

# Outdoors

## The whitetail rut ... Part II

Last week we mentioned a few mysteries about whitetails' reproductive rituals. Now we'll examine some things we do know.

We know that the timing of the rut varies with latitude. For example, the annual mating festivities in the South Texas Brush Country begin about one month later than in the Hill Country.

But the dates do not change much from here to Canada, the ideal hunting time in Alberta and Saskatchewan being the week before Thanksgiving.

There are local anomalies, however; one example is the herd along the Texas coast which begins to rut in October, six weeks earlier than the rest of South Texas.

We know that bucks everywhere are hot to trot as soon as they strip their velvet, about mid-September. Ready they may be, but, as always, females control the action, and the real rut doesn't begin until a few does actually come into their first estrus period of the season.

If a doe conceives during that first period, she passes out of estrus for the year. If not, she cycles out of estrus after 24 hours, only to come back in about 30 days later. This cycle continues until she conceives, or until about February, after four of five periods. Very few Texas does ever make it through the season unbred.

Meanwhile, the bucks range far and wide looking for receptive does. Food is a low priority, and the reduced nutritional intake together with rutting exertions (fighting, running does, etc.) costs them 20 percent or more of their total body weight before the season ends.

They make scrapes to advertise that they're standing at stud. Does seeking mates sometimes visit these sites and leave their own urinary calling cards. Upon detecting this scent message, the buck takes the trail at a high trot, nose to the ground like a bloodhound, uttering pig-like grunts every few seconds. He is so fixated on that trail that I have actually had a trailing buck run headlong into the side of my truck when I stopped it across a doe scent trail.

Bucks other than the original maker may also use the scrape.

Scrape-checking by



Photos by John Wootters

**This buck is tending his lady love. He remains close but does not pester her, as though he's afraid to offend her. He neither eats nor rests, and watches her adoringly and continually. In this phase of the rut, he aggressively confronts any rival male that tries to get close to her. If all this reminds you of someone you know, especially a teen-aged human male, don't say you got it from me.**

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bucks is largely a nocturnal activity. Day or night, bucks often merely pass downwind of the scrape and check it by scent, never approaching the actual scrape site. Ever sat up at over a hot scrape for a week without laying eyes on a buck? Now you may know why.

Bucks "test" does for readiness to mate by making short dashes at them in the characteristic posture — head lowered and thrust forward, nose up. His nose tells him whether she's ready. If so, she usually lets her suitor chase her until she catches him, as the saying goes.

When she stands for him, her tail lifted to one side, he mounts her. Copulation is usually brief, immediately after which both deer may lie down. If, while driving through the pasture at this time of year, you see a doe stand up but appear hesitant to run away, grab a rifle and get ready; her lover may be bedded nearby out of sight, ready to take off any second.

A buck remains close to his doe for a day or more both before and after the mating, and his activities then are called "tending." He hardly takes his eyes off his beloved, making certain no rival buck gets near her. He seldom eats or sleeps while tending. He's in love, but the doe appears to pay not the slightest attention to him.

Duration and intensity of the rut may vary from year to year. Some seasons it appears all to be crowded into a frantic two-week period, while in other years it seems sort of stop-and-go, strung out over two months or more.

Surprised that whitetails' breeding strategies are so

complex? Believe me; I've had room here only to touch the high points. But understanding even this sketchy description of the rut will enhance any hunter's success ... as well as his pleasure in watching deer this season.

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