

Anticipating a buck's moves, then altering your methods to confuse him can put vension in the freezer. All it takes is a little imagination and the ability to . . .



THINK LIKE A DEER!

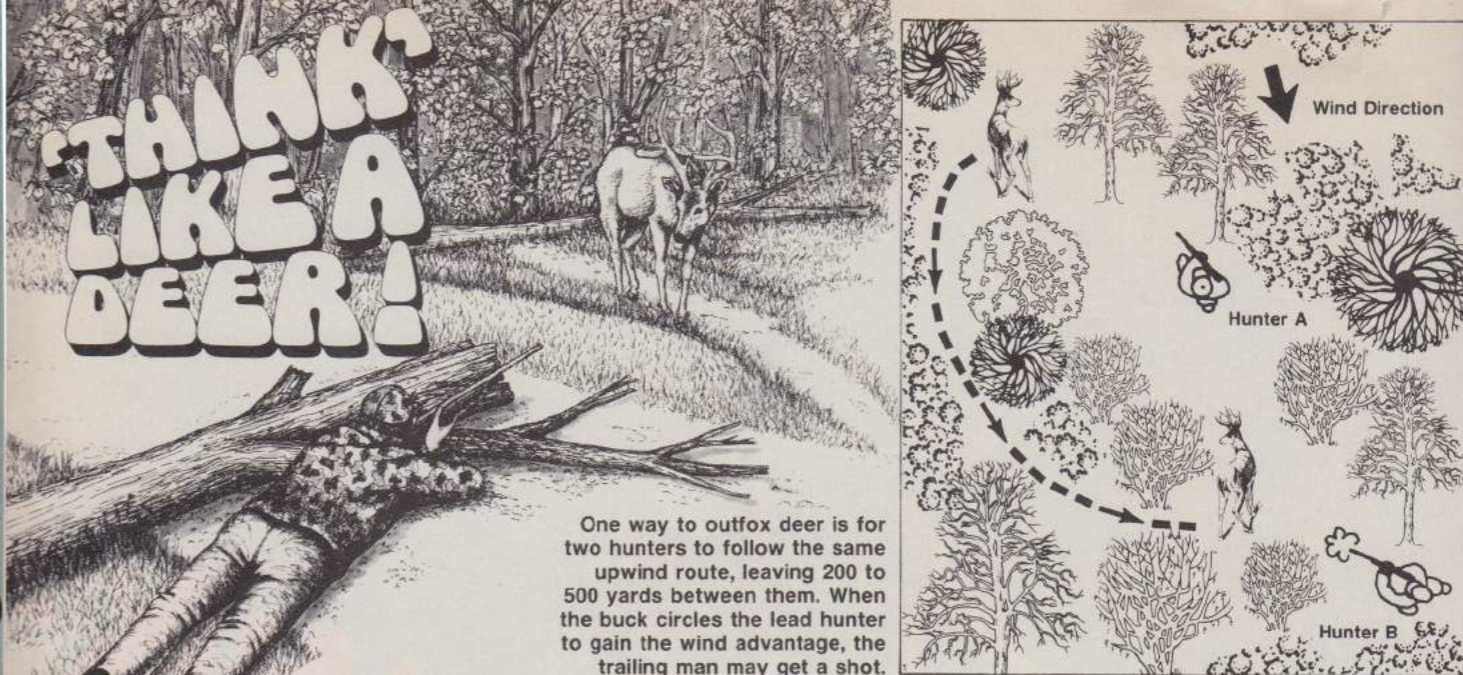
BY JOHN WOOTTERS

In the privacy of the hunting field, I confess to having done some pretty nutty things to confuse or misdirect a whitetail deer. Things like giving my best imitation of a domestic sheep's bleat when a doe had spotted me, or like sailing my cap away to one side after a buck had pinned me down at short range in camouflage. His eyes followed the spinning cap, giving me the split second I needed to slam a rifle butt to my shoulder.

Usually, such unorthodox antics have been desperation measures, adopted when the situation was so precarious that I really had nothing to lose. Now and then, they work. More often, they don't—but I'm no worse off than if I hadn't tried something of the sort. When one has worked for me, it has invariably been inspired by thinking like a deer instead of like a hunter.

"Thinking like a deer" is a handy phrase, more easily recommended than accomplished. Most living crea-

Photograph by Wyman P. Meinzer, Jr.



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One way to outfox deer is for two hunters to follow the same upwind route, leaving 200 to 500 yards between them. When the buck circles the lead hunter to gain the wind advantage, the trailing man may get a shot.

By lying prone behind a log near a deer crossing, Wootters changed his shape from the upright image deer associate with man, which enabled him to get a shot.

tures—including hunters—tend to see the world through their own eyes, and to assume that everything else sees it similarly. It takes a real effort to adopt the viewpoint of another species, even momentarily and in imagination, but it can pay handsome rewards for the deer hunter.

For example, let's think for a few minutes about how a whitetail buck perceives the hunter and what he really knows about human beings. He perceives us, of course, through his three principal senses: vision, scent, and hearing. All three are excellent and serve him well in his avoidance-and-escape tactics. Most whitetail see many people, the year around, and are thoroughly familiar with the characteristic, upright shape of a man. Identification is instantaneous of a human being on foot, especially one in motion. Even when the man stands like a statue, hard-hunted deer will become suspicious of that shape, if it can be seen clearly. If the hunter can modify his shape, however, he no longer looks like a man to a deer.

This is the purpose of camouflage, of course. While not actually changing a man's shape, camo confuses it and makes it blend into certain backgrounds so that a buck's eyes cannot so easily make it out. Similarly, when we sit down or even lie down, we change our shape radically to the eyes of a deer. I've taken a couple of wary bucks by sprawling prone in the middle of a woods road near a known crossing with a dead log dragged up in front of me and my rifle rested over it. Although I was in plain sight and the deer instantly saw me and

became suspicious of this unfamiliar object in their habitat, their panic bells failed to ring, at least long enough for me to aim and fire.

There was almost no other way to have taken either of these animals, short of digging a pit blind. Like most old bucks, they would approach the edge of the brush along the road and stick one eyeball out, studying everything in sight before exposing themselves. Sitting in the edge of the brush in full camouflage wasn't enough; I tried it, and never had a prayer of a shot. The bucks may not have identified me visually as a hunter, but they knew I was something strange and new. Not only would they not cross, but I know one of them (and suspect that both) withdrew and circled downwind to verify the danger, and once they got a snootful of me, I might as well have gone hunting in a clown suit accompanied by a brass band for all the chance I had of ambushing either of those old mossy-horns in that fashion.

By lying down in plain sight with a little cover from my log, however, I changed my shape and lost my furtive appearance—and got my shots.

Still on the subject of a whitetail buck's visual impressions, have you ever wondered what color he thinks a human being is? Of course he can't comprehend clothing, so he must think some of us are blue on the legs and red on the upper body, while others are brown and white, or red plaid all over, or khaki-colored, or spotted in several shades of green or brown! That is, he must *if* he can see colors somewhat as we do. We once believed that deer were color-blind, but recent research, as yet inconclusive, has suggested that we may have been wrong, although we can only guess how and to what degree a buck perceives colors, if at all. Even if he is without color vision, however, the great variety of apparent shades and textures of humans'

hides and fur must be confusing to him.

He is not in the least confused, however, about how a human smells. Besides your basic human stench (to a deer), an experienced animal probably has quite a lot of other odors firmly associated with people, such things as Hoppe's No. 9, Marlboro filter tips, Palmolive, shaving lotion, boot dubbing, ham sandwiches, Texaco unleaded, wood smoke, carbon monoxide, Jack Daniel's "black," Pepsodent, and so on and on. And maybe—just maybe—a few deer in a few places are even beginning to make the connection between strong skunk scent and some other masking and attractant scents and the human presence, or at least with danger! If so, it will be very bad news for hunters.

Similarly, most whitetail are quite familiar with a thousand unnatural, human-related noises, from dogs barking, to doors slamming, to tractor motors backfiring, to rock music. None of which will bother an old buck much, unless it's too close—but he also must understand the cadence of a hunter's steps in dead leaves, the soft raking of a twig against denim or canvas, the snapping of a rotten stick underfoot, and the click of a safety catch.

Overall, then, a whitetail perceives you as a large, upright, slow-moving, bad-smelling, clumsy predator with a bewildering variety of coats, who is utterly incapable of moving silently in the woods, is relatively unalert, and possesses little or no sense of smell. But he learned at his mother's side that this creature is extremely dangerous to deer at certain times, that you can strike from a great distance, and that your attack is usually characterized by a deafening bang. A mature buck with five or more seasons' experience also has encountered most standard hunters' tactics—drives, still-hunting, runway watching, tree stand sitting, horn rattling, etc.—and has evolved

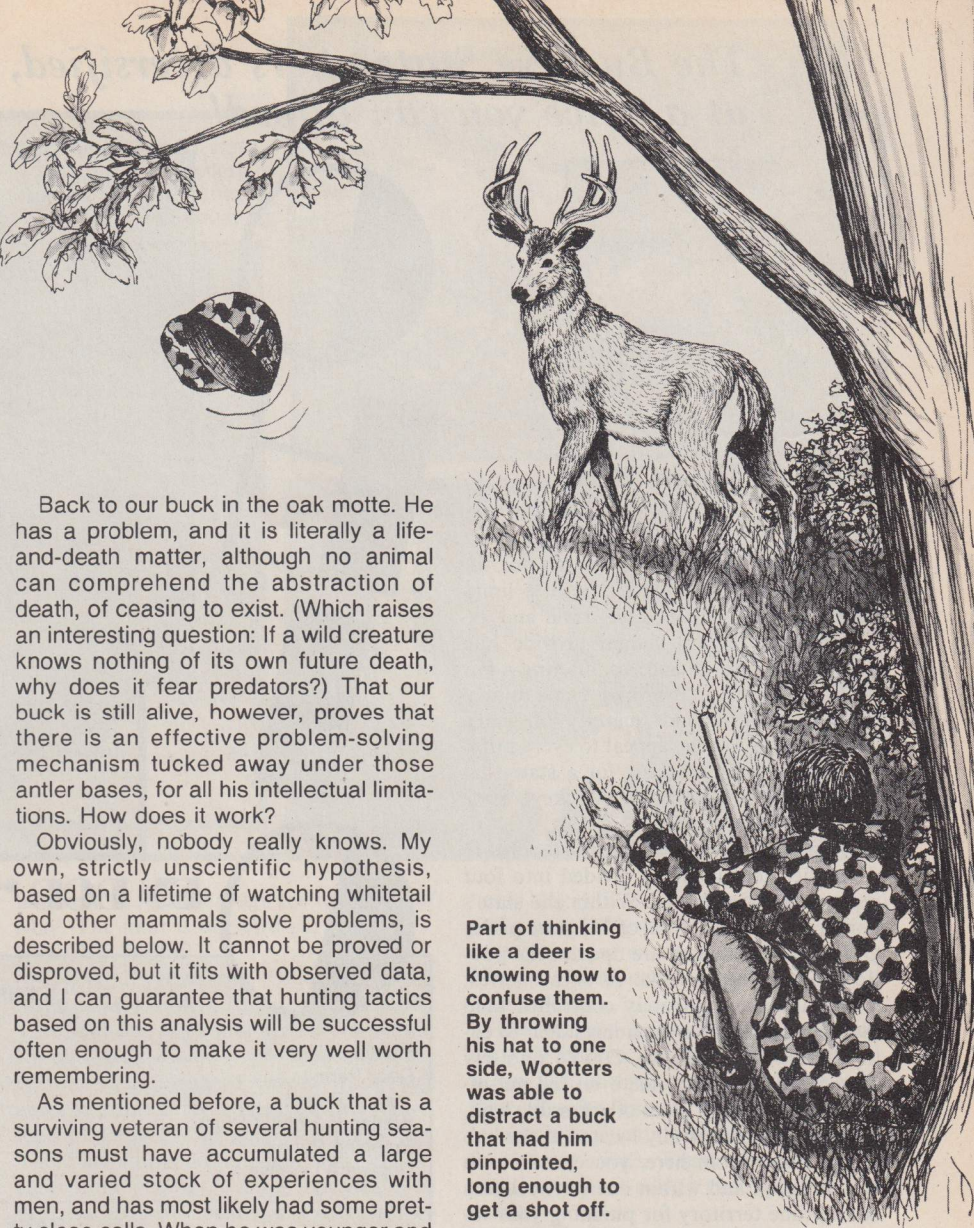
both a pattern of existence that has minimized his exposure to such hazards and a variety of tactics to evade them.

We may spend a little time, now, speculating about the nature of a buck's reactions when faced with an armed human during open season. Let's imagine him nosing around in the dry leaves on a frosty dawn, picking up the last few acorns of the year's crop. Suddenly, he jerks his head up and stands rigidly, ears fanned toward a faint sound from the downwind direction. He stares, listening, for a full minute, an acorn unchewed in his mouth. After 40 seconds, he knows all he needs to know: A man is approaching from downwind, trying to walk slowly and quietly. The hunter is still more than 100 yards distant, but he comes steadily straight toward the grove of oaks and will shortly be in sight. The buck has perhaps another 30 seconds or so to act.

He has several options. He can simply turn and walk quickly away, lying down behind the nearest cover with his chin stretched out on the ground. He can stand frozen where he is, knowing that humans will often trudge right past a motionless deer only a few yards away without seeing it. Then, if the gamble fails and his enemy does see him, he can explode into flight at the instant of eye contact. If it does not fail, he can wait until the hunter passes and then, crouching so low as almost to drag his belly in the leaves, he can skulk safely away downwind. Another possibility is to move quickly at right angles to the hunter's line of march, circling in behind the man to return to his acorns once the danger has passed.

How does he decide? An old whitetail buck is plenty "smart," agreed, but it is as great a mistake to give him too much credit for sheer intelligence as to give him too little. He is, after all, only an animal, without an acquaintance with logic and lacking the capacity to reason in the human sense of the word. He does not stand there, sucking on his acorn, and say to himself, "Oh-oh, here comes ol' Wootters again, looking all squinty-eyed! If I run through that clearing, he will most likely shoot me with that .308 Sako Mannlicher of his, and I'll die. But if I pussyfoot over behind that yaupon bush and lie down, chances are sixty-fourty he'll stumble on by and never lay an eyeball on me. And even if he lucks out and spots me, I can always do the explosive departure bit, in which case he probably won't have one chance in 10 of laying a cross hair on me!"

Exaggerated, yes, but I have heard hunters talk as though they believed a deer could think like that. They seem to credit the animal with the power to think like a human, rather than trying themselves to think like a deer. That's putting things the wrong way around, and it's self-defeating.



Part of thinking like a deer is knowing how to confuse them. By throwing his hat to one side, Wootters was able to distract a buck that had him pinpointed, long enough to get a shot off.

Back to our buck in the oak motte. He has a problem, and it is literally a life-and-death matter, although no animal can comprehend the abstraction of death, of ceasing to exist. (Which raises an interesting question: If a wild creature knows nothing of its own future death, why does it fear predators?) That our buck is still alive, however, proves that there is an effective problem-solving mechanism tucked away under those antler bases, for all his intellectual limitations. How does it work?

Obviously, nobody really knows. My own, strictly unscientific hypothesis, based on a lifetime of watching whitetail and other mammals solve problems, is described below. It cannot be proved or disproved, but it fits with observed data, and I can guarantee that hunting tactics based on this analysis will be successful often enough to make it very well worth remembering.

As mentioned before, a buck that is a surviving veteran of several hunting seasons must have accumulated a large and varied stock of experiences with men, and has most likely had some pretty close calls. When he was younger and more naive, he reacted to such encounters more or less at random or by instinct. He tried different things to escape, but not through conscious experimenting; he merely did what seemed best at the moment to avoid being seen, or to put distance and/or cover between himself and the danger. If his choices were bad, he wound up in somebody's freezer, and that was that. If they were successful, however, he acquired a series of mental "templates" of the various situations, linked to memories of the most successful responses, and the longer he lives, the richer and more complex this stored information becomes.

Still, I believe even the smartest old whitetail buck incapable of exercising what we call "judgment." He cannot, when faced with a threat, conceive four or five alternative courses of action and coolly decide between them. Yet, any experienced hunter knows that a buck does react differently to different situations. He doesn't always do the same thing, even in response to very similar threats, and this unpredictability is in it-

self one of his best defenses. We must conclude that some selection process does take place in that brain of his.

What happens, it seems to me, is that a deer's mind works somewhat like a computer, which is capable of comparing two sets of fairly complicated, inter-related facts and recognizing a match between them. In other words, an experienced buck, when faced with the presence of a hunter, sort of thumbs back through his mental files, comparing the present situation with others from the past, and then follows the course of action that was most successful in keeping him alive in previous similar circumstances. It is not, in my opinion, a conscious process, but an almost instantaneous, automatic action.

The value of all this theorizing to a hunter, if he understands what is going on in the buck's mind, is that it may allow him to present the animal with a new and perhaps confusing set of circumstances, one which forces the deer out of what has become his normal pattern of re-

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sponses. If that can be accomplished, the buck is likely to hesitate, at least, and you know what they say about he who hesitates! That is exactly what I was doing to those bucks on the woods roads. The spectacle of a human being lying full-length in plain sight was so foreign to their experience that their mental computers suggested no immediate response.

There are many ways to take advantage of even the wildest old mossyhorn in this manner, but all of them require a little imagination on the part of the hunter. In fact, the more rigidly a hunter follows his regular hunting patterns, the more easily an experienced buck may be able to elude him, according to this theory. The trick, then, is to present him with the unexpected, hoping he'll make a mistake, and to be prepared to take advantage of that mistake in a split second. One example might be the excellent but seldom-used technique of two hunters still-hunting in tandem, sneaking along upwind on the same route but from 200 to 400 or 500 yards apart, depending upon terrain and cover density. It is most commonly the trailing hunter who gets the shots in this setup, at bucks that detected the approach of the lead hunter and chose to move aside and then circle behind him for the wind advantage. With the deer in motion (and with his attention on the lead hunter, whose location he knows), the second man has an excellent chance—because the animal's escape tactics were based on experience with one still-hunter at a time.

Even when you're hunting alone, the same kind of pressure can be applied. When pussyfooting upwind, as the hunter in our hypothetical example a few paragraphs back was doing as he approached the buck in the oak grove, he might have collected that animal by leaving his straight-line, upwind approach as he neared the area he knew to be a very likely spot and circling to approach it crosswind, or even slightly upwind. The buck hears him coming, as related, alerts,

and listens as the footsteps then turn and fade off at right angles. Perhaps the deer then relaxes and goes on with his acorn munching—until he realizes, too late, that the hunter has circled.

In the same manner, a canny hunter can trip up a buck by feeding misinformation to one or more of his senses. Usually, a deer that detects possible danger through his eyes or ears waits for corroboration from his sensitive nostrils before taking action, unless the threat is too near or his position is abnormally exposed. On the other hand, if the initial contact is by scent, he needs no auditory or visual backup.

Where I had the wind, however, I have occasionally managed to confuse a deer by providing conflicting sensory data. I mentioned before having imitated the bleat of a sheep when spotted by a whitetail in country where domestic sheep are plentiful. In a typical situation, the doe had noticed me as I moved slowly, wearing full camouflage. Trying to get inside the deer's head, I figured that her eyes told her there was *something* peculiar and possibly dangerous there, but since she didn't have my wind, she waited for more input before snorting and/or running. I had sunk to my knees as soon as I realized I'd been detected, so my shape was not humanoid. Remembering that all prey animals tend to take sudden motionlessness on the part of a potential predator as an immediate threat, I made no effort to hold absolutely still as I rendered my best impression of a rambouillet ewe calling softly to her lamb. It would have won no prizes in a sheep-calling contest, but it worked. The doe's ears contradicted her eyes, and she moved away quietly.

Once the hunter has acquired the habit of "getting inside" a deer's head, of trying always to interpret the situation with the eyes, ears, nose, and mind-set of a whitetail instead of his own, whole new vistas open up. He sees the woods world in a different perspective. And he will have armed himself with one of the most powerful weapons a man can bring to bear against an animal—the power of the human imagination!

