

What has come to be called "horn rattling" (though even we Texans do know the difference between antlers and horns) has an interesting history—and an even more interesting present! Strange things happen when a fellow goes out and beats a pair of antlers together, if everything is right. If everything is wrong, of course, nothing happens, but when conditions are favorable, strange, wild, hilarious, and sometimes frustrating events come to pass.

Horn rattling is one of the few forms of game calling that seems to be exclusively an invention of the white man. No record of the American Indians having been familiar with the practice has ever come to

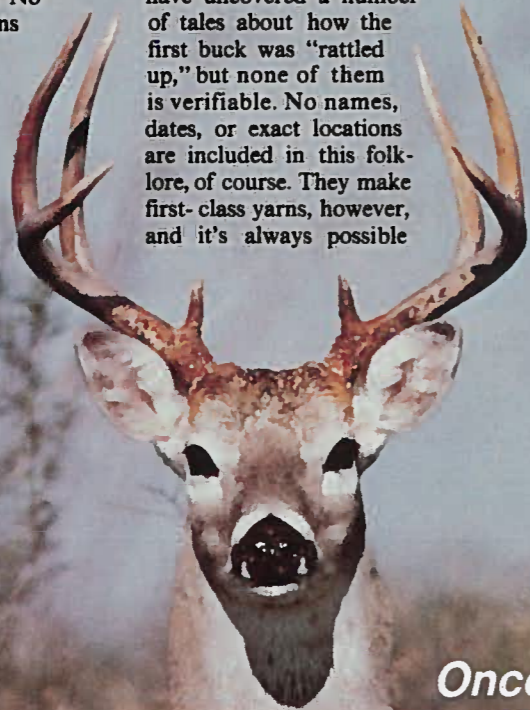
light, either in the journals of the early explorers who first contacted them or in the oral traditions of the aboriginal people. I find it difficult to believe that so bizarre a practice would not have been noted by such careful observers as Lewis and Clark, or the early Spaniards who crisscrossed Texas 500 years ago, if it had been seen.

Such evidence as exists seems to suggest that horn rattling began in South Texas (south of what is now U.S. Highway 90 and east of Highway 281) sometime after the Civil War, for sure, and probably well after the turn of the twentieth century. I have uncovered a number of tales about how the first buck was "rattled up," but none of them is verifiable. No names, dates, or exact locations are included in this folklore, of course. They make first-class yarns, however, and it's always possible

that some of them are true—or even that one of them is the real story of the discovery of the art of horn rattling.

One candidate for this honor holds that a rancher near the little town of Cotulla, Texas, was driving a light wagon through the brush during an exceptionally dry winter. The drought was so severe that the spokes of his wagon wheels had shrunk to the point that they rattled in their sockets as the wheels turned. As the story goes, he was challenged by one or more furious whitetail bucks as he made his way along the rutted wagon trail, and he finally figured out that the rattling spokes were the sound that turned the animals on.

The trouble with these tales is that they tend to get all mixed up with oddball stories about bucks responding to certain sounds, so that it's difficult to sort out those purporting to relate how rattling was discovered from those about hunters' weird experiences. For example, I've heard the following yarn told both ways, once as a historical fact as the first example of rattling and several times as a firsthand or secondhand experience of much more recent vintage.

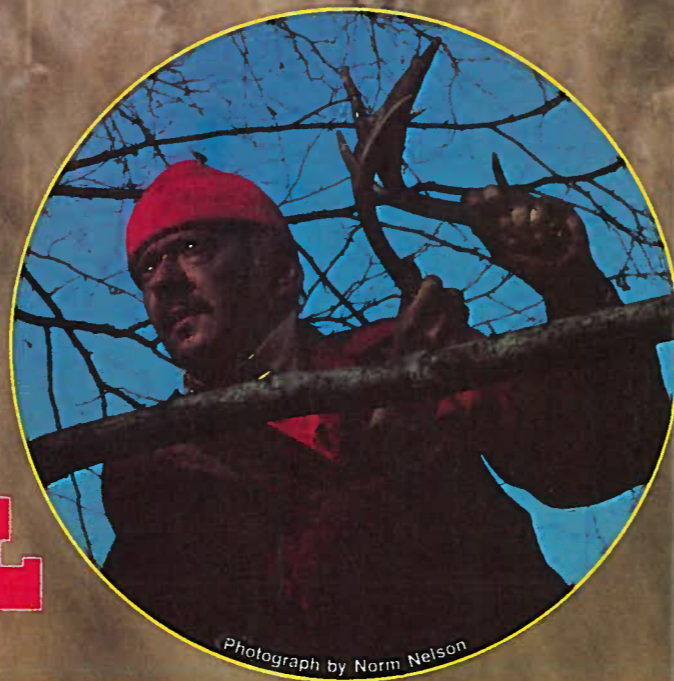


Once you pick up the rattling horns, you'll soon have your own tale to add to the legends and lore of...

HORN RATTLING FOR WHITETAIL

BY JOEN WOOTERS

Photograph by Wyman P. Meinzer, Jr.



Photograph by Norm Nelson

It seems that a hunter decided to build himself a small brush blind from which to watch a favored feeding area or crossing. Drawing his heavy hunting knife, he began to chop at the brush, cutting off limbs with evergreen foliage for the blind. As he whacked away, a huge buck leaped over the bush, close enough to touch, with the hair along the nape of his neck standing on end and his nostrils flared with anger. His attention seemed so focused on the source of the sounds the man had made while cutting branches that the hunter made the connection and decided that the animal (which he did not shoot in any of the versions) had been attracted by the sounds. To an old horn rattler, this story has the feel of truth. A buck in rut very often will respond to the noise of breaking brush, even before a hunter has time to clash his rattling horns together.

The fact is that horn rattling was probably independently discovered by many different persons, scattered across a vast area of South Texas brush, more or less simultaneously. Most probably, the idea occurred to most of the "originators" in much the same way, after having witnessed a breeding battle between whitetail bucks and having noticed other bucks approaching the sounds. This could hardly happen until deer populations in the Brush Coun-

try region of Texas built up to the point that the statistical probability of another buck hearing a fight was reasonably good. That would place the time either in the 1870s or, more probably, sometime after the end of World War I. Whitetail populations in this region between those dates were at a low ebb, partly due to the lack of legal protection and partly to a disastrous seven-year drought that struck the country during the 1880s and from which the herds did not recover until the Roaring Twenties.

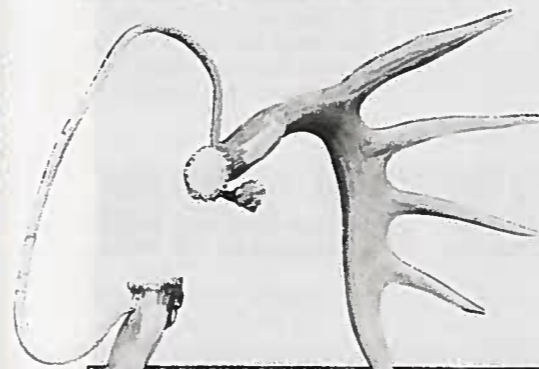
Anyway, the number and variety of rattling yarns around the Brush Country certainly indicate a reasonably long history and that rattling was a common, even a standard, hunting method at least two or three generations ago. One of my favorites involves a hunter who shot a buck on stony ground. As the deer kicked his last, his antlers clattered against the rocks and gravel, and brought a furious charge from another, much larger, buck that mistook the sounds for a fight. Another concerns the bulldozer operator who shut down his tractor for lunch and a nap, and, when he awakened, took a short stick to clean out the radiator grille of his machine. His stick rattled irregularly against the bars of the grille—and you know what happened.

There are also stories about hunters rattling up bucks by banging a knife handle against a gunstock or two dead sticks against each other. The lore of horn rattling is endless.

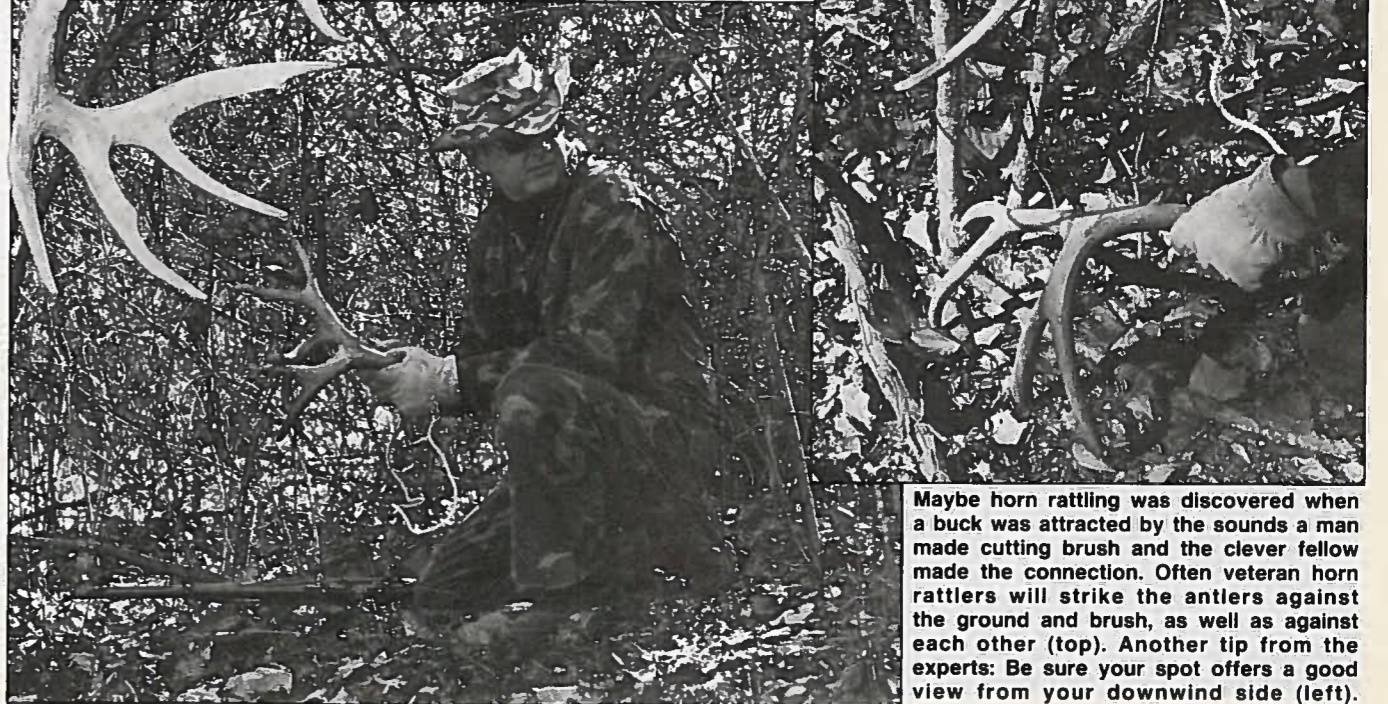
I believe it all, because I have actually

seen stranger things with my own eyes than most of the yarns recount. A whitetail buck, when responding to rattling horns, often behaves in ways that seem completely out of character for his species. For one thing, he appears to be so totally convinced of what he is about to see (two other bucks in battle) that he seems unwilling to believe what he actually sees (a hunter with a pair of antlers in his hands). The first buck my wife ever saw come to the horns was a good example. There was no wind, and he came in from the direction from which I had least expected him, behind us. We were in camouflage, but had no cover from that angle, so he could see us plainly. He stopped at about 90 yards and threw his head up to stare. I could see 11 good points and whispered to Jeannie to shoot. She raised her .257 Roberts—but, as the seconds dragged into what seemed like hours, she did not shoot. Finally she moaned, "I can't see him!"

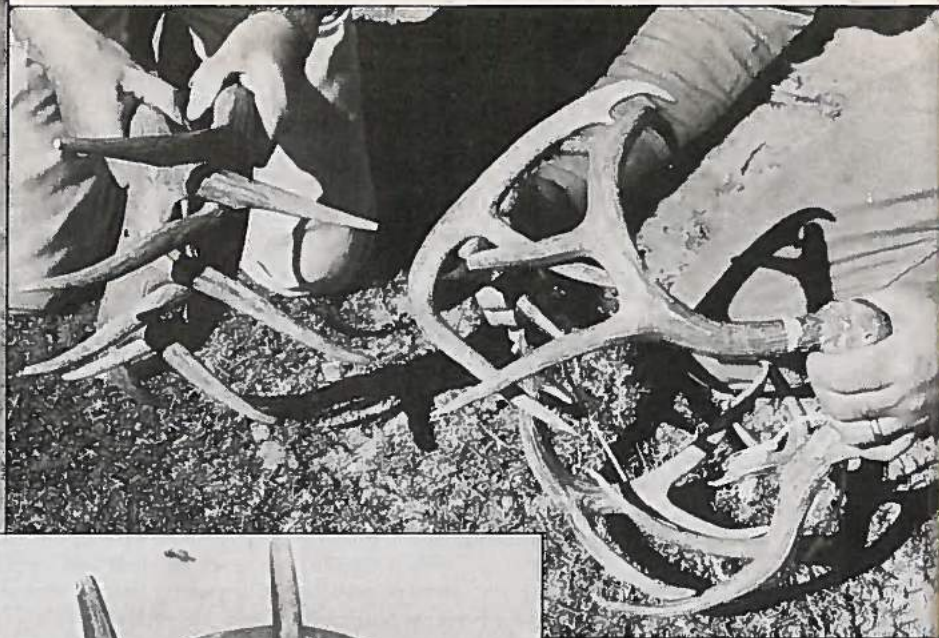
It was a misty, drizzly, cold day, and I guessed instantly—and correctly—that her scope was fogged. "Here," I hissed, "take my rifle!" In her excitement and distress, she didn't understand, and kept trying to find a picture of the buck through her whited-out scope. Finally, I had to wrench her rifle out of her hands by sheer physical strength and thrust my little .308 Sako Mannlicher at her. She had never fired the rifle before, and, of course, the stock was too long for her. She took several more seconds adjusting herself to the gun.



"Horn" rattling has nothing to do with horns, of course, but with antlers. The fun begins when you beat a pair of them together, imitating the sounds made by two battling whitetail bucks.



Maybe horn rattling was discovered when a buck was attracted by the sounds a man made cutting brush and the clever fellow made the connection. Often veteran horn rattlers will strike the antlers against the ground and brush, as well as against each other (top). Another tip from the experts: Be sure your spot offers a good view from your downwind side (left).



There's more than one way to rattle up a buck, but the most common method is shown at left. Some hunters cut off the antler tips; others leave them "natural style," as shown above. Will twice as much racket double your chances? Round up a hunting buddy and you can find out. Some bucks rush in at the sound of the antlers, but savvy deer are more wary, so be patient.

Through all this conversation and movement, the big buck stood calmly, like a bronze statue on an estate lawn. I don't know how much time was consumed, but I do know that no mature whitetail buck in his right mind would have stood there and watched our shenanigans for so long—except one that had come to the sound of rattling horns. Finally, my spouse got her act together and squeezed off a 150-grain bullet, which dropped him in his tracks. I don't think that deer ever moved a muscle for at least a couple of minutes. To the hunter who has never seen the magic of the rattling horns, his behavior would have seemed utterly incomprehensible, but it was not really all that unusual.

He was fooled completely. Knowing the hunting history of that ranch, I doubt that he had ever heard the sounds of clashing antlers that were not attached firmly to the skulls of live bucks before. Too much (or unskillful) rattling, I now believe, can make the local bucks wary of the sounds; they will still come, but they come cautiously, circling downwind, and reconnoiter the area carefully before showing themselves. In modern times, at least, most whitetail bucks answer the horns in that fashion. Only a few actually charge the sound, at the gallop, with nostrils flared, hair standing on end, and fire in their eyes. Often, these chargers make savage sideways swipes with their antlers at unoffending shrubbery that happens to get in their way, and I have had them skid to a stop so close to me that their hooves threw dirt and gravel on me!

The spectacle of a charging buck at close range does some strange, and occasionally hilarious, things to hunters, too, especially those who have not seen it before. Over the years, I have witnessed just about every

HORN RATTLING

conceivable variation in reactions, from staring in helpless astonishment to total hysteria. I have seen experienced hunters allow the buck of a lifetime to swagger around within 15 or 20 yards for five minutes or more without once remembering the rifle in their hands. I've seen bucks missed at ranges at which I *knew* the hunters could have hit those deer with their eyes closed!

I once rattled up a charger for the wife of a friend of mine, a lady who had probably shot a dozen or more whitetails at the time, only to have her empty her rifle into him once, reload and fire four more rounds before the rifle jammed, and then grab my rifle and uncork a couple of more. She hit that deer just about everywhere you can hit a deer without downing it, and I finally had to finish the buck off with my pistol. Throughout the episode, she became more and more incoherent and finally dissolved into tears, although this particular lady is normally anything but the emotional, hysterical type. Furthermore, several male hunters have been almost as overcome in the presence of a buck that charged the rattling horns.

That same lady's husband, an experi-

enced horn rattler himself, once invited a new brother-in-law on his first deer hunt. Bill, the host, had located a big buck along a certain fenceline and had gone to the trouble to construct a two-man brush blind from which he intended to rattle the deer up for his guest, Mike. Choosing exactly the right day and hour, the two of them entered the blind and Bill began to rattle the antlers. The first thing that happened was the appearance of a doe, apparently in heat and probably just happening by the hunters' location.

Then Bill spotted a subtle movement, back in the shadows down the fenceline. Watching breathlessly, he made out the curve of a massive antler beam and knew the big buck was coming. About that time, a silly little spike burst into the clearing in front of the blind, panting on the trail of the doe. Bill, of course, paid no attention to the spike. His eyes were focused on the area where he'd glimpsed the big buck as he tickled the tines of his rattling horns together, briefly, softly, one more time. He hoped and expected that the big buck would come boiling out of the brush in response, and, sure enough, Bill spotted a neck and shoulder and a foreleg in move-

ment as the trophy buck began to emerge.

It was about then that Mike shot the spike, which was standing and staring foolishly at the blind about ten yards away! Bill says that when that rifle went off, he nearly jumped out of the blind. He snatched up his own rifle, but only in time to see the big ten-pointer vanish back into the brush like a curl of smoke in a good breeze.

It's fairly common, in good country, to rattle up two (or even more) bucks at the same time. Once, when my wife and I were afield after the close of hunting season, strictly for photography, I tucked her under a bush and moved a few yards away to do the rattling. At the first clash of the antlers, no fewer than *five* bucks burst out of the brush across a little clearing and charged us, abreast, like so many cavalry horses! They ranged from a wide but spindly-horned ten-pointer down to a spike, and they came within a few feet of us. Glancing sideways at Jeannie, all I could see was a pair of blue eyes, about the size of coffee saucers, peering out of a bundle of camouflage. On that trip, I rattled up 22 bucks in eight hours, including the time spent moving from one rattling spot to the next, and didn't draw a blank until the ninth stand. In another incident of multiple responses, I once sat in one place for about 2½ hours and rattled up eight bucks, one

at a time, several of which came back again and again. I have a witness to that performance and photographs of every one of those deer. The next morning, my companion and I returned to almost the same spot and rattled up four more, one of which my companion shot. That deer, a wide 11-pointer, turned out to be one of the bucks that had responded and been photographed the previous day, although we couldn't be certain of that until I developed my film a few days later. Only a couple of years ago, hunting on a ranch strange to me, I was plagued by a certain distinctively antlered 10-point buck that I wouldn't shoot, but which came running to me whenever I hit my horns together. I rattled up that stupid deer two or three times a day in different locations, for two days. He seemed to be following me around. Wherever I went, I could hunker down under a bush, crash the antlers together, and look up to see him coming, on the run!

On that same ranch, on a different trip, I rattled up a promising young buck, a smallish ten-pointer with a little drop tine on each beam, which had been fighting so much that he'd broken off four of his ten points and was bleeding from dozens of fresh wounds in his neck and shoulders. Knowing the size of some of the mature bucks on that property, I judged he'd taken enough punishment to discourage any three young bucks, but he came charging

to the sound of my horns, fiery-eyed, ready for more! It isn't particularly rare, for that matter, for a horn rattler to attract two different bucks at the same time and to have the two of them square off in a battle royal before his eyes. A majority of the serious buck fights I've witnessed, in fact, have been between bucks that came to my rattling horns.

The idea that all this horn-rattling fun is strictly limited to Texas is a myth. A year or so ago, a friend of mine from North Carolina called me long-distance on the evening of their opening day of deer season to report that he'd rattled up five or six bucks that day and had bagged the biggest of them. "That's great," I responded, "but why'd you call me long-distance to tell me about it?"

"Because," he said, "nobody around here believes whitetails will come to rattling in this part of the world, and I wish you'd quit tellin' 'em about it!"

Just last month, I had a bowhunter from New Jersey inform me that he had successfully rattled up a buck in that state last season. "He didn't come quite within my bow range," he said, "but there's no doubt he was coming to the horns, and it would have been an easy shot with a rifle." I believe this hunter represented about the thirteenth or fourteenth state from which I have had credible testimony of horn-rattling successes, including states in the Northeast, Southeast, and Midwest. About the only areas, apparently, in which horn rattling is *not* a useful hunting technique are those in which the buck-to-doe ratio in the local herd is lower than about one to three and, of course, those where the legal hunting season happens not to overlap some part of the rutting period. Of course, it must be added that, though possibly useful, rattling can only be regarded as suicidal on heavily hunted public lands! That warning is offered in all seriousness; there are almost as many yarns about hunters rattling up other hunters as about hunters luring bucks, and some of them are horror stories. I could pass on a couple, myself.

Horn rattling, like every other legal hunting method, works on some days and doesn't work on others, and I've learned not to make any bets on which days will be which. It also works well in some years, whereas during the next season, on the same property, with the same deer herd, rattling results will be sparse at best. Weather has something to do with this seasonal difference, but often the difference will be manifest even between two consecutive seasons during which the weather conditions appear (to a human) to be quite comparable. It requires patience and skill, and can still be frustrating and puzzling—but, when the bucks are really coming to the horns, there's no other deer-hunting experience in the world like it!

If you give it an honest try, chances are you, too, can eventually add to the growing body of horn-rattling lore.

Photograph by Walter Elling



When you see bucks with tarry-black hock glands and swollen necks (left), it's time to take out the rattling horns. Wootters did, and was rewarded with the biggest buck of his career as a hunter (below).

