

# Outdoors

## The Old Bat

We'd all be better off if we were not only deer hunters, but also deerwatchers, in the same sense that some of us are birdwatchers. We watch birds to enjoy their beauty, grace and sprightliness.

There is pleasure to be had from watching whitetail deer going about their daily lives, too, aside from looking for antlers.

A hunter can learn much of value from quiet observation. He must, however, not only notice the actions of deer, but must also keep his curiosity engaged, trying to tease a meaning out of every flick of an ear. He must assume that every action, no matter how insignificant or casual, has a meaning, and asks "Why did he do that?", "Did that head position mean something?", "Is she signaling something with her ears?"

I've noticed that persons without such an interest in deer rarely become very successful hunters, even by today's relaxed standards for deer-hunting success.

Answers to those questions may not come quickly — or ever, for that matter — but now and then there will be a bright flash of inspiration when the watcher realizes that he has been granted a peek into the secret life of the whitetail deer. Suddenly, he knows something about deer that he didn't understand before ... and it may be a thing of substantial value to him as a hunter, as well.

He is beginning to learn to read the complex body language of the deer. At the same time he's learning to interpret the animal's mood, attitude, and probable next actions.

It's good stuff to know. I can recall at least two times when my understanding of deer behavior warned me that a rut-crazed, rattled-up buck did not realize that I, kneeling in full camo, was not a rival male, and was about to challenge me. When I stood up, assuming the vertical human shape, and spoke to him, his belligerence melted away, and so did he.

The deerwatcher comes to realize that every animal has its own distinct personality just as people do. This includes the does, of course, and provides a possible means by which to recognize individual animals, even those without antlers.

When my wife and I first built a hunting camp on our small Webb County ranch in 1980, we noticed an aggres-



John Wootters photo

The whitetail doe that the author named the Old Bat lived on his ranch for 13 years and contributed as many as 25 fawns to the herd, as well as displaying an unforgettable personality.

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sive doe hanging around the feeder in the yard. She stood out because she ruled the local roost with an iron hoof. She dominated all the other females and fawns all the time and even bullied the bucks after they shed their antlers. She was so hard to get along with that we named her "The Old Bat" even though we really had no idea of her age. Our mistake was equating dominance with seniority.

Later, we were surprised to see that she passed her dominance on to her female offspring, and that it was recognized even by the other, older does in the neighborhood. The Old Bat actually founded a feminist dynasty!

As the years passed, we realized that she must have been quite young when we first noticed her. There was nothing distinctive in her appearance but her behavior marked her as plainly as if her name had been painted on her side in big red letters. She was an able, tough survivor and she always remained a hard-nosed, intolerant old battle-ax of a doe.

When she disappeared and I found her carcass not far from the feeder, we counted back and realized that she'd been at least 13 years old when she died, apparently of old age.

We'd long recognized her

as an extraordinary mother who always — in fat years or lean — produced and raised two healthy fawns. That means that the Old Bat contributed as many as 25 new deer to our herd over her lifetime, almost half of which were little bucks.

One year she delivered what looked like identical male twins. We watched them grow up and become respectable trophy bucks, although we never had the heart to shoot them even in their latter years.

If our attitude had been the usual one that a doe is just a doe and not worth getting to know, we'd never have had the pleasure of watching The Old Bat be her disagreeable but highly successful self for all those seasons.

She was the undisputed Grande Dame of Los Cuernos, and the ranch was better off and more interesting for having had her around for her whole long life.

If we weren't deerwatchers as well as deer hunters, we'd have denied ourselves the privilege of hunting on The Old Bat's ranch.

**John Wootters, of Ingram, 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.**