

Outdoors

My path to becoming a trophy hunter

Since trophy hunters seem to be in low esteem among uninformed non-hunters, I cannot so identify myself without a word of explanation. First, true trophy-deer hunters are highly selective, discriminating and skilled hunters who kill very seldom and who help keep the age and sex ratios in a whitetail population as much like an un hunted herd as possible.

We do that by removing over-mature, non-breeding males and surplus females, allowing the younger bucks to attain full maturity (five to six years of age). Harvesting does that are surplus to the herd's reproductive success makes more forage available to all members of the herd, promoting better body condition, higher fawn survival, and less stress on both the deer and the habitat during hard times. So-called "trophy hunting" is thus the most benign type of hunting to which a deer herd can be subjected.

Of no less importance is the fact that the high-protein, low-fat, low-cholesterol venison harvested by trophy hunters is not wasted, but is often distributed to low-income families via programs like "Hunters for the Hungry."

Few begin as trophy hunters, or, more accurately, every first buck is a trophy to a hunter whose trophy standards are as undeveloped as his hunting skills.

In the days of my youth, when the world was new and my energies were largely spent in chasing girls and whitetail bucks (not necessarily in that order), taking any legal buck was a proud accomplishment.

Spikes and does were protected by well-meant but misguided laws based on imperfect understandings of the sparse scientific research available in the 1940s. I spent my teen years and early manhood relentlessly whacking any buck carrying three or more points that came before me, up to the annual bag limit of two.

This was my deer-hunting apprenticeship, when I learned the ways of the woods and of the whitetails.



Photo by John Wootters

This is the Dimmit County buck that in 1961 converted Wootters into a dedicated big-buck hunter. His first South Texas whitetail, the buck aged at 6-1/2 years and, at 186 pounds field-dressed, remains the author's lifetime heaviest after 65 years of active deer hunting in 17 states and provinces in three nations.

Currently Outdoors



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I learned to read sign and to stalk like an Indian, also how to be invisible in the woods by sitting absolutely motionless for hours, ready to uncoil like a striking rattler when it was time for the rifle.

I strived to get inside an old buck's head and outthink him, formulating imaginative tactics to force him to deal with me when and where he least expected. During those years my gun-handling became so effortlessly precise that I rarely missed a deer and never lost a wounded one.

And in all those years, I never even heard of a manufactured blind, much less an

automatic corn feeder or a game-proof fence. The deer I hunted were real, wild, free-ranging bucks.

Inevitably, knocking over yearling five-pointers and spindly little eight-pointers became too easy. I wanted more challenge and dreamed of matching myself against the big, grown-up bucks of whose incredible cunning and wariness I'd heard told over a hundred campfires.

In 1961, I finally got to hunt the famous South Texas brush country of Dimmit County. There, on the first morning and in the teeth of a howling norther, I shot my first real trophy buck, stalking him and dropping him cleanly with one bullet as he rose from his bed. He was a massive 11-pointer, a gnarly, gray-faced old warrior whose field-dressed weight of 186 pounds literally doubled that of my next largest-bodied buck. Today, 45 years later, he still remains

the heaviest of all my 200-plus whitetails.

From that moment I was hopelessly hooked on mature bucks (which is another term for "trophy"), and have passed much of my life in their pursuit, sometimes winning the contest, sometimes defeated, but always learning and trying new ideas.

I've taken many outstanding old bucks, some scoring much higher, but none has ever displaced that first Dimmit County brute, in my memories or on my wall.

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.