

# Outdoors

## The oldest buck

If a whitetail buck has grown to maturity in a hunted pasture, I think he deserves the title of “trophy” regardless of the size of his antlers.

The mere fact that he’s still alive at age 5 or 6 years is proof that he long ago learned how to avoid hunters and survive deer season year after year. He knows all the tricks and presents just as great a challenge to a fair-chase hunter’s skills as if he wore a record-class rack.

Therefore, the buck in the photograph is one of my proudest trophies, even though his measurements would get little notice in one of the growing number of Texas big-buck contests.

I was hunting on foot on a strange ranch (by invitation, I hasten to add) in Duval County, in late December of the 1971 season. I had no guide and no chance to do more than the most superficial scouting — only enough to learn the main ranch roads and the stock tanks and to spot a few promising game trails from the car. It was late in the afternoon when I donned camouflage face-mask and gloves, loaded my rifle, and began still-hunting along one of those trails.

I hadn’t gotten out of sight of my Suburban when I caught a movement in the brush ahead, froze, and watched this buck step into the open. One glance at his antlers confirmed his eligibility, but I hesitated long enough for a second look at his body.

The first thought that entered my mind was: that’s got to be the oldest buck I ever saw! His skin seemed to hang on his shrunken body like an old man’s baggy suit. He had a lot of gray around his muzzle, but the most pow-



Photo by John Wootters

**Wootters maintains that old bucks are automatically trophy bucks regardless of antler measurements, because survival over several hunting seasons proves them just as elusive and hard to get as if they carried record racks.**

### Currently Outdoors



John Wootters

erful impression was just one of age and tiredness and stiff joints, more than any other whitetail I ever saw before or since.

I hesitated no longer; the rifle came up as though of its own volition, the crosshairs settled, and the gun barked. In the second it took me to recover from recoil the buck was lying motionless in the grass.

I walked up and sat down beside my deer and took a few minutes to mourn and memorialize a life ended. It’s

a habit I developed early in my hunting career and a ritual of respect for the animal.

His antlers were massively heavy, with 13 points; it remains to this day the only whitetail rack of mine that measures an honest six inches in circumference just above the burr. Neither the spread nor length of tines and beams are notable.

His old gray face and neck showed a hundred scars from his breeding battles with other bucks over the years, but the hair of his hock glands was white, unstained by the secretions of the rut which was in full swing. He was simply too ancient to participate in those strenuous festivities any longer.

Non-hunters among the readers may not know that a whitetail deer’s age can be deduced from wear patterns on its teeth, at least up to age 8-1/2, but this buck’s teeth were so worn that I could only guess at how many years he had lived past 8-1/2. I think he was at least 12. His molars were worn below the gum line, and could no longer efficiently process his food for its nutrients. He was literally starving in the midst of plenty, and could not possibly have lived through the coming winter.

I had simply done, quickly and painlessly, the job the coyotes would have done when he grew too weak to fight them off in February. They would pull him down and begin eating him alive, the fate that awaits most deer if they escape being hit by a vehicle or hung in a fence for a lingering death, or starved in a late-winter drought, or slain by a mountain lion, or any of the myriad other killers of deer, including human hunters, both legal and otherwise.

I wonder how the arrogant, bitter critics of sport hunting would choose between the kinds of deaths faced by this buck — my bullet or starvation and the coyotes’ fangs.

Out in the real world where wild animals live, there are no alternatives.

**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.**