

THE EXPERTS CHOOSE:

MULE DEER VERSUS WHITETAIL

The air was heavy with the smell of sagebrush as I headed up the dry wash in the dark. The ground suddenly pitched up steeply and for 50 yards I did some fancy scrambling as I climbed in the loose shale. Then I was on top and I knew exactly where I wanted to fort up. I'd studied the ridge carefully with my spotting scope the day before, and the rocks jutting out from the north end of the rim looked perfect. From behind them I'd be hidden from deer working toward me from water, yet I'd be able to see everything in the sage-covered basins below.

Once I was comfortable amid the rocks I dug into my day pack for my spotting scope, pulled the 8X binoculars from in-

side my down vest, and settled back to wait for the sun. I was plenty early. The sky was filled with millions of stars and it seemed I could reach out and touch them. At that moment I could have been the only living thing on earth. Nothing moved in the predawn stillness, neither bird nor beast, and the only sound was my breathing.

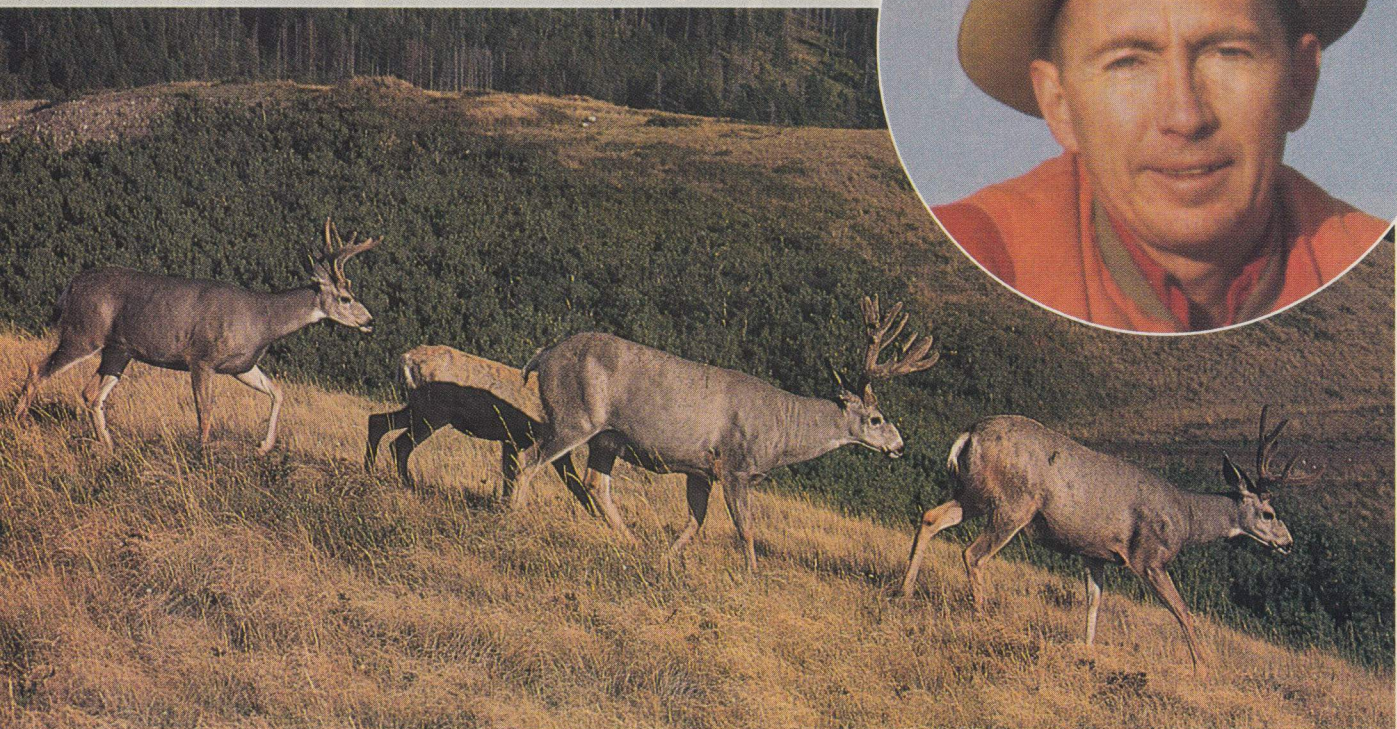
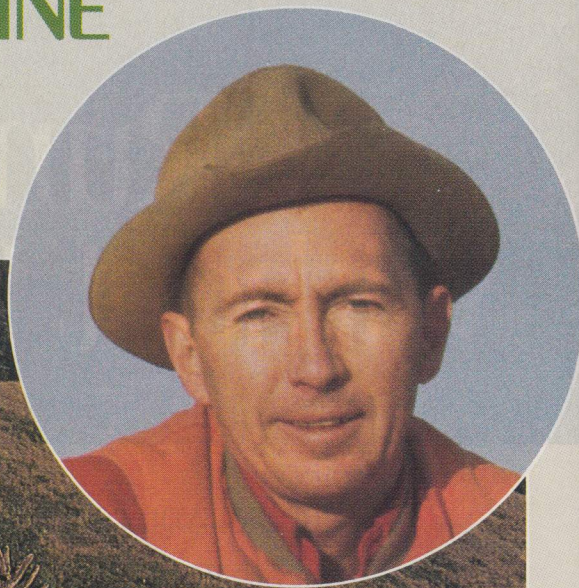
Then one by one the stars in the east began to wink out, and soon I could see the rugged outline of the Big Horn Mountains almost 40 miles away jutting starkly into the sky. It was time to get down to business. Using the binoculars I searched the sage-choked basin below me for movement. The first thing I saw was a couple of yearling Herefords as they

rose from their beds and started grazing. A flash of white signaled the movement of some pronghorns almost a mile away, and I glimpsed the last of the herd just as it disappeared in a shallow depression.

Then the mule deer moved. At first there was only a lone doe, her huge ears flicking as she strained to hear any unfamiliar sound, her nose raised to test the breeze. Not until she was satisfied that the wind carried no strange scent did she begin to wander away from the creek. Soon there was a fawn behind her, then another, and before long there were nine mule deer in sight.

Only nine? Yesterday, and the day before as well, there had been 10 deer—
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By Bob Milek MAKE MINE MULIES



Photograph by Bill McRae

MULE DEER VERSUS WHITETAIL

Everyone likes to win, but there's a special kick in beating the best.

Chess players seek out masters to challenge their best efforts. Tennis players find their intensity level rising to meet that of a tough opponent. Champion shotgun competitors know they shoot better under pressure, and the better the competition, the greater the pressure.

That's why my favorite hunting quarry is an old whitetail buck. He's "the best," the master of masters among game animals, at least in my experience. I haven't tried every game species on the planet, but I haven't missed many of those whose names come immediately to mind. After rattling around for 50 years on five continents, I've a pretty fair idea of what most of the so-called "glamour game" animals can demand of a fair-chase hunter.

To put it as plainly as possible, I believe that the mature whitetail buck demands the application of more sheer hunting skill—and of more different kinds of skill—than any other deer (or any other animal) on earth.

A strong statement, yes, but it is not made merely to stir up a controversy or to put down any of the other beautiful and interesting species of deer. And it needs qualification.

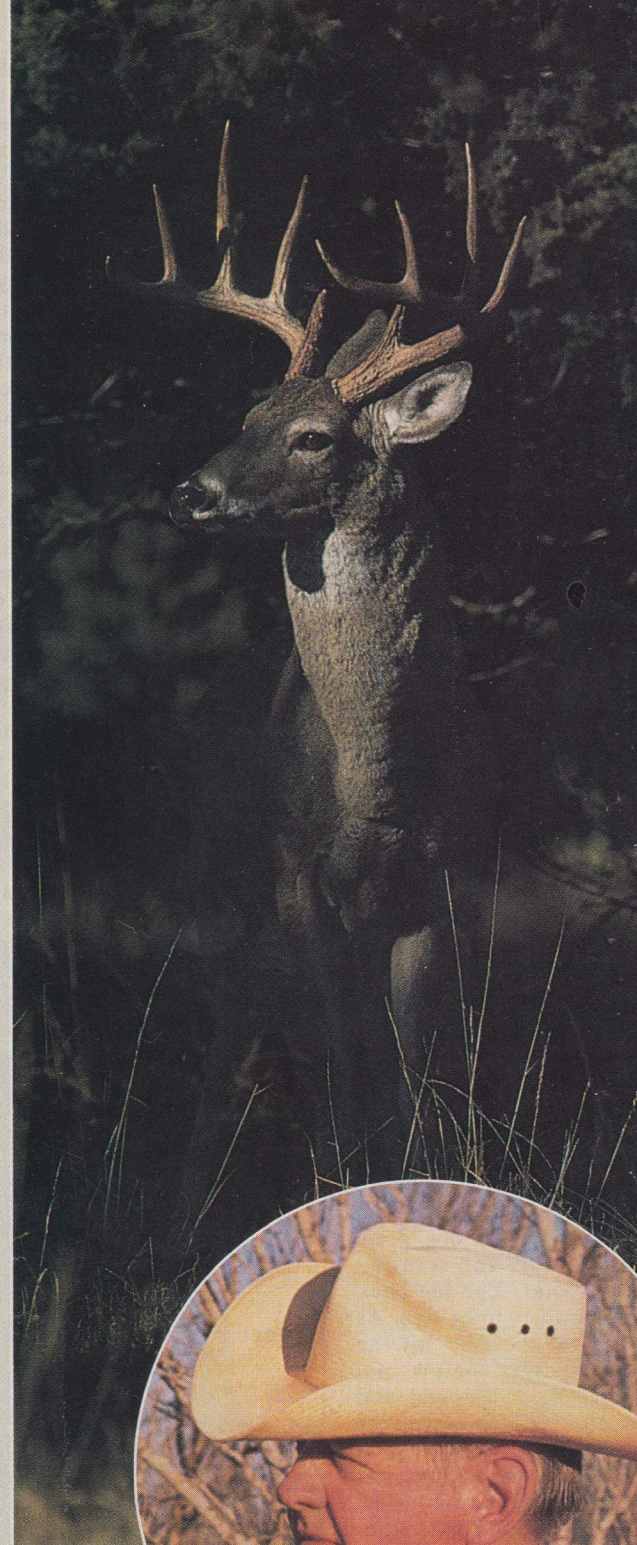
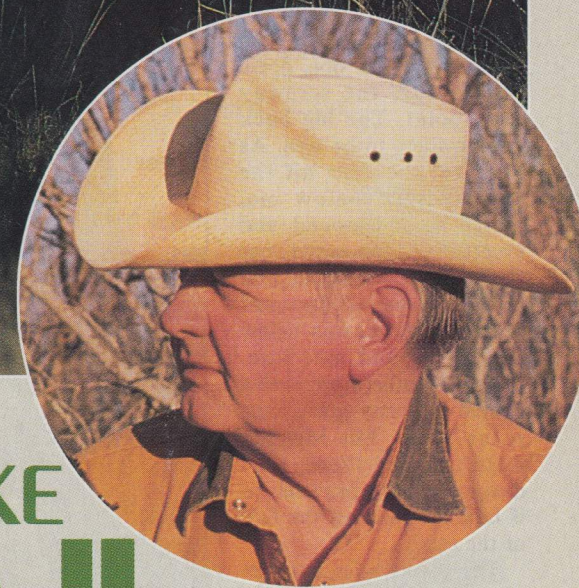
Please note that I've specified "old" or "mature" whitetail bucks. A whitetail finally matures fully at about age five, when his body and skeletal growth are completed. If he's still alive at that age (not many are), he has survived five whole hunting seasons, and he has almost nothing left to learn about evading hunters. He shrugs off all the routine hunting methods and tricks like he shakes moisture from his coat on a misty day. He has probably seen your best moves a dozen times and can counter them as easily as Mike Tyson blocks some amateur's jabs.

Again, for emphasis, we are not talking here about just whitetail bucks. To be sure, shooting any buck in fair chase is a respectable accomplishment... but the difference between just any buck and a *mature* buck is the difference between junior-high football and the NFL! Most hunters have seldom if ever hunted, or even seen, a fully mature whitetail buck, and they cannot easily imagine how different he can be from younger members of his own species.

They go forth and hunt deer in the same places and by the same methods that have been successful for them (on does and young bucks) in the past, and wonder why they never "get lucky" and collect a real wall-hanger, never understanding that no better way exists to guarantee that one will *not* see a mature, trophy buck!

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By JOHN WOOTTERS I'LL TAKE WHITETAIL



Photograph by Mike Biggs

WHITETAIL

They underestimate the beast, not being able to bring themselves to believe that, if you happen to have a somewhat larger-than-usual backyard with a little shrubbery in it, a grown-up whitetail buck could easily live his whole life in it without ever giving you a good look at him. That is not an exaggeration, and you readers who cannot quite accept it for gospel may have to wait a few more years for your wall-hanger. Luck, in the sense of random chance, has almost nothing whatever to do with the fair-chase acquisition of genuine, trophy-grade whitetail bucks. To believe otherwise is a cop-out, and to rely on luck for your trophy is worse than mere wishful thinking; it's self-defeating.

An old whitetail seems almost supernatural in his elusiveness. One reason is that as he grows older and more experienced, he tends to become more and more nocturnal. This is especially true during the open season, but what frequently escapes the notice of hunters (and writers) is the fact that it is also true out of season. Thus, it's hard even to realize that he exists, and almost impossible to scout him. Only the accidental discovery of a set of exceptional tracks may tip his hand . . . and old bucks understand that they leave tracks and understand their meaning, and spend a disproportionate part of their time in swamps, on hard ground, in deep ground cover, and elsewhere where they leave little readable sign.

It wasn't until I flew a few low-level helicopter deer surveys in the South Texas Brush Country that I realized how many unsuspected big bucks lived on acres I thought I knew intimately! And if you don't even know he's out there, it's pretty darned hard to hunt him in an intelligent way.

What *may* get you such a deer is a keen knowledge of the species, its personality and its habits, a lot of hard work (year-round), plus the flexibility to reshape hunting tactics almost

minute-by-minute according to sign, weather changes, and a thousand other inputs. Then you'll need patience, lots and lots of patience, and some imagination . . . imaginative hunters knock off lots of old bucks because they dream up ways to present the animals with novel situations. Never having faced exactly those situations, the deer have no preprogrammed response, and that may buy the hunter a few extra seconds. And mere seconds can make the difference in the big-buck game!

Let's see, now: The old-buck hunter also needs a lot of the woodcraft skills—sign reading, understanding how scent flows and floats, camouflage, how to move without seeming to move and how to sit without seeming to be there at all, how to *see* (oh, how crucial *that* is!). Oh yeah, it sure helps to be quick and deadly with gun or bow. There are a hundred other skills I haven't mentioned, each one critical for maybe 30 seconds during any given hunt . . . but without which you're doomed to a lifetime of taking toy bucks and does.

There are also a few things whitetails *don't* demand of the hunter, things mule deer, among other species, often do. Because the animal is pretty sedentary and exists quite happily cheek-by-jowl with mankind, you don't (usually) have to climb mountains, walk for miles, or ride horses to get a whack at him, and in most regions great skill in long-range riflery is superfluous. In most whitetail habitat, covering lots of ground is actually counterproductive, and some of the very deadliest hunters I've ever known suffered some physical handicap or condition that forced them to let their brains do the walking, as well as the deer hunting. You don't overpower an old whitetail buck or even outsnipe him; if you are to possess him, you must out-think him.

If that statement is true of any of America's species of mule deer, I have not observed it during the hunting of the dozen or so mulies I've been privileged to take. I know that old timberline mule deer bucks can and do get very crafty, and I've seen them do some pretty fancy ducking and dodging before and during their downhill autumn migrations. They are no fools, and those who say they are have simply never encountered the *mature* mule deer buck.

However, they do remain basically open-country animals that feed, breed, and even bed where they may be spotted from a distance. This means that they can be stalked. Making the proper and necessary distinction between "stalking" and "still-hunting," whoever heard of *stalking* a big whitetail buck?

Moreover, the mulie seems to be a natural runner and a migrant that's often hunted outside the boundaries of anything that can be described as a "home territory." By contrast, the whitetail is a natural hider and relatively sedentary, one that spends most of his life within the same handful of acres, every rock, bush, and stump of which he *knows* . . . like you know the way to your bathroom in the dark!

None of this makes him a nobler beast or a more worthy trophy, of course. What it does make him is *interesting* to hunt. I've been after him for half a century, and yet I never fail to learn something new about him every season. He is the chess master who sharpens my skills and demands my very best. He challenges me, excites me . . . and often humbles me.

All this—and much more—makes the mature whitetail buck the most fascinating animal I have ever hunted, and my favorite deer.



This 10-pointer was 6½ years old, and that fact alone made it a fine trophy animal, according to Wootters. The buck's experience and elusiveness made it a worthy challenge to any hunter because all his knowledge had to come into play.