

Outdoors

How good are you? Unkillable bucks

Watch small white-tail twin fawns at play and you'll likely observe that one is not only slightly larger but that he (it will invariably be a "he") is also bolder and more alert, more aggressive in nursing and quicker to sample unknown foods. He'll seem spookier and more curious, and will venture farther from his mother's side.

At the tender age of four weeks, the toddler is already revealing his maleness. Almost from birth, little bucks' behavior differs from their little sisters', and as they mature it diverges even more noticeably from that of younger bucks, as well.

If this buck lives to the age of six years, he will be a finished player in the survival game. He is, by the way, a worthy trophy regardless of antler size, because he has learned the lessons and accumulated the wary wisdom to keep himself alive.

Having survived at least five hunting seasons, he's a battle-hardened veteran, and is every bit as hard to kill as any world-record head.

He now has the nerve to stand perfectly motionless in cover and let a human walk within a few yards — as long as the man gives no sign of having detected him. If the buck sees such a sign (especially eye contact), he knows how to explode into action and be gone before the man can react.

He may become almost wholly nocturnal, at least during the annual season of the guns, and may simply vanish from his accustomed territory. He will rarely approach a corn feeder or enter a food plot by daylight unless a hot doe happens to lead him there during the frenzy of the rut — and even then he may hang back in the brush.

I once watched a big buck tending a doe where corn was on the ground. I saw him only because I was in a high tripod looking down into



Photo by John Wootters

This is as good a daylight look as you're likely to get at a trophy buck ... and he wouldn't be seen even this well without the selective-focus feature of the camera lens (or good binoculars). He's clearly an old buck with a 24-inch spread, scoring maybe 150 B-&-C, but presents an extremely dicey shot because of possible bullet deflection in the brush. Besides, as soon as he sees you raise a rifle, he'll vanish, so subtly that you won't even see him move.

Currently Outdoors



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somewhat open brush. He kept as close to his lady love as he could get without showing himself in the open but never took his eyes from her fair form. He ignored the corn. I might never have been aware of him at all if the doe hadn't telegraphed his nearness.

Active breeding bucks regularly reduce their food intake by more than 50 percent during the rut and may lose a fourth of their body weight, so hunting field or acorn crops isn't likely to prove much more productive than feeders. Water? These animals know every little hidden trickle and pothole holding water deep in the brush, and come to open water, if ever, only after sundown.

Under heavy hunting pressure some mature bucks actually can become unkillable, by any legal, sporting means. They may not even revisit their own scrapes and, if they do, they tend to circle downwind to scent-check from cover, never physically approaching the scrape.

That's why you can sit downwind of a smoking-hot scrape for three days and never see the maker; perhaps you weren't far enough downwind, allowing the buck to scent-check you, too.

If you think that word "unkillable" is a bit extreme, think again. I've hunted whitetails for more than 60 years. I may not be the best deer hunter in the world, but I have been described in hunting publications as a "legendary hunter" and "one of the best." I wrote what is alleged to be the best-selling deer-hunting book of all time. After 20 years in print, I did a revised edition in 1997 which is still selling. I was an instructor in all of the NRA Whitetail Super Clinics and a speaker in demand by sportsmen's groups all across the U.S. and Canada.

In other words, I'm no beginner. While hunting across 20 states and provinces in three nations for three-score and five years, however, I've

encountered several whitetail bucks that neither I nor any of my expert hunting buddies could kill. These deer simply kept one step ahead of us, no matter what tricks we tried. We played the game and they won. They defeated me ... but they remain some of my fondest hunting memories.

Locating one specific free-ranging mature buck and setting out to take him (and no other) in fair chase is one of the toughest challenges in all of hunting. And succeeding will surely become the proudest accomplishment of any hunting lifetime.

John Wootters 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.