has water, dense cover, and good deer forage, and a number of deer, most of them does, do seem to spend much of their time in it. After the early buck showed up late in the 1989 season, I got curious enough to scout it out and could find no sign that any particularly large buck inhabited it regularly. Furthermore, we see all the resident deer often enough that we recognize most of them at any time, and this buck would have stood out in that crowd even without his antlers.

Since we saw him neither before nor after the rut, I guessed that he must have been a drifter just passing through. Such bucks are not rare in south Texas, where recent radio telemetry studies have demonstrated that they may ramble miles from “home” during the rut. Often, a great buck will be glimpsed only once and then will never be seen again anywhere, even on a fairly large ranch. Wistfully we hoped that this one had sprinkled a few of his genes about the premises before he drifted on.

Then, almost on the first day of the rut last year, the early buck showed up in the camphouse trap again! Again, it was in the first light of dawn, and again our companions were Joe and Carolyn Balickie from North Carolina. Joe is one of the great masters among custom stockmakers today, as well as a thoroughly depraved whitetail nut and a favorite hunting companion, as is Carolyn. The Balickies’ airliner had arrived at Laredo on the previous evening, and it had grown so late before

we finally got to bed that we decided to skip the morning hunt. So it was that the only occasions on which we’d laid eyes on this buck had been when Joe and Carolyn had been our guests.

It was unmistakably the same animal, but he’d taken full advantage of the best antler-growing season in a decade in south Texas. He still showed the basic five-by-five structure, only bigger, but now there were four “kickers,” or non-typical tines, two on each of the rear fighting tines, which I guessed to be about 12 inches long. The rack was exceptionally heavy for a Texas deer and carried the beam thickness well forward. All the tines were long except the eye-guards, which were about average. The spread was not exceptional for this area but looked to be at least 20 inches outside. Overall, he was a breathtaking whitetail, but he was still safely inside that sanctuary fence, so we could only “oh” and “ah” and stumble over each other trying to get a better look!

We were thrilled that this great buck was still alive and still around. But, unbeknownst to me, his reappearance had thrown the challenge to my wife, and she quietly vowed to have him.

Jeannie is no beginner. She shot her first whitetail more than 25 years ago and has taken her share, including several quite respectable trophies. She has also hunted in Mexico and Africa, and the story of her hunt for a great axis stag a few years ago appeared in this magazine. But whitetails remain her first love; if anything, she’s an even more enthusiastic deer hunter than I am.

There are male hunters who think that women have no place in the hunting field. They either think lady hunters are diletantes whose guns have to be loaded by someone else or that they must be unfeminine. Such men are always genuinely troubled upon meeting Jeannie. Not only is she ineffably girlish, but she knows more about whitetail deer and how to hunt them than most men.

It has been many moons since I dared offer her advice about how, where, or when to hunt, and the last time I did so, it didn’t work. She does her own thinking and scouting, evolves her own tactics, selects her own stands, rattles her own antlers, and shoots her own deer. In all her 25 years of hunting deer, she has never lost a cripple, has missed outright only once, and has used a second bullet only one other time. On African game she went five animals for five shots.

She also has a knack for seeing the biggest bucks. There was the legendary Gravel Hill buck, with a body as big as a yearling bull’s and a rack like a dead tree stuck on his head, but he was too far away to risk a shot. And the Alamo buck, who caught her by surprise with her rifle on her shoulder. And... well, you get the drift: She’s often seen the best we had, but usually not when she could manage a shot.

Now, however, the early buck’s massive antlers looming in the dawn mist had aroused in her a grim determination to crack that jinx. She said nothing to me, although I understand that she and Joe plotted together some. She mused over an aerial photograph of the place, mapping out a campaign to find that deer, fair and square, outside the sanctuary fence. It took her eight days.

*After a quarter century of whitetail hunting, the author's wife was rewarded with the buck of a lifetime.*

I know her and I know the country, and so I figured out what Jeannie was up to pretty quickly. She has her own hunting vehicle, a refitted and camouflaged electric golf cart, so she could go about her own affairs while I drove the Balickies to and from hunting stands in other portions of the ranch. She'd decided to operate on my theory that the early buck spent most of his time outside the sanctuary pasture, and that he entered it mostly to drink at the pond below the camphouse, probably at night, or to check the estrous status of the resident "yard does."

The barbed-wire fence that isolates the sanctuary from the rest of the property is triangular and a mile long. Jeannie began by walking that fenceline and studying every deer crossing. She then followed the most heavily used trails away from the sanctuary, far enough to learn where deer using them might be coming from.

She'd spotted something on the aerial photo that the rest of us had overlooked; a creek meandered around west of the sanctuary and lay only about 100 yards from the fence at the closest point. That creek bottom is one of the roughest, wildest, thickest spots on the whole ranch. Nobody hunts it simply because a human can't get around in it. There are no natural clearings or vistas, and in most places a person would have to crawl on hands and knees to penetrate the thicket. Some years earlier I'd tried to explore it and had found plenty of buck sign, including old rubs and shed antlers, but had finally given up on actually trying to hunt the area. There was no room to walk, to see, or to handle a rifle.

It's a typical buck "stronghold" area, a veritable fortress of tangled stems, vines, and thorns where a whitetail can be as safe as a beetle under a boulder. Nothing short of a bulldozer could penetrate it and, last summer, a bulldozer had done just that. Two major natural gas companies completed seismographic explorations in the area during which they bulldozed arrow-straight, eight-foot-wide lanes, or senderos, across the creek, right through the heart of the heaviest creek-bottom brush.

Along that creek is the best buck cover found anywhere near the sanctuary pasture, and Jeannie had a hunch that it was the early buck's hideout. Besides near-perfect security, the thicket provided him with water and food, and the only thing likely to get him out of there was a hot doe. Four of the major deer trails she'd followed back from the fence led down into this bottom.

Following each in turn, she began to probe the thicket along the creek very cautiously, sometimes on hands and knees.

Such in-season scouting is extremely risky in stronghold areas because deer disturbed on their bed grounds sometimes abandon them for days or even weeks. Jeannie gambled that the urgings of the rut would keep this buck on the move, even during daylight hours, and would reduce the chances of spooking him with her reconnaissance.

Her gamble paid off. She found big rubs, big scrapes, and big tracks, all the signs of a dominant buck's breeding territory. Best of all, she didn't think she'd jumped the buck himself, alerting him to the fact that his perimeter had been breached.

I keep at least one portable, tripod-type hunting stand in reserve during the season for just such situations. On the evening of December 18, Jeannie announced that she wanted me to erect the reserve tripod next morning at that intersection of the two new senderos. It was a place we'd never positioned a stand before,



From a stand overlooking a cleared lane through the dense Texas brush, Jeannie was able to wait in ambush for the buck.

and an area we hadn't seriously hunted. At dawn on December 19, I set the tripod up according to Jeannie's wishes, wished her good hunting, and drove away as she was climbing up to the seat.

It was light enough to shoot by 7 a.m., and by 7:15 Jeannie had already seen her target buck! He was chasing a doe around in a clearing on the far side of the creek, several hundred yards distant, flashing back and forth across the narrow sendero. She couldn't be certain that he was the buck, only that it was a big-bodied animal with a big rack. Anyway, he offered no chance for a shot.

But now she had a chance to make a big mistake. Upon spotting a big buck too far away to shoot from a stand or blind, I'll often get down and go after him. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't, but I did knock over the biggest whitetail of my 50 years of hunting in that manner. My theory is that the most valuable thing a hunter can possibly possess is knowledge of the exact whereabouts of a trophy buck at any instant, and that he may throw that information away by failing to act on it. Jeannie has absorbed this philosophy from me and has used it successfully to collect bucks for which she wouldn't likely have had a chance by staying put.



Now she sweated out the decision. Stay where she was and hope the buck's girlfriend would lead him within range? Or try to approach the pair on foot in the brush? From her scouting, she knew the terrain between her and the deer, and she decided she couldn't get close enough unnoticed, especially with the deer on the move. She also understood that the odds for success weren't terribly high on either course of action, but she made the right choice. She sat tight.

The deer did not reappear. One hour dragged by, then the best part of another. Suddenly, a doe stepped out into the sendero at only 75 yards. She stopped and looked up at Jeannie on her stand, a new thing in that place. Then the doe stared back over her rump. Jeannie knew what that might mean, and her rifle slid into position on the stand's gun rest.

Jeannie shoots a lovely, slim little Ruger Ultralight bolt action, remodeled and restocked by Joe Balickie. It's chambered to .308 WCF, but for whitetail-size animals I hand load her ammunition to duplicate .300 Savage ballistics exactly, delivering a 150-grain spitzer bullet to the muzzle of the 20-inch barrel at 2630 feet per second.

Even walking, a deer can be across an eight-foot-wide sendero more quickly than you'd believe. In this country, under these circumstances, there's no time for binoculars. As the doe's head started to swing back to the front, and she took a step, Jeannie quietly thumbed the safety lever forward and settled her cheek on the comb. Through the scope, she saw the doe hop out of sight into the brush, and then she saw the massive head of the great buck come into view behind her!

He paused and lowered his nose to sniff at the doe's trail. It was his last sniff. The trigger broke cleanly and the buck lunged forward, out of sight. Half a mile away, Carolyn Balickie heard the shot and the strike of the bullet and checked her watch. It was 9:10 a.m.

Jeannie reloaded and swung her rifle to cover the other sendero toward which the buck had disappeared. He never crossed it. That could mean that he'd circled back toward the creek thicket or it could mean that he was lying dead in the brush somewhere between the two senderos.

Trembling now, Jeannie scrambled down from her tripod. She trotted down the sendero, which was crisscrossed everywhere with fresh deer tracks. When she reached the place the buck had seemed to be, her heart sank. There was no blood. Then she remembered my advice for such situations and went a few yards farther along the sendero. There it was! Blood, gleaming wetly in the morning sunlight.

I said that Jeannie is our best blood-trailer, and you can believe she never trailed a trail so intently as that one! Alone, step by step through the dense undergrowth she trailed, suffering all the turbulent crosscurrents of doubts and fears all of us know so well. The shot had felt good, and she has perfect confidence in her little rifle, but where was the buck? She should have found him by now if he was down, shouldn't she? Maybe she'd jerked the shot. Or could he have moved just as she fired?

Then, there was a shape in the high weeds ahead, the curve of an antler beam...there he was, dead as he surely had been since about 10 seconds after the bullet took out his heart and lungs. During those seconds, he'd run perhaps 50 yards.

I don't know what happened then; I wasn't there. But I do know that all the weeds for yards around the buck's final resting place were trampled flat!

The antlers of Jeannie's buck measure 164% Boone and Crockett



By propping up a stand overlooking a cleared lane through the dense Texas brush, Jeannie was able to wait in ambush for the buck.

points before deductions. The net score will be about 152%. I told Jeannie that knocking off the four "kicker" tines with a hatchet would raise the net to 160 points or higher, but all I got was a dirty look.

There are a few other things you should know about Jeannie's buck: The property on which we produced and hunted him is not enclosed with game proof fences. There are no game feeders, automatic or otherwise, except the one that operates year-round in the camphouse yard (and is the reason we don't shoot inside the sanctuary pasture). The deer get no artificial protein or mineral supplements and, to date, have no access to crops. We have no permanent, elevated deer stands except one that seats two, installed mostly for wildlife viewing and photographic purposes. He was a real deer, in a natural herd and habitat, and he was hunted the old-fashioned way.

I've managed the property for quality whitetails since before Jeannie's buck was a gleam in his daddy's eye, but that's all the credit I can claim, except perhaps for one more thing. I just can't keep myself from adding that, well, after all, I did teach that girl everything she knows! ★

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*Mr. Wootters, a former HSC President, passed away in January of 2013. HSCF greatly appreciates his wife, Jeanne McRae Wootters, for sharing his legacy and wisdom. [johnwootters.com](http://johnwootters.com)*