

By JOHN WOOTTERS



THE LOST ART OF STILL HUNTING WHITETAILED

**GHOSTING THROUGH
THE DEER WOODS
WORKS!**

Some find it as hard to imagine a time when there was no such thing as a manufactured tree stand, tripod or portable blind as they do accepting that a majority of deer hunters might ever have scorned the use of scopes. But those times were not so long ago. I know; my own deer hunting career began while both those situations were reality.

A "deer stand" then was nothing more than a promising place to sit, on a stump or against a tree trunk, or maybe on a board in a tree crotch. Usually lacking concealment for the lurking hunter, such "stands" placed a premium on sitting *still* (read: motionless)

for long periods, forever alert and hair-trigger ready to swing the rifle. Cramped legs, wet butts and sore backs were among the routine joys of stationary deer hunting. Patience and dogged perseverance were prerequisites. Such places made stand hunting a wholly different challenge from that offered today's user of comfortable, safe commercial stand equipment.

They also tended to make a lot more of us into still hunters. Yes, the controversy about the relative merits of stand- versus still-hunting was already in full swing, but still hunting had more champions back then—"back then" being the 1940s and earlier. It

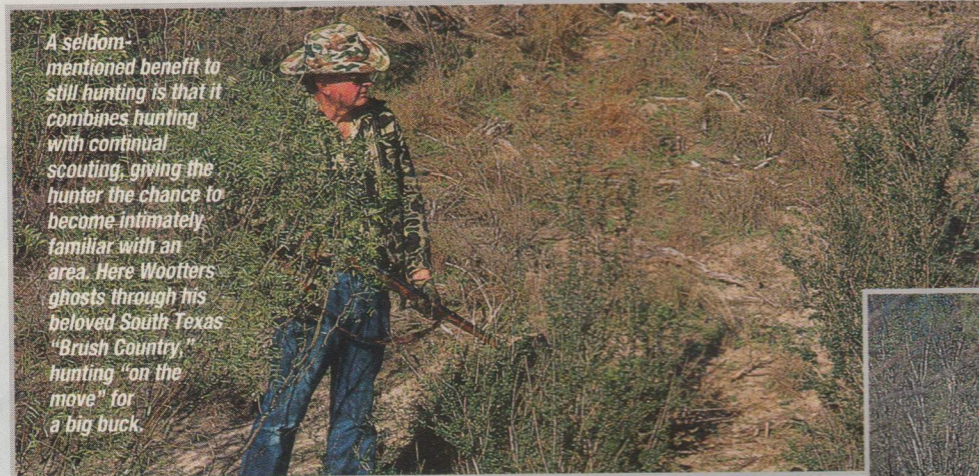
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was generally agreed that consistent still-hunting success required a higher order of skill than stand hunting. Big bucks regularly hung up by this method were acknowledged evidence of superior knowledge and craft. Of course, hunters in that leisurely era, by and large, started younger, hunted more and attained a higher level of woodsmanship, on average, than today, and they knew their local hunting grounds almost as well as the whitetails. Or perhaps the deer were less sophisticated? Anyway, we still-hunted; and without that feeling that all the deer were over in the bushes, snickering, or that our chances of killing a buck on purpose about equalled those of the proverbial snowball. Also, it must be admitted that the woods were less crowded in those days, meaning fewer leaf-crunchers to keep the deer stirred up for standers—and fewer to screw up a cagey still-hunting campaign.

All this has brought about, in our time, a decline in the number of hunters who can properly be called *still-hunters*. Many—probably most—walkers who think they've been out still hunting were doing no such thing. They were merely out for an invigorating stroll in the woods and might have been more sensibly armed with swagger sticks, which are less tiring to carry than rifles and just about as likely, in the hands of one of these strollers, to bring down a buck!

Hence the title of this article. True still-hunting experts always were pretty rare, but there are so few these days that it's no exaggeration to call the art of still hunting "lost."

Well, maybe not quite *completely* lost. There are a few of us left who enjoy hunting whitetails the hard way (another term for still hunting). Why? Because it's the most intensely satisfying of all whitetail hunting methods. A still hunter sees, hears and does things that no stand hunter can even imagine. He goes *mano a mano* with bucks in the supreme test of woodcraft, awareness, and, often, riflemanship. He enters deer habitat on the animals' own terms, matching his own senses and stealth against the world's coolest and most cunning wild creature.



He aims to shed his own identity as an intruder and become a part of the forest community. The mental concentration and physical control demanded by this effort is so intense that experienced still hunters report that it produces a soaring "high" and a definite crash after the hunt. I know whereof they speak, for I am one of those. And when you collect an old buck by still hunting, you've done something very, very special!

The term itself is

Still hunting and handguns go well together, especially open-sighted revolvers that are easy to carry and fast to handle in close quarters.

ambiguous; many seem to think that "still hunting" is hunting by being still, as in waiting in ambush. But in this usage "still" means *silent*, not *motionless*, and still hunting is actually hunting on the move, but so quietly and slowly that wildlife is not disturbed by, or even aware of, his presence.

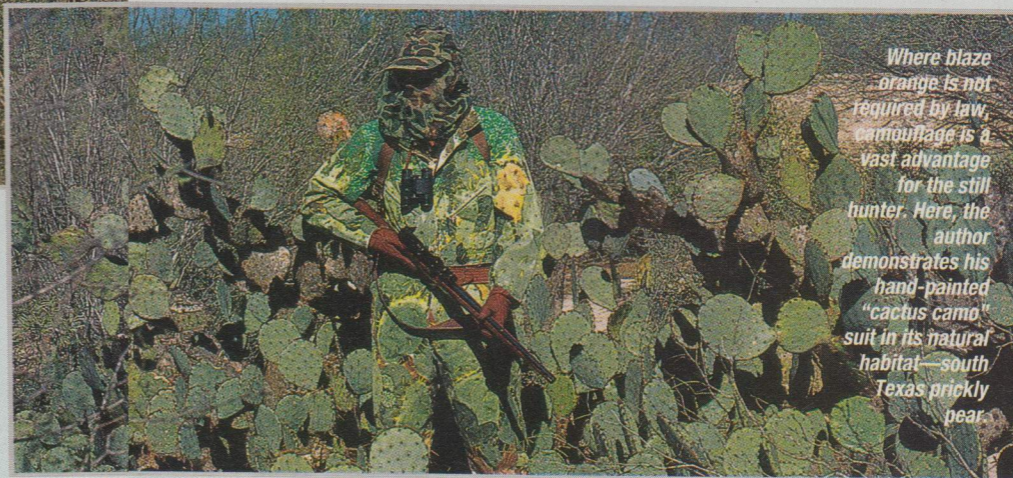
If you snorted with disbelief when you read that last sentence, you proved yourself a case-hardened stand sitter who thinks that kind of stealth unattainable by modern man. Maybe so—for you. Still hunting is difficult—the most demanding, most exhausting and probably least productive of all common methods of hunting deer. But it's real, honest-to-gosh, proactive *hunting*, and not mere sniping from ambush. It is the absolute

ultimate in fair chase that can be carried out with your shoes on and with a weapon more technologically advanced than an atlatl! Nobody can do it for you—or even *with* you. There are no coaches and no referees—just one man versus the deer—and the results speak for themselves.

Obviously, still hunting is hardly the technique of choice for the obsessed trophy hunter—but I've shot three of my five best trophies by this method. On none of these days, by the way, did I set out to still hunt, but when fate dangled the chance before me, I called up my old still-hunting know-how and used it to get a career deer.

A still hunter must master two skills. The first is to flow ghostlike through the woods, meaning not only avoiding making noise but also keeping movements limited, smooth and fluid. Progress is

necessarily very slow. "Very slow" means maybe no more than a few hundred yards per hour, but terrain and cover will dictate the rate. You must go slowly enough to see where you're putting each foot at every step and to put it down without snapping a twig or crunching a leaf. The expert still hunter stops often (always in shadowed cover) and does not move on until he is satisfied that no deer is visible in any direction—especially including behind him. He probes every thicket, every shadow, every screen of brush with eyes and binocular and he lingers long enough at each stop to give any hidden and unalerted deer a chance to betray itself. His motto could be "however long it takes"...time must mean no more to a hunter in this mode than to the hunted, which is nothing. And that is modern man's greatest obstacle; we, the Masters of the Universe, are the inventors of time, and it seems unnatural to us to ignore it. But note this well: if you have an appointment, you cannot still-hunt effectively. Hunting an imagined white-tail buck simply must be the only thing in your mind, your sole objective in life, for however long it takes.



The other great obstacle, especially to a hunter who lives in the city, is switching off his distraction filters. We are continuously bombarded with the most raucous demands for attention, via radio, TV, traffic signals, hustlers, billboards, flagmen, etc. All of us (those who remain sane, anyway) erect mental filters to shut out the "white noise" of demands, commands, pleas, promises, factoids, forms, flags and searchlights in the sky, but hopefully not those signals essential to safety and success. Just consider all the ways emergency vehicles try to break



Wootters collected this elderly buck in Old Mexico with a heroic still-hunting effort from which he emerged sweaty, torn, bleeding—and successful.

through our defenses against distraction and capture our attention—strobes, flashing colored lights, gaudy paint jobs, whoopers, sirens, Klaxons, and horns! If you go into the woods with those defenses up (and you will, without a conscious

effort to lower them), most of the subtle signals of wildlife activity, past and present, will be overlooked.

Lowering the screens, however, is difficult. It requires practice and concentration, a distinct effort of will. Try this; go into a room alone, sit down in a comfortable chair, close your eyes and just...listen. Make your mind a blank and concentrate on hearing; try to identify every slightest noise, however insignificant, sounds you normally tune out without thinking. Gradually, you'll become aware of noises you haven't

heard in years—the a/c's hum, perhaps; the creaking of the house itself; wind under the eaves; the kid's stereo, upstairs behind closed doors; a neighbor's dog fussing three houses down the block; clinking utensils in the kitchen; water moving in the pipes in the wall; a murmur of traffic on the freeway seven blocks away; a cardinal singing in a tree-top outside. The harder you listen, the more you'll hear, as if you turned the volume up on a hearing aid—and, in fact, some veteran still-hunters with perfectly normal hearing actually buy hearing aids and do exactly that. Now, suddenly, the wee twitter of a kinglet or a titmouse is no longer meaningless background noise; instead, it may signal a buck on the move nearby.

The still-hunter matches wits with creatures whose senses are forever set to "high," who never fail to notice, interpret and seek the origin of every sound, scent, and movement. Evolution has honed a keener edge on their sensory receptors, so a human's one chance even to stay in the contest, much less win, is to operate his own sensors at full power every second. This is one reason still hunting is so tiring.

It may be impossible for a human to match a wild animal in sheer alertness and awareness of his surroundings, but the interpretive and analytical powers of his brain can partly make up the deficiency by letting him focus on what really counts. He tries to notice everything, even the most insignificant—patterns of leaves and the play of sunlight on bark. Only routine observation of all the normal patterns of the woods will let him notice the abnormal: the angle of a frozen buck's hock in a thicket or a limb that shines like an antler. I once had my attention snagged by three black dots in the undergrowth as I walked along a woods road. The observation was so subliminal that I couldn't have told you exactly what I'd seen, only that *something* back there didn't fit. Backing up one step at a time and scanning hard, I finally spotted the triangle of dots again—the eyes and nose of a doe, a statue in the shadows, waiting for me to pass on. When our eyes met, she waited no longer.

There are a lot of things still hunting is *not*. It is not stalking (that's the execution of a planned approach to previously located game). Nor is it aimless wandering in the woods; there should be noth-

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ing random about still hunting. All my favorite still-hunting routes are carefully laid out in advance, planned to bring me to certain promising locations with the wind and sun in my favor. They are not necessarily upwind only, by the way, although none intentionally go straight downwind. Crosswind bothers neither me nor the deer one whit, but I am fanatic about keeping the low sun at my back. Thus, some are morning routes while others play better after noon, some work well on any normal wind (being usable from either end), and some are so specialized that conditions get right to hunt them maybe every other season. Some produce early in the season; others are designed for the post-rut period.

All the routes go where they go for a reason: They may take me close to (but not into) known bedgrounds, perhaps, or into roadless stronghold areas to which mature bucks retreat from hunting pressure. Part of my annual preseason scouting routine is walking out my still-hunting routes, noting changes in visibility and cover, and recent deer sign. Differences from year to year in the distribution of natural foods like mast failure

can influence route selections, too. Sometimes a still-hunting trail must be rerouted because of new deadfalls, washouts, undergrowth, whatever, and it's better to note the change in advance. The time needed to complete a route may also change from year to year; remember, still hunting cannot be rushed.

Still hunting integrates well with other hunting methods. In my own country, "walkin' and rattlin'"—still hunting between promising antler-rattling spots—has long been my most favorite hunt. But I've also scored after spotting a worthy buck from a stand and, switching into still-hunting mode, abandoning my stand and going after him afoot. One of these bucks was spotted more than half a mile from my tower blind, and it was a still-hunt instead of a stalk because he was obviously not going to stay in one place until I got there. He turned out to be my lifetime best (at least until next year!).

The rush of satisfaction from such a feat is powerful and makes this kind of hunting addictive. The reason is that walking up close to a wild whitetail buck is not something just anybody who buys a hunting license can do. It's difficult, very diffi-

cult, and is a memorable accomplishment when you pull it off. It's so much fun that you may catch yourself stalking anything—does, squirrels, the neighbor's pooch snoozing in the shade, anything (humans don't count; they're too easy). I've gotten almost close enough to a buck in the woods to kick him and even closer to a doe or two. Those triumphs resonate in my memories as vividly as the harvest of any buck I've ever shot!

Still hunting, in other words, is a high art and a passion unto itself, usually but not always associated with deer hunting, and having rewards not necessarily connected to a kill. It really should have another name ("woodwalking," perhaps, or "still-haunting") of which the word "hunting" is not a part. But few besides hunters are sufficiently motivated to bring to it the obligatory intensity and discipline. That's why still-hunting skills are fading away in today's impatient, high-voltage lifestyle. That's a pity, because lots of good hunters will never know what they're missing! **H**

HUNTING DEER FROM STANDS UNSPORTSMANLIKE?

Readers will be stunned to learn that stand hunting for deer was once thought unsporting by a father of the American conservation ethic, none other than Teddy Roosevelt himself. The future president, also a founder of the Boone & Crockett Club, wrote the club's first fair-chase code in 1893, in which he condemned as unfair all the following: killing bears, wolves or cougars in traps; "fire hunting" (jacklighting); "crusting" moose, elk or deer in deep snow; killing swimming game from a boat and killing deer by any other means than stalking or still hunting! All these methods were, of course, quite legal at that time.

This statement of one group's 19th-century concept of sportsmanship would also seem to exclude from fair chase such other methods as baiting deer, hunting from vehicles, tree stands and tripods, horn-rattling, grunt-calling, decoying, mock-scraping, etc.... all of which are presently legal somewhere in America.

Teddy's code was written, remember, at the historic low point of North American big-game populations, when many species were feared already doomed and extreme sanctions were seen as their only hope. For him, condemning such socially acceptable hunting methods as immoral must have taken as much courage as leading the Rough Riders up San Juan Hill... but that great hunter never flinched from any test of honor or manliness!



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