

# Outdoors



Photos by John Wootters

Guess what this fine fellow has on his one-track mind! The whitetail rut is the most exciting time of the year, both for deer and for hunters, but much remains poorly understood or controversial about it.

## The rut ... magic and mystery

In my library are more than 100 books on hunting whitetail deer, including all the most significant volumes back to the very first one in 1881, the classic "The Still Hunter" by Van Dyke. Many of these are good reading, if only to observe how American hunters' understanding of deer behavior has evolved during these 125 years.

No subject reveals so much disagreement and misinformation as the whitetail rut. And, though this is the most studied big-game animal on earth, subjected to the most intense scientific scrutiny imaginable, the rut still creates puzzles for the scientists and controversy among hunters.

For example, we know that rutting bucks make "scrapes" – pawed-out spots in the ground in which they urinate. We hear about "core scrapes," "satellite scrapes" and other kinds, but I haven't met the man who could give me a convincing explanation of the meaning of the various types of scrapes during the phases of the rut.

Everybody has theories, but the exact nature and purpose of scrapes, much less how a hunter can use them to his advantage, remains controversial.

By the way, some of the old-time writers called scrapes "stamping grounds," which seems to be the origin of that term in modern English.

As for me, I've been a scrape-chaser for 55-plus years, but have largely abandoned trying to outguess the scrapers and now put more stock in rubs (which we

### Currently Outdoors



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shall consider in a future column) in planning my own hunting tactics.

Another controversial aspect of the rut is why bucks fight. Conventional wisdom has it that they battle over hot does, but by the time I was 19 years old I'd observed enough buck aggression to cast doubt on that explanation. I believe that bucks fight only over breeding territory, and that the presence of a doe at a skirmish merely tells us that she happened to lead her suitor into the territory of another dominant buck.

This could explain why you may see a hot doe being trailed by four or five bucks with no fighting between them, simply because the fun group happens not to be in the breeding territory of any of them.

Another misconception is that the rut is started by a cold front passing through. Not so, the biologists tell us. Actually, the rut in any specific area begins on approximately the same date every year, give or take a couple of days.

There are ways to recognize the approach of the rut for yourself, however. One is that the buck bachelor clubs of the summer begin to break up. Most buck

sightings will be singles, and this may also be true of the does. As she nears her estrus period, a doe will not permit her fawns of the year, especially males, to follow her, and the woods may be full of forlorn yearlings wandering around like little lost souls, wondering why their formerly-loving and protective mothers suddenly seem to hate them.

Sounds of clashing antlers may be heard in the woods in this pre-rut period, especially near water at night, and the number of fresh rubs seems to double or triple overnight. It's also the most productive time of the year for horn-rattling, although many of the bucks coming to the antlers in the first days will be youngsters.

You'll see much more buck-doe interaction around your feeder during this period, too, with the bucks investigating every arriving doe and often launching

brief chases while the does dodge and circle through the brush, trying to shake persistent males and get back to the corn.

As the rut gathers momentum, there is a sort of electric tension in the woods, an atmosphere of excitement and activity that foretells the approach of the almighty rut, the one time of the year when even the wariest old warhorse of a buck just might – might, I say — get careless for a minute or two.

**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.**