

*Every buck is important,
those that got away
as well as those that didn't.
But some stand out in one's memory. . . .*



John Wootters' Milestone Bucks

Whitetail bucks are remembered for many different reasons. Some represent a "first" or a personal best in a hunter's life. Others are memorable because of some physical characteristic, or for their legendary elusiveness. Some make us recall a triumph, while others, just as fondly recalled, remind us of a defeat. Oddly, we often feel the same pride for the buck when he beats us that we do for ourselves when we happen to win.

A milestone buck in every hunter's life is his first buck. Non-hunters don't understand what "first bucks" mean to kids (or to grown-ups, for that matter). The first buck is a turning point, an immense personal accomplishment, a rite of passage. The taking of a deer's life is an awesome thing to do, and it is not done lightly. To do it requires an emotional and physical mastery of oneself unequaled by very many other experiences in a youngster's life.

My first buck was shot on December 31, 1941, the last day of the Texas hunting season and a few weeks after the Japanese Navy attacked Pearl Harbor. I was 13 years old. It was a windy, bitter-cold morning, and my father and I were camped in a tent near Columbus in Colorado County. It was so cold that Dad allowed me the first cup of coffee of my life with breakfast before we braved that frigid wind.

He wasn't a veteran hunter, not having taken his own first buck at that time, either, nor was he familiar with the ranch on which we were hunting. We were really two neophytes, one 13 and the other 40, setting out together in the pre-dawn darkness. We walked a long time along an old woods road, the oaks and yaupon thickets looming ghostly in our wan flashlights. I don't remember how a place was chosen for me to sit, but there was nothing there to mark it as a hunting "stand." It was just a tree for me to lean against, sitting on the ground where I could see a little way through the live-oak woods.

My rifle was a borrowed Remington Model 81 autoloader chambered to .35

Remington with the factory iron sights. Scopes were few and far between in the Texas woods before World War II.

Dad told me that he'd hunt farther down the old road, close enough to hear any shot I might fire. We wished each other luck and I sat down and watched his flashlight bob away, paling in the gathering dawn, until it was gone.

I didn't mind being alone in the woods. This wasn't my first deer hunt, although no buck had offered me a shot yet. I was excited, of course, but mostly I was miserably cold. Thinsulate, Gore-Tex, Therman, and all the other high-tech garment items were not even dreamed of in those days. Even insulated underwear was not yet invented, and I was shivering in a thermal-knit cotton union suit, wool shirt and pants, and a leather "bomber" jacket. That morning, it was not enough. I sat and shivered as the light grew stronger, and yearned for another gulp of hot coffee.

Speaking of hot coffee, that first cup began to have its predictable effect upon my innocent young kidneys. I sat and shivered *and* squirmed. Finally, not long after the onset of a gray, watery shooting light, I no longer had any choice. I stood up and stepped around behind my stand tree, leaning my rifle against its trunk, to answer the call of nature.

Note that I was now facing the wind, as I should have been all along but had avoided in an effort to use the tree trunk to break the icy blast. That's why I found myself staring at a nice, eight-point whitetail buck at no more than 25 yards! Pure instinct and nothing else prompted me to freeze and remain motionless until his head passed behind a bush, when I dropped to one knee and snatched up the rifle. When he stepped clear, the front bead was upon him.

Well, sometimes it was on him, and sometimes it wasn't! The truth is that the muzzle was executing great, sweeping arcs and circles, and only occasionally did the buck's shape whizz momentarily through the sight picture. I suppose that the thrashing of limbs and shrubbery under the lash of the wind must have covered my movements.

The harder I tried to force the rifle to point straight at the animal, the wilder were its gyrations. My breath seemed trapped inside my chest and my heart boomed in my ears like the war drums of the Valkyries. I remember thinking, "He'll get away! He'll get away, and I'll never have another chance!" That thought—of failure, of going buckless for the whole rest of my life—somehow steadied me. Desperately, I aimed, wobbled, corrected, wobbled off again, pulled back on, and convulsively yanked the trigger.

The buck was down instantly, but still kicking. I will never know how I mustered enough control to put in that coup de grace, but I did it somehow and turned a corner in my young life in that moment that I would never come to again.

Waiting for Dad, I sat—no longer aware of the cold wind—beside this magical creature and ran my fingers over him in wonder, trying to comprehend what he was and what I had done. I mourned that buck, as I have every one of the more than 200 since, at the same time that I was near bursting with pride. Those who have done it know that it was a very difficult thing that I had done. I had overcome the stress, wild excitement, and fear of failure; when the chips were down, I'd mastered myself, which is far harder and more important than merely mastering a wild animal. A 13-year-old boy took a long stride toward manhood, all alone, in those dull and blustery woods that morning.

I shot quite a few bucks during the next few years. Each was memorable in his own way, but one was unforgettable. He was the first deer I ever had to take running, and he was also my first 10-pointer. I'd skipped lunch and was sitting against an oak bole one sunny November afternoon in 1951, fondling my new deer rifle, a Savage Model 99 EG in .300 Savage caliber, equipped with a Lyman receiver peep sight. It was my very first centerfire rifle.

At about 1:00 p.m., the 10-pointer followed a hot doe across an open area in the woods and, approaching from behind, took me by surprise. For a second we stared, eyeball-to-eyeball. Then he

By John Wootters

whirled and ran. I had to spring up and spin to bring the rifle to bear, and the buck had gained precious yardage before I could shoot. I fired four rounds as he made two or three bounds, and then he was sagging, slumping, and tumbling sideways, dead before I could run to him. Examining him, I discovered that every one of my bullets had touched him, and three were fatal. One of my father's friends, hunting nearby, reported hearing the shots but had doubted that they could have come from my rifle. "I didn't think anybody could shoot a lever action that fast!" he said.

It was another milestone, at which I discovered I could rise to a certain kind of rifleman's challenge that I'd dreaded for a long time. In big-game hunting, some of the most valuable things you learn are about yourself.

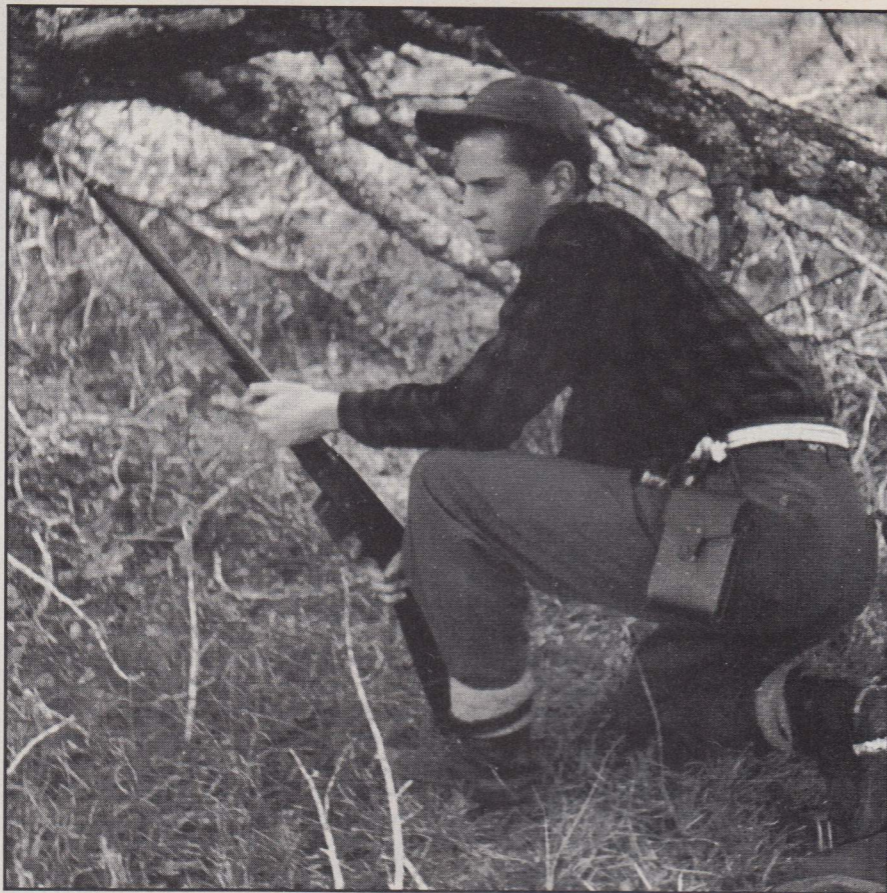
One of my most educational milestone bucks, however, was one at which I never even pointed a rifle. We met on a beautiful ranch in a bend of the Nueces River in Uvalde County, Texas, in 1965. That's top deer country, but the herds were seriously overpopulated and big-antlered bucks were about as plentiful in those parts as rhinoceri.

For the first 25 years of my deer-hunting career, I hadn't been at all choosy. If two bucks were standing side by side, offering me equally good shots, I'd pop the one with the larger antlers, but that was about as far as my "trophy hunting" could have been said to go. During one period, I shot a buck before sundown of opening day from the same stand every season for seven straight years, which doesn't argue strongly for my selectivity. I had not, in fact, ever actually turned down a clean shot at a legal whitetail buck, regardless of the size of his headgear, while I still possessed an unfilled tag. All this may comfort some readers who have accused me of being a big-buck snob; even if that were so, I would not have arrived at that point without having served my apprenticeship!

But there were so many deer on that Uvalde County ranch that shooting the first one you saw merely ended a weekend hunt before it was begun. So it was that I found a fine, fat little six-point yearling before me, completely unaware of my presence. I had him absolutely dead to rights. He was mine if I wanted him.

Without a second thought, I started to shoot, as I had almost 50 other times in previous seasons. And then a strange thing happened; I hesitated. I really did not want to shoot this buck, not on the first morning of a four-day hunt. I was a guest on the ranch, and it would be bad manners to harvest two bucks. Note that I didn't turn down this six-pointer because he was not big enough, but only because I knew there would be many other chances and I was enjoying the hunting too much to eliminate the excuse for it too soon.

So I just squatted and watched the buck, busily nuzzling the little native pecans out of the leaf litter. It was the first time I'd de-



Wootters' milestone bucks span many years; above, at age 19, he carries the .35 Remington used on his first buck. Right is his personal best of 48 hunting seasons.

liberately let a legal buck live for more than a few seconds, and I found it to be an oddly pleasant experience. With the certain knowledge that I could harvest him at will, I enjoyed the feeling of allowing him to live. It was as though my restraint somehow made him mine anyway.

And, more than that, I suddenly found myself observing the animal's actions with a new fascination. It was dawning on me that bucks, even youngsters like this one, react and behave differently from does. I'd never given myself a chance to learn much about buck behavior, simply because there's little to be learned from dead bucks. Watching this live buck for 20 minutes opened the door for me to a whole new world of whitetail habits and reactions, and that made him a definite milestone in my career. Since then, I've passed up at least a score of legal bucks for every one I've shot, and every one of them has taught me something worth knowing.

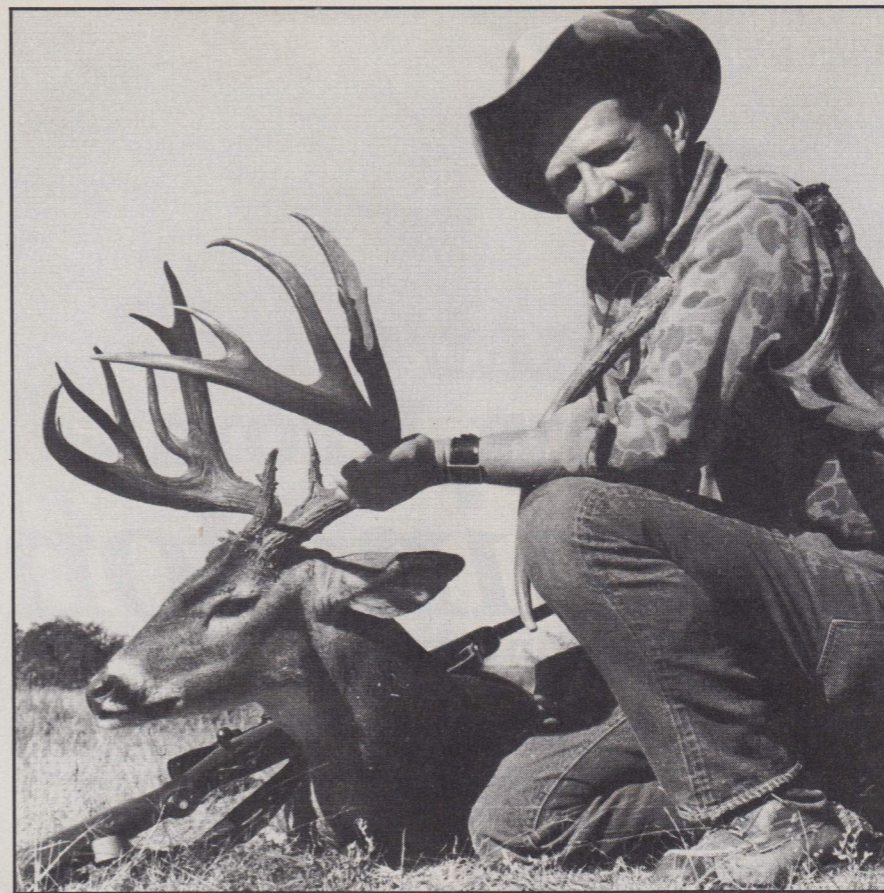
One milestone buck I *didn't* pass up—but couldn't take—was, beyond any doubt, the largest I've ever seen in the wild. He inhabited a huge ranch in the Mexican state of Nuevo Leon. The closest look I got at him was from about 700 yards, but it was a good look, through a pair of 10x40 Zeiss binoculars, and I still wake up in the middle of the night thinking about him! That buck's inside antler spread was not less

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than 30 inches, probably 32, and he had five big, tall, primary tines on each side, making him at least a 12-pointer. I say "at least" because I had the impression that he had a lot of extra structures my lenses couldn't quite resolve at that distance. He was a dead-cinch book head, and that's all there is to that. Unfortunately, in two seasons of trying I never got a look at him within range. A milestone? You bet!

Of the scores and hundreds of bucks I've shot at in 49 hunting seasons, only two, to the best of my knowledge, have been hit and not recovered. The life of one of these was saved when my bullet was deflected by a tough mesquite stem and inflicted only a superficial wound. I actually observed the buck chasing a doe later that same day. I could see the wound through binoculars, even though the range was too great to try another shot, and it was obvious that I hadn't hurt him badly enough to take his mind off his lady friends.

The other was a sadder event. Walking across a flat covered with waist-high brush in northern Webb County, Texas, early one afternoon in 1967, a companion and I jumped a huge buck, which ran about 100 yards and stopped to look back at us. I could shoot offhand or forget it. There was



nothing to rest the rifle on or even to lean against, not even a chance to kneel or sit. It was a dead-on rear-end shot, but I was carrying a 7mm Remington Magnum loaded with 160-grain Nosler Partition bullets and I knew I could rely on them to drive on into the vitals if I could only make a solid hit.

It was not actually that difficult a chance. I could make that shot cleanly 24 times out of 25, then or now. But I didn't make it that day. Worst of all, I *almost* did. In other words, I didn't miss completely; the bullet apparently grazed along his side and smacked into the shoulder bulge, shattering the foreleg. I was literally sick to my stomach as I watched the buck top a low ridge. I still am, 20 years later, whenever I think about it.

My companion immediately turned back to fetch the ranch manager and his deer-trailing dog, but that ranch is so vast and rough that by the time the man and dog could be brought back the light was gone. Meantime, I'd followed the trail as far as I was able, but it was no use. We tried again with the dog next morning, but she couldn't carry the cold trail.

I spent the next two days aimlessly searching that pasture, checking all the water holes, scanning the skies for vultures. Doing my penance, but all in vain. The manager rode the pasture on horseback, to no avail. No trace of the deer was ever found. I didn't shoot another buck that season, nor the next season, either. I nearly quit deer hunting, in fact.

Friends tried to offer solace, saying that one lost cripple out of 200-something "isn't too bad." They were wrong; it *is* too bad. It's inexcusable. Nor does it excuse me that I at least took the intrinsic lesson to heart: I'm very good with a rifle, but nobody's infallible. It makes me take that extra split second, even today, to double-check the sight picture on each and every shot at game before putting the last microgram of pressure on the trigger.

A milestone that may last the rest of my life was passed in 1973, when I collected my best set of trophy antlers to date. Hope springs eternal, but the possibility exists that I may never beat the buck I shot in Dimmit County on a sweltering New Year's Eve afternoon. The moon was wrong, and whitetail movement had been

spotty that morning, so I didn't expect much from the evening period. I chose to hunt from a certain elevated blind high up on a ridge, from which a vast amount of countryside was visible. I took a 25-40X spotting scope and a 7mm Remington Magnum rifle loaded with a very flat-shooting handload, figuring that I might see a buck at long range.

I did! Just before sundown, I spotted a movement near a small water hole half a mile distant, and focused the telescope on it. It was a doe with twin fawns, and all three were obviously nervous. They kept peering into a nearby thicket. Then a huge buck rushed out of that thicket with his head down and nose lifted, in typical rutting-buck style. I could hardly believe the size of his rack. At a glance I knew I had to get this deer if it was humanly possible.

It didn't look even probable, however. He had no reason to come within range of my blind and he was much too far away to respond to rattling horns. I'd have to go to him, and the odds on that looked pretty slim, too. The water hole, adjacent to which I figured he had a breeding territory set up, lay in the bottom of a long, deep draw that was choked with a shrub locally named whitebrush, which grows so densely that a man cannot push through it all, much less quietly. Finally, the sun was already touching the horizon, and I had only a few more minutes of light to perform whatever miracle I had in mind.

I fixed in mind one particular tree, near which the buck had been last seen and which I figured I might be able to see from inside the whitebrush. Then I grabbed my rifle and rattling horns, swarmed down out of the blind, and struck off down a game trail toward the draw. Soon I was inside the gloom of the whitebrush thicket, navigating by my marker tree and trying to move swiftly and silently at the same time. I got lucky, finding a couple of tunnel-like hog trails going in the right direction that I could traverse on hands and knees.

At last, with the sky darkening, I broke out into a small semi-clearing not far from the marker tree. It would have to do; there was no more time to maneuver. I knelt, laid the rifle close at hand, and picked up the mule deer antlers I was using for rattles. Delicately, I thrust one antler into a dry bush and shook it violently. Then I gently placed the rattles together and softly rubbed and clicked them. I was betting the buck was close—if I hadn't spooked him out of the country with my approach.

He was close, all right! I heard a single hoofbeat off to my left, then the crackle of whitebrush being pushed aside. Then I saw that marvelous rack, silhouetted against the sky where the sun was setting. He was there, at 15 yards, swaggering arrogantly, carelessly, into the clearing to call any other buck in the territory out into the street for the shootout.

He must have won a lot of shootouts in his time, but he lost that one.