

Outdoors

The 'Moon of Madness'

That's what certain Indian tribes called the annual rutting period of the local white-tails. It's not a bad description, actually, of the three or four-week peak mating season of our most plentiful native deer.

The observant Native Americans saw the male deer stage ferocious duels and concluded that they went temporarily insane. It still looks that way, even to modern observers with a more sophisticated understanding of the rut than the Indians.

Many fights are to the death, and many bucks are mortally wounded in these battles. Bucky, the gentle-toward-humans buck that thought he owned the area immediately around my ranch house in Webb County, fought constantly during the rut. In his short summer coat he showed impressive scars from those brawls on his face and neck. He won most of them and retained his dominance around the feeder in the front yard from age 3 'til 5 years, challenging any buck that dared intrude on his territory.

When he was 6, however, he challenged one too many bucks and received a fatal antler wound low in the abdomen. On the same ranch, a guest and I were walking along a fenceline one December morning when we heard a peculiar gasping, gurgling sound in the high grass and found a young six-point buck dying from an antler wound that had penetrated his left lung. He passed on as we stood there, unable to help. In my decades of knocking around the continent hunting white-tails, I have come across several other bucks dead in the woods that bore no bullet or broadhead wounds but had been gored to death by rival bucks.

Any hunter fortunate enough to witness a serious breeding battle, especially between an evenly-matched pair of big South Texas bucks, will be left with no doubt whatever that the goal of each is to kill — not merely defeat, not just win breeding rights, not prove maleness — but to leave the opponent forever dead on the forest floor. Such a fight can be so savage, so violent, that it may be a little frightening to watch, even from a stand at a distance. I have seen two bruiser bucks tearing up the woods, raising a billowing cloud of dust, and sending broken branches and huge clumps of prickly pear flying in all directions, and those fights weren't mere three- or four-minute skirmishes; one lasted almost 40 minutes, after



Photos by John Wootters

This is a deadly serious battle between two major bucks, each determined to establish his own status near the top of the dominance hierarchy.

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which both contestants were simply too exhausted to answer the bell for another round. It was truly one of the great wildlife spectacles that I've ever seen.

All this leads me to two conclusions. The first is that you cannot make too much noise rattling antlers; there's simply no way one man with two antlers can make as much or as loud a racket as can two 150-pound whitetail bucks with four antlers.

The second is that, when rattling, it pays to learn to read incoming bucks' body language. If you're too convincing with the rattling and let a major buck that's really wired get too close, it's at least possible to find yourself in physical danger from your intended quarry.

Believe me, I am not being melodramatic about this nor sensationalizing it. I have seen several rattled-up bucks in my career come in with nostrils flared, hair standing on end, and a sort of glazed look in their eyes that told me that they were utterly convinced they were about to encounter a rival buck. Only when I stood up, waved my arms, and



The author and a companion discovered this hefty buck, freshly dead of an antler wound in Michigan, a not-uncommon result of forcing the buck-to-doe ratio too high in an enclosed area.

rendered my opinion of their IQs in a loud and profane voice did they skid to a halt and take a second look at me. I had them sold; too well sold for my own peace of mind.

I feel a sense of brotherhood with those Indians who also saw the fire of madness in a testosterone-crazed buck's eyes and dubbed November the "Moon of Madness."

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.