

The Life And Times Of Bucky

More than just a deer, this special buck was an institution!

By John Wootters



Bucky and the author's wife, Jeannie, dearly loved each other. The deer was the beneficiary of a steady flow of his favorite fruits from her fingers.

Bucky was a tame/wild whitetail buck who, when he felt like it, inhabited my ranch on the Tex-Mex border. When he felt like it, he also inhabited at least two other adjacent ranches.

He was as sovereign as a mortal animal can be. Nobody owned Bucky. He was born free and lived that way, on his own terms—never confined. He came and went when and where he pleased, and was an integral and accepted part of the local whitetail herd. For a time, in fact, he was the dominant breeding buck in the 50 acres surrounding the ranch house.

If that "tame/wild" description seems contradictory, consider that Bucky was never really a pet but a friend, a co-equal being who chose to share our space for a time. He was truly wild, in every possible way except one: This deer had no fear of humans. Instead, he trusted and seemed fond of people and of the goodies they were so eager to give him—corn, tobacco, bourbon whiskey, cantaloupe, bananas, apples, and other fruits, all of which he was addicted to. It is, therefore, not so strange that he hung out around my

hunting camp whenever we were there. He had quickly identified my wife, Jeannie, as a soft touch and the most dependable fruit-bringer.

There was about Bucky a certain mystical ambience that defies description. Because of it, one felt somehow privileged by his very presence: blessed, almost honored, by the association. He was truly fascinating. All of us—including the most case-hardened of deer hunters—simply delighted in Bucky. We never tired of him. He was always the center of attention. His arrival, at any time of day or night, always caused an excited scramble for cameras and corn buckets.

When Jeannie and I first met him, we were visitors on a neighboring ranch and Bucky was a tiny fawn, a delicate, beautiful little bundle of russet, white-dappled fur, big dark eyes, and appetite. He lay in a man's arms, lustily nursing a bottle. As we would learn, Bucky would do everything in life lustily.

His mother, a household pet, had been frightened by a dog and had jumped a fence her twin babies couldn't manage and fled into the night. The proprietor had the fawns brought in and hand-fed until the doe returned, which she did before morning. She was thoroughly gentle around humans, and she passed that attitude on to her son.

We forgot about Bucky for the next three years. Then one day during hunt-



When the author first laid eyes on Bucky, the weeks-old fawn was enthusiastically nursing a bottle in the temporary absence of his mother.



Wootters inspects Bucky's newly begun antlers in early May. The buck almost never had a problem with being touched by the author.

ing season, I was driving a guest out to a stand when he said, "Hey, look at that eight-pointer!" To my surprise, the buck in question was placidly bedded down in a shady spot a few feet from a car, chewing his cud. He wore an orange collar and bell, and accepted our proximity without alarm.

The collar didn't last long, but, fortunately for the deer, few hunters in that part of the world will shoot a buck with a rack as small as Bucky's, so he managed without the protection.

He turned up at our camp the following spring, sporting a pair of large yellow ear tags. We knew of no name that belonged to this animal, so we called him "Bucky." Every pet whitetail buck I've ever known or heard of, in or out of Texas, has been a Bucky, so who were we to go against tradition?

Bucky's tolerance of people was amazing. He actually seemed to enjoy being handled, and would stand and allow me to pluck prickly-pear cactus spines out of his hide as long as I'd do it. He came when called by name (especially when I was shaking a bucket of corn) and would follow me around. He had no fear of buildings (never hesitating to enter barns, garages, and even houses), people, vehicles, or our poodle, Peso. He even learned to negotiate a three-step stairway to get up on the porch, and seemed a little hurt that we wouldn't allow him in the house.

Even more amazing to professionals who have known domesticated whitetails was the fact that Bucky would allow me to pick his feet up like a horse's, to inspect his hooves. One summer day he showed up limping and came straight to me. A joint of the vicious, barbed cactus Mexicans call *clavelina* was stuck on the fetlock of his left forefoot. I tried

to pull it loose with my fingers, but the hooked spines were deeply embedded, and he flinched in pain.

"Wait here, Bucky boy," I told him. "Be right back!" I ran into the house and got a pair of pliers. When I got back, the buck was still waiting patiently. I grabbed the cactus joint with the pliers and jerked it free, whereupon he ambled away into the brush. Jeannie, watching all this from across the yard, said that it looked as though the animal very deliberately hunted me up to take care of his problem.

I often doctored him after that, disinfecting and anointing various minor—and some not-so-minor—wounds.

It was always fun to introduce friends to Bucky for the first time. One day I was driving with a friend along a boundary fence during the rut, when he pointed across the fence and said, "There's a buck running a doe!" Recognizing Bucky, I stopped the truck and demanded a cigarette. Bob was startled, knowing that I'd long since quit smoking, but he shook out his pack. I took a cigarette and stepped out of the vehicle, discarding the filter.

"Hey, Bucky!" I yelled. The buck stopped in mid-stride and threw his head up to look. I held the cigarette up so he could see it and called, "Here, boy! C'mon, Bucky!" He promptly turned and trotted down the fenceline to me. I gave him the cigarette, and he ate it (all whitetails love tobacco, and they can digest the cellulose in the paper, too). Then he whirled and took off at a gallop after his doe; she hadn't stood around waiting for her boyfriend to get his nicotine fix.

Bob was absolutely dumbfounded. It wouldn't even be an exaggeration to say that he was, like, totally freaked, man! "Well, hell, Wootters," he sputtered, "anybody could be a big-time deer expert if he can just run around in the pasture and



Bucky's scarred face and neck, revealed by his thin summer coat, testify to his indomitable fighting spirit.



Bucky was raised around dogs. Here he and Peso the poodle check each other out. This shows Bucky's antler development as of July.

call bucks up by name!" Years later, after he'd come to know Bucky well, he opined further, "You know, that buck is so valuable, you'd have to invent him if he weren't here!"

He was right. I learned more from Bucky in a few years than in all the rest of

DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME!

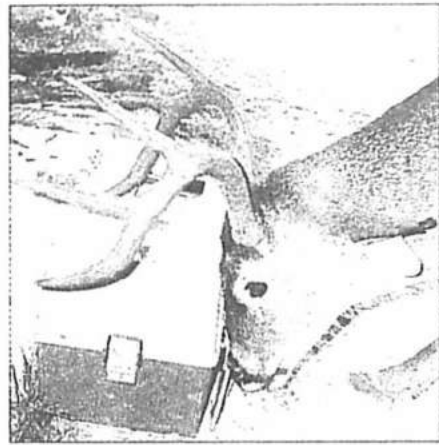
In all the years we knew him, Bucky never once made any aggressive physical gesture toward a human. One afternoon, when he was lying in the yard during the peak of the rut and I bugged him, he did suggest that I go away. The sound he made is called a "snort-whoeze" and is usually directed toward rival bucks. It means business and I knew it, so I simply backed away and left him alone.

Other than that, he never showed even the mildest belligerence toward any of us.

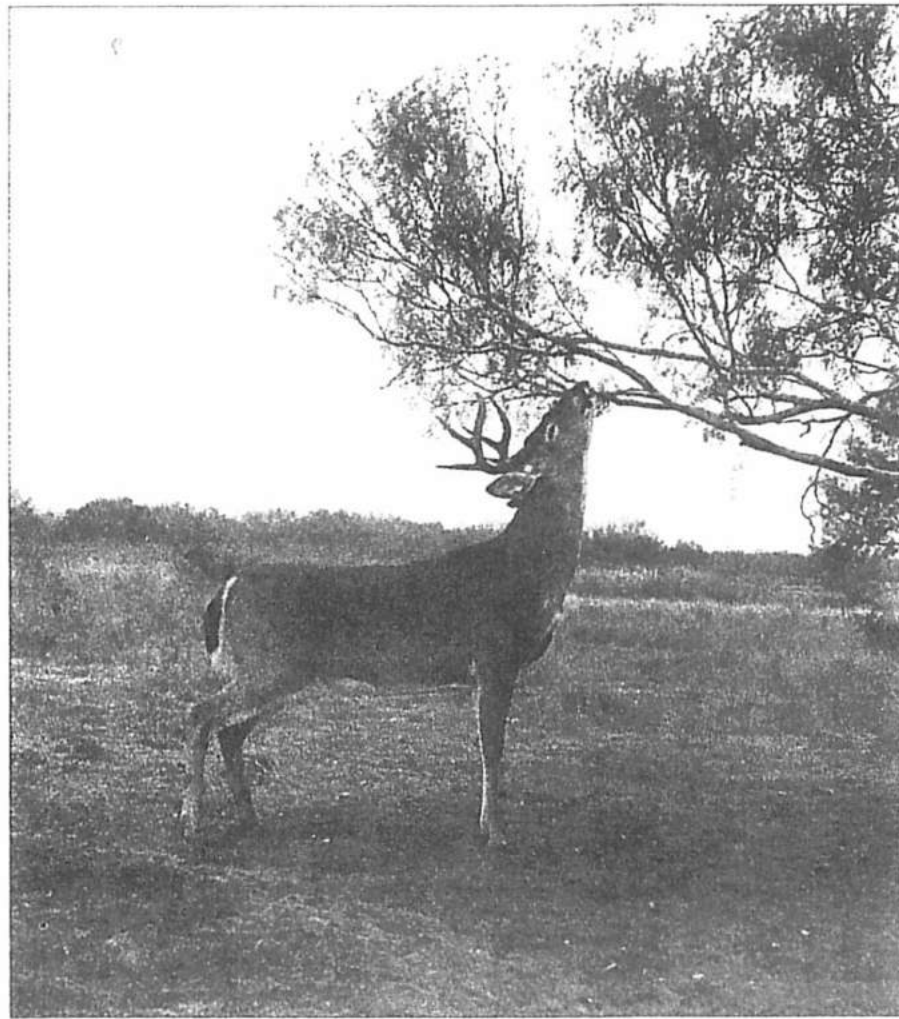
Tame whitetail bucks, however, are notoriously unpredictable and can be deadly dangerous, even to the people they know best. Many bottle-reared bucks have grown up and gone berserk during the rut, attacking familiar human friends without warning, sometimes fatally. We tried never to turn our backs on Bucky any time his antlers were hard.

Never trust any whitetail buck that shows no fear of humans, no matter how well you think you know him—especially during the rut.

Bucky



Here Bucky is scent-marking Wootters' toolbox in the camp carport, carefully transferring scent from his forehead glands and then delicately sniffing his handiwork—then repeating the whole process again and again.



Bucky was the alpha breeding male around the ranch house, offering Wootters opportunities to study rutting behaviors in a free-ranging dominant buck. These opportunities were not available with either wild or captive animals. Here, Bucky was nuzzling the limb hanging over a scrape.

my half century of studying whitetails and their ways. For one thing, I learned that deer are highly individualistic, and have personalities as distinctive as those of dogs. Bucky's opinions about things were simple, clear, and firmly held.

Even his bearing and gait were characteristic: he tended to walk with a lieurely and slightly stiff-legged pace, so I could recognize him as far as I could see him, even after he lost his ear tags. Bucky also had his own preferred, personal routes through the dense South Texas brush: I have never seen another deer on them. We have many deer coming and going in our yard and I know all the usual trails on which they enter and leave the house clearing. Bucky walked those trails, too, but no other deer ever used Bucky's private paths. Perhaps that's one of the perks of dominance. In any case, we grew accustomed to seeing the buck emerge from the surrounding brush at unexpected places where we never saw other deer coming or going.

Bucky felt very much at home around the house, and made the whole establish-

A DOSE OF REALITY

Animals-rights fanatics (ARFs) normally wouldn't recognize Reality if it ran up and bit them on the leg! If they could, Bucky's biography might be a revelation. First, being anti-human, they'd expect his association with people to taint him and make him dysfunctional in social interactions with the wild deer. They couldn't begin to comprehend his proud warrior nature, and they'd never understand his relentless drive to compete for breeding dominance.

Then they'd be mystified by the sincere respect, as well as affection, accorded Bucky by his human friends (hunters all). Finally, the ARFs would surely be shaken by the pain, hazard, and hardship that are the daily lot of any wild animal—so different from the fluffy Disneyesque idylls from which so many of them learn their concepts of nature.

I can just hear these fools asking me to show them Bucky's kennel!

ment his territory. He drank from the bird-bath, napped in the flower beds, wrestled the garden hose-reel, and scent-marked in the carport. An automatic corn feeder runs year-round in the yard, and draws girl deer; there's a nearby lake in case the bird-bath goes dry; and the cattle (which compete with and annoy whitetails) are fenced out. A dominant whitetail buck couldn't ask for more, especially since the area surrounding the house is a game sanctuary.

As the rut neared each year, Bucky's dominance thermometer would rise and he'd start rubbing and scraping early. He'd make scrapes about every five feet around every tree and shrub in the yard. If you wanted to see a fresh whitetail scrape, all you had to do was step out of our house at that time of year and you'd fall into one! If you wanted to photograph a whitetail buck scraping, with Bucky around all you needed was a camera. Watching him, I noted a few minor variations from orthodox thinking about scraping behavior, i.e.: he defecated in a scrape about as frequently as he urinated in it, and I never once saw him "rub-urinate," although his hock glands did become all black and messy. He would also scent-mark, with his forehead gland, a twig that overhung a scrape, and then, using his antlers as deftly as humans use their hands, snap that twig off, so it fell into the scrape—and rescraps around it. The scented twig probably served, like urine and other glandular secretions, as a personal olfactory calling card, but I can offer no other explanation for this behavior. I have, however, noticed many freshly-broken twigs in other new scrapes in the woods since the first time I saw Bucky do that.

Bucky was a medium-size buck, and his antlers were no larger than average for South Texas. Nevertheless, he was a fierce fighter, and regularly thrashed other mature bucks that were noticeably heavier



Bucky was welcome inside the ranch house of Mark Crider, owner of the ranch where the deer was reared. He is shown here discussing with the buck the evening's TV viewing.

and/or bigger-crowned than he. He finished the rut every season limping and bleeding and drawn, but still the by-gosh boss buck. In his short summer coat, the network of old scars on his face, ears, and neck looked like a roadmap! He maintained his status in the social hierarchy for years, on sheer pride and indomitable fighting spirit. Bucky never backed away from a fight and he never quit.

That toughness would take its toll. The account came due in 1990, when he had the misfortune of breaking his velvet-clad right antler just in front of the first fighting tine. We observed the injury on July 4, when Bucky's rack was about half-grown, and the torn velvet still showed dried blood. When hardened in September, that antler was normal out to the point of the injury, where it ended in a disorganized knot of nubby points, useless for fighting. The left side was normal, and



This photo, taken in early December, shows Bucky's last set of antlers. This was the deer's only nine-point rack. Note that the right beam tip and brow tine are already broken. One month later, after a season of fighting, Bucky is down to only three of the original nine points. The puncture wound visible here, low in Bucky's flank, was apparently the cause of his death. He was never seen again after the day this picture was taken.

that rack would have been the best of his life but for the injury. Looking at it, I had a hunch that old Bucky was in for a long rutting season.

I was right. Without the right beam and second fighting tine to catch and parry his opponents' left antlers, he took a fearful beating. He appeared before daylight one morning looking like he'd lost a fight with a chain saw. His right ear was cut completely through near the base, his lip was cut and swollen grotesquely, and we feared his left eye was seriously injured. His cheeks and neck were bleeding and he was hobbling on two legs.

We never knew which buck beat Bucky up, but he did a merciless job of it. It was Bucky's first loss in years, and his frustration was pathetic. His wounds healed (the eyeball itself wasn't damaged, as it turned out), but he really never recovered his pride.

He produced a normal, but smaller, set of antlers the next (Bucky's ninth) year, and tried to regain his lost championship. But pure grit and guts were no longer enough. An 8½-year-old whitetail buck in the wild is ancient, and the years had diminished the old warrior's fighting prowess. By the end of the rut, his antlers were so shattered only three of the original nine points remained.

It got worse. On January 6, 1992, Bucky limped stiffly up to the door, looking for a handout. I went out and got him some corn and, while standing beside him as he munched, was horrified to notice an ugly hole in his side, behind the rib-cage. It looked like a bullet hole at first glance, but closer examination showed no apparent penetration of internal organs. It was an antler wound that completely penetrated the abdominal wall. Bucky had licked it clean, and there was no drainage or sign of infection, nor could I detect any "gut-shot" odor to it. I'd seen deer survive terrible wounds, but this one was sustained



by an elderly animal coming out of the rut in poor condition, with the South Texas winter (such as it is) imminent. There's only so much one can do for a wounded wild deer, even a tame/wild one, and, furthermore, we avoid intervening in the natural order of life around the house.

It's very hard not to stick our human noses into wildlife situations we ultimately cannot control; in this case all I could do was try to disinfect the wound and apply an antibiotic salve. Having done that, we could only hope—that the winter would be mild, that peritonitis wouldn't set in, and that Bucky's natural strength and healing powers would pull him through.

It was a vain hope. We never saw the old buck again, nor did we or our friends on the ranch next door ever find Bucky's remains.

What we'd had was a truly unique opportunity to peer through a window of friendship into the life of a wild whitetail buck, from infancy through old age and death. We witnessed his maturing and taking his rightful place in the wild herd. We shared his ups and downs, his victories and his defeats. We watched him swagger around, bullying other bucks and does, and we saw him come limping home, bleeding and almost blinded, when he tried to fight with defective weapons. Despite the emotional bond we felt with the deer, we couldn't communicate congratulations on his triumphs, nor comfort him after his losses. However much we loved him, we could really never be anything but spectators in the drama of Bucky's life.

That life was perhaps not exceptional. Bucky's career was doubtless more or less typical of those of countless generations of bucks on the Texas border...but for one to be spun out so humans can witness it in such continuity, over so many years, is unheard-of.

Bucky's passing has left a hole in our lives like a missing piece in a jigsaw puzzle, a hole shaped exactly like a medium-size whitetail buck, that can never be filled. Even once in a lifetime is once too often to hope for an experience like Bucky: twice is inconceivable. He was one of a kind! ■

