



TROPHY BUCKS

by John Wooters

I hunt hard, goes the refrain, and I'm a good hunter. I see plenty of deer. I get my share. But somehow I never find a really big one. Just one real trophy is all I ask; we like the venison, but how I'd love to hang just one honest-to-gosh monster on the wall! But I just can't seem to get lucky.

Have you heard it? Have you said it? So did I, for about the first 25 years I hunted whitetails. In the breast of almost every meat hunter there beats the heart of a secret, frustrated trophy hunter. Few men, however addicted to venison, will pass up an antlered buck for the better-eating doe standing beside him. And fewer still, having shot an exceptional buck, will leave that great rack in the woods and pack out only the meat.

Not many of us live long enough to kill a giant buck by accident. For practical purposes, I can give you an ironclad guarantee that you can hunt the rest of your life in the same places, at the same times, and by the same methods which have kept your freezer filled with the meat of ordinary bucks and you will never take a genuine wallhanger. In fact, those very techniques which have made you a successful hunter of run-of-the-mill deer constitute the best possible insurance against shooting a trophy animal.

Trophy-grade bucks are different. They usually do not exist in the areas where you'd look first for deer. They live according to completely different rhythms, and they require special knowledge and skills of the hunter. There is, in short, very little luck in taking big bucks.

Think back on the hunters you've known who have

taken the biggest racks. Not many of them, I'll bet, have knocked over only one big one; these are the same men who show up year after year with exceptional heads, the fellows who usually (not occasionally) produce the biggest buck in the camp every season, or the best one killed in that particular area. They're consistent, and nobody can be that consistently lucky.

The truth is that most hunters reading this already have most of the know-how and hunting skills needed to nail a big buck on purpose, not by chance. They simply haven't put it all together, and they haven't adopted the attitudes of the trophy hunter. For, in fact, the difference between a trophy hunter and a meat hunter is mostly a matter of attitude. The latter hopes for a big set of antlers but doesn't really

expect one, and settles for whatever comes along. The dedicated big-buck hunter expects to get a trophy, knows how to do it, and refuses to shoot until he sees what he wants.

No one begins as a hunter of trophy bucks. I suppose I've shot 30 or 40 whitetails which would qualify as small three-, five-, and six-pointers, even spikes and forkhorns, and small eight-point heads, deer not more than two-and-a-half years old, and I'm certainly not ashamed of a one of them.

That was my apprenticeship. It was on such tasty youngsters that I began to absorb the know-how and hone the hunting skills I would need to tackle the trophy bucks later on. For the taking of a big buck—which means one who has survived at least five hunting seasons—is the postgraduate course in deer hunting. Make no mistake

A seasoned hunter with a wise vision of whitetail management shows that an ordinary deer hunter may never even see a trophy buck, but a trophy hunter is a good hunter period.

Photograph by Bill McRae

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about it; the man who has a row of giant antlers nailed up in his garage is a master hunter. He may very well knock over a forkhorn, or even a doe, now and then for the larder, but he knows something most hunters don't know about whitetails and he knows how to put that knowledge to the best use.

And he is also a conservationist in the best sense. We hear quite a lot of plain and simple baloney about hunting in general, these days, and about trophy hunting in particular. People—even some hunters, to my constant amazement—condemn trophy hunting as some sort of weird exercise in *machismo*. They may say that trophy hunting strips out the finest breeding stock and impoverishes the herd's gene pool, but such critics merely reveal their own ignorance of whitetail reproductive mechanisms. They may suggest that it's all right to kill a deer for venison, but somehow sinful to kill him because you want his antlers, as though big antlers and good meat are mutually exclusive in the same animal.

To begin with, a real trophy hunter shoots fewer animals than the meat hunter, which, in itself, means he affects the population less. Then, his highly selective hunting is focused on very old animals, since no buck can be considered a real trophy until he is in his sixth year, at least. This means that he has already made whatever contribution to the herd that he is likely to make, and may be well past his breeding prime. My own finest whitetail trophy was more than eight-and-a-half years old, and his molar teeth were worn down to the gums. Although he was in breeding condition when I got him, it's doubtful that this buck could have made it through the long, cold, dry winter that followed, and absolutely certain that he was within a year of his end when my bullet struck him. Which was the better fate for this animal—to die instantly and be immortalized on my den wall, or to be pulled down by the coyotes when he was sufficiently weakened by malnutrition, perhaps only a couple of months later? There is no third alternative.

The real truth is that trophy hunting and all that goes with it is biologically sound deer management. The incidence of trophy-class (i.e., fully mature) males in a deer population is a very good index to the health, vigor and balance of that herd. In herds managed merely to produce some kind of a buck for as many hunters as possible, there can be few or no trophies, even though hunters may see plenty of deer in the woods. A herd that has a reasonably normal age-class distribution among the bucks, however, can be shown to be a biologically normal unit, functioning reproductively as nature intended.

It turns out, then, that the average size of the bucks' antlers in a deer population is a pretty good index to the overall health and quality of that herd, and that any herd with animals that interest a true trophy hunter is a well-managed herd. It is also a herd, for the information of the few antihunting preservationists who may read this, which most closely resembles a "natural" un hunted herd in its age and sex composition.

Deer and deer hunting have changed. They are not the same today as when I began my lifelong pursuit of white-tails, and they will not be the same in a few years as they are now. The old rules and standards don't work any more. Man's relentless alterations of the ecology have outdated them, and forced him to *manage* the deer whether he wants to or not. Slowly but surely he is learning how, and he will learn to progress faster.

Deer herds have to be managed within a limited and shrinking habitat, with overpopulation the ever-present specter looking over the managers' shoulders. Antlerless deer must be removed from the ranges, and this happens to be exactly in phase with the trophy hunter's management concepts. What he wishes to harvest are the geriatric

cases in the herd, the tiny pinnacle of the iceberg that is a deer-herd unit, the fully mature and overmature males whose loss has no effect on the population dynamics of that herd.

By definition, hunting trophies is selective, restrained, discriminating hunting. So our trophy hunter cheerfully contents himself with a surplus doe or spike buck for the freezer and permits the younger bucks to live another year. He is a minority today, but he is the cutting edge of tomorrow's deer-management programs. He is ahead of his time now, but we hope not for long.

The Trophy Buck

I've used the terms "trophy buck" or "trophy deer" several times, without a definition of the word "trophy." The reader may be surprised to find that I'm perfectly satisfied with the dictionary definition: a memento of a personal achievement. That dictionary says nothing about number of points, inside spread, or dressed weight, and I say that there is no single set of such specifications which can cover all regions, all hunters and all situations. Under some circumstances, even a spike buck might qualify as a legitimate trophy, as in the case of a youngster's first kill.

Many regions simply haven't the genetic potential to produce outsized antlers, and the hunter who sets his heart on a Boone and Crockett Club record in such areas is beaten before he sets foot in the woods. Yet he still may be able to collect a trophy head there, under my dictionary definition of the word. Personal tastes and standards vary among individuals; a buck you might disdain could be the once-in-a-lifetime trophy for me . . . or vice versa. One hunter may regard great antler spread as the principal ingredient of "trophy," while another is turned on by massive beams or lots of points, and couldn't care less about spread.

The ultimate achievement in trophy deer hunting is, of course, a head which is listed in the Boone and Crockett Club Records of North American Big Game, but it must be understood that this is *not* the definition of a trophy head which will apply here. To begin with, the Boone and Crockett minimum score for entry is, in my opinion, ridiculously high. The best statistics available for the last few seasons, as I write this, suggest that not more than one whitetail rack out of each *one million* bucks killed in the U.S. qualifies as a B&C record. I'm not certain what percentage of the antlers taken of any species of deer should be recognized in a records-keeping system, but I'm pretty sure that it should be more than the top .000001 percent.

For purposes of clarity, I shall use the terms "record" or "record-book" buck to mean a head scoring at least 170 points under the Boone and Crockett system of measurement, and the term "record-class" buck to indicate one scoring between 150 and 170 points according to that system. My rationale for this distinction is that a whitetail scoring 150 B&C points was admitted to the record lists as recently as 1962, and there are many heads around which appeared in fairly recent editions of the official record book but have been dropped from the current edition.

Perhaps the best all-around definition of a trophy buck, and the one that will be operative throughout this discussion, is a five-and-a-half-year-old or older buck which represents about the best antler development possible within his specific habitat and gene pool.

Big Bucks Are Different

The difference between the trophy hunter and the ordinary hunter can be seen in this imaginary situation. It's the last day of the season and you have no meat. Suddenly, you find yourself looking at two bucks standing side by side, within easy range. One is a smallish eight-pointer which you judge to be about a three-year-old, while the other is a spike. Which do you shoot?

Most hunters today would unhesitatingly shoot the eight-pointer, because he is the "better" buck. A genuine trophy hunter would shoot the spike, knowing that neither deer is in any sense a trophy and that both will be good eating. His reasoning is as follows. The eight-pointer is only a couple of years away from possible trophy status, and the habitat already has three years of forage "invested" in him. The spike is a genetic defective which has no hope of ever becoming a superior buck, but, even if he could become a trophy someday, he's a full four years away from that status and the habitat has invested only 18 months in his growth.

If big-buck hunters are different—and usually better—than run-of-the-mill deer hunters, so are the animals they seek. Mature bucks—meaning five-year-olds and older—are so different from the younger males that they might as well be a separate species.

The most obvious difference is simply that a mature buck has survived at least five hunting seasons. He has experience that a younger buck cannot have. Various sensory perceptions have more meaning for him, and his life-style must necessarily have been altered by his experiences, or he would not have lived to maturity in most areas today. He lives according to different rhythms.

For background, let's review a few facts about whitetail natural history and plug in some observations. Whitetail fawns are usually born as twins, with the sex ratio almost exactly one male to one female. Buck fawns reveal a different personality almost as soon as they're big enough to follow their mothers. The word is spooky; they seem to come into the world more alert and wary, and they become continually more so as time goes by. Early fawns, born in early May, may have tiny antlers in their first year of life, and are called nubbin bucks by some hunters. Male fawns born as late as August are still babies during the following hunting season, although they won't have spots and may show slight velvet-covered protrusions where their antlers will be. With or without antlers, the little bucks will not be permitted to follow their mothers during the dam's heat period; either the doe will drive them away, or her lover will do it for her, for a breeding buck will not tolerate the nearness of any other male. It's the first of many hard lessons to be learned by the buck fawn if he is to survive.

The young buck usually grows his first real set of antlers in his second year, so that they are hard and polished during hunting season when he is about 18 months old. It is while the buck has this first set of antlers that he must somehow begin to learn to deal with the hunter, and the majority of such bucks do not learn quickly enough. In many states, the average age at death for whitetail males is about 18 months. Those who do survive this first hunting season are infinitely wiser, and the odds begin to turn a little in their favor, for they have already begun to establish successful escape patterns.

One year later, the buck is no longer an adolescent. At three-and-a-half years, he shows his potential for body

size and antler pattern. His skeletal growth is nearly complete and his musculature is developing into heavy shoulders, blocky hams, and a powerful neck to wield the antlers which are beginning to be taken seriously by the other deer in the herd. During this season's rut, he is likely to be a definite factor. And if he makes it through this third full hunting season, he has been awarded a sort of master's degree in evasive tactics. For the rest of his life, he will be very, very difficult to catch in a set of rifle sights.

In his fourth full year of life, the buck is, for all practical purposes, mature. Depending on the composition of the herd, he may well be *the* dominant buck in his neck of the woods, with the younger animals warily deferring to him as he once did perhaps to his own father. If there are older, bigger bucks in the area, he may now challenge them boldly, and win his share of the battles. During this breeding season and the next two, he will be fearfully busy and will make his greatest contribution to the gene pool of his herd, fathering as many as 40 to 50 fawns in *each* of his three peak seasons. During the rut, his nutritional intake will be reduced by as much as 50 percent, and he may lose a full one fifth of his total body weight.

By now, his antlers are big (though they will continue to improve somewhat over the years) and their characteristic pattern will be very obvious. Tendencies toward extra-wide spread, many points or abnormal points, great weight, or whatever will be clear in this fourth set of antlers. Find his shed horns this January, and you will be able to recognize him at once if you see him next October.

By now, too, his life-style is well established. He had learned that certain patterns of movement, certain bedding areas, and certain hours offer him fewer frantic alarms and greater serenity. He probably has retreated to terrain into which few hunters penetrate, and where none *can* penetrate without his knowing long before he is in danger and from which two or more well-tested escape routes exist. He has gained courage and cunning, and knows how to stand motionless, controlling his nerves, as an unseeing human passes within yards, crashing through the woods and spreading his nauseating scent about. In his first year, the buck might have broken and run, but now he knows that hiding is safer. Unconsciously, he has begun to order his daily routine more toward the hours of darkness, and to route himself to avoid openings; now he leaves the trail to skirt the margins of a meadow in the shadows at the edge of the forest, rather than follow

Experiment in Evasiveness

South Dakota conservation researchers carried out an amazing experiment, when they live-trapped a mature whitetail and fitted him with a radio transmitter and long orange ribbons in his ears. He was released in an open hunting area, but escaped hunters for an entire week. The biologists, who were able to maintain an exact radio fix on this buck's location at all times, noted that some hunters actually passed within 40 yards of the deer without ever suspecting his presence. During the second week of the experiment, a team of expert hunters was directed to the marked buck's area. They knew where he was, but the most careful searching failed to produce even a single sighting (remember the orange ear streamers!). Finally, one of the hunters jumped the buck by almost stepping on him, and, even then, the deer escaped safely.

his companions blithely across the sunlit center of the clearing.

His armor has become almost complete. He has learned to take nothing for granted and to pay attention to every sound, sight and odor that reaches his sensors. He sleeps lightly and feeds briefly. He moves to water like a shadow among the shadows of dusk, dips his nose reluctantly and jerks his head erect, with water drops splashing from his chin every few seconds. He does not linger.

He may have, by now, become completely unkillable. There are such bucks, deer whose chosen habitat protects them so perfectly that no legal hunting technique can take them. I've hunted several such, together with many other veteran hunters of proven skill, and been defeated year after year. There was one, a monstrous ten-pointer, which could be seen on almost any day, with binoculars, but simply could not be approached within rifle range. He lived in a broad, shallow draw on the side of a rocky hill, and any daytime approach skylined the hunter for many minutes long before he could try even a desperately long shot. An approach before daylight was inevitably so noisy, in the loose rocks, that the buck was alerted. We tried big, noisy drives, and slow, subtle, one-man drives with a gun on each of the buck's known escape routes. We attempted to install brush blinds, and he never came near them. We tried to rattle him up, without success. Not only did we never kill that deer, but none of us ever fired a rifle at him, though we saw him every day.

That is the sort of animal the trophy hunter seeks by choice. There have been two or three other such bucks in my hunting career, and I remember each of them with respect and with love. They beat me, but every glimpse I got of them, alive and wild and challenging, remains etched in my mind, long after I've forgotten what scores of the bucks I've killed even looked like. The big bucks can capture a man's imagination as no other American animal.

We tend, however, to give such animals too much credit for sheer, human-type intelligence. An old buck's evasive tactics are not really creative, no matter how frustrated and futile they may make us feel. He's incapable of reasoning out new and ever more devious tricks to play on hunters; his choices of action are nothing more than repetitions of those which have worked before. He only wants to be where there are no sudden, deafening explosions and no human odor, and if he finds himself in the presence of a human being, his heredity and experience have taught him how to rid himself of that presence most effectively. We can handicap ourselves psychologically by believing that a trophy buck is invulnerable, with supernatural abilities, whereas, in fact, some of these characteristics can actually be used against the old fellow by a hunter who knows what he's about.

The Chink in a Buck's Armor

I said earlier that a mature buck's armor is *almost* complete, but there always remains one chink in it. That chink opens during rut. I am constantly amazed at the number of fairly experienced hunters who really do not understand the biological mechanics of whitetail reproduction, men who don't know the difference between a rub and a scrape. Without such basic knowledge, a hunter's chances

of catching up with a trophy buck range somewhere between none . . . and none *whatsoever*.

The annual antler-growing-and-shedding cycle of the whitetail is controlled by levels of the male sex hormone. Once his antlers are clean and polished in early autumn, the buck is capable of breeding. At about the same time, he begins to feel a restlessness and a sudden resentment toward the other bucks in whose company he has spent the summer. As the season progresses, he becomes downright belligerent, and settles any small differences of opinion as to his proper place in the dominance rankings with his gleaming new weapons. These fights have nothing to do with any particular doe; they're purely for the purpose of establishing status for the exhausting days which are to come.

Finally, the dominant bucks stake out breeding territories, usually much smaller than their own normal residential territories (which are not defended among the bucks). These breeding territories are marked around their boundaries with a secretion of a gland at the forward corner of the eye, called the preorbital gland. This secretion is deposited on the foliage and stems of various bushes, many of which are also thrashed soundly by the proprietor of the territory with his antlers.

These so-called "breeding rubs" are entirely different in appearance from those made a couple of months earlier in the process of polishing the antlers. Breeding rubs are much more savage, with the bushes or saplings severely damaged and sometimes killed. Branches are broken and tossed away, and every part of the shrub scarred. The ground at the base of one of these rubs is usually torn and pawed, and sometimes the buck kneels and gores the soil, leaving the marks of his antler tines and knees. Of course, a breeding rub will also be much fresher during hunting season than the antler-cleaning rubs. A breeding territory can sometimes be identified merely by several, or even dozens of, minor rubs along with a few major ones within a 100-yard radius. Since he'll make one or two new ones each day during the peak of the rutting time, a noticeable variation in freshness will be evident.

Somewhere in his territory, the dominant buck makes one or more *scrapes*. A scrape is a pawed-out spot in the soil, perhaps a couple of feet long by 15 inches wide (sizes vary considerably), almost always located on a trail in a clearing, and invariably located so that twigs and foliage from a shrub or tree overhang it. The maker urinates in his scrape, in such a posture that the urine runs down over his tarsal glands and carries their secretion to the ground. He paws like a mad bull, until the scrape is muddy and smelly, and even ejaculates in it. In the process, he will mesh his antlers with the aforementioned overhanging branches and twist and batter them, and he also nibbles the leaves and twig tips. No one knows the significance of these actions, but they're never omitted.

This scrape of his is the dominant buck's sign before all the deer world that he is standing at stud for all comers. He sticks pretty close to the scrape, often refreshing it or making a new one nearby, at all times during the rut when he is not actually occupied with a doe in heat.

Now comes the object of all this strenuous activity, a doe in her estrus period. Like the buck, she is incapable of breeding during most of the year, usually coming into her first annual heat in October or November, depending upon the latitude. The sign that she is in heat is the wetting and blackening of her hock glands, just as in the male. When the urge comes over her, *she goes looking for a buck*. It's important to note that it is *not* the other way around; the buck does not go looking for a receptive female. He sets his little sex trap—his scrape—and waits

for her to take the bait. The odor of the scrape, which is evident even to the human nose, draws a hot doe like catnip draws a cat. If the proprietor happens not to be in the store when she visits the scrape, she leaves her own urinary calling card and wanders on. The buck, who checks his scrape often during the day or night, detects this invitation and takes up the trail. He trails the doe like a hound, nose to the ground and following every twist and turn of her wanderings. We do not know the exact source of the scent which permits the buck to follow one particular doe through areas with many deer tracks and trails. Whitetails have an interdigital (between-the-toes) gland which secretes a waxy substance and permits a doe to follow her fawn by scent, or vice versa. Perhaps the secretion is distinctive enough between deer to enable a trailing buck to follow a specific doe, or perhaps he detects the odor of his own scrape on her hooves. However he manages it, he usually is successful in locating her even when the trail is hours old.

Now let's go back and review this process from the point of view of the hunter. A dominant buck stakes out a breeding territory and makes a scrape (sometimes several) to which the receptive does are attracted. The buck guards his territory jealously, and will not permit another breeding male to enter it. A hot doe seeks out the scrape and either encounters the proprietor or leaves her sign and he trails her. These points are important: a territorialized (dominant) buck does not roam at random in search

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of does; they come to him. However, once on the trail of a hot doe, he will follow her anywhere, even into the breeding territory of another dominant buck.

I believe that all my observations over 35 years of watching and hunting whitetails point to a theory which is exactly the opposite of most hunters' ideas about breeding fights between bucks. It is that *whitetails rarely, or never, fight over does*, although it often appears that a nearby doe may be the object of a battle. Instead, I believe that these fights are *territorial*, and occur only when one dominant buck is led into the breeding territory of another dominant buck, usually by a seductive female. Especially for the hunter who prefers to rattle antlers, the difference is crucial.

The importance of the timing of the rut has to do with its coincidence with the local open hunting season. If the season fails to take in at least a part of the rut's peak, hunters' odds on a trophy-grade buck are seriously reduced. The reason is that this two- or three-week period is the one and only time of the year in which the big, dominant males are likely to be just a trifle less cautious. They are much more active during this period, at all hours of the day and night, and much more liable to show themselves away from impenetrable cover during legal hunting hours. If a really mature, trophy whitetail is ever in his whole life going to do something *dumb*, it's most likely to be when he has his mind on a receptive female.

And the brutal truth is that no matter how skilled the hunter, the majority of all really big bucks are taken because they made a mistake, and not because they couldn't cope with the hunter's cunning. In fact, the highest art of the whitetail hunter is simply placing himself in a

position to take advantage of a big buck's mistake when and if it occurs.

Since the onset of the rut must dictate a fairly radical revision in the hunter's tactics, we must be able to determine when it happens, and there are many signs. Obviously, if bucks are seen scraping, rubbing, trailing, or chasing does, or in close company with a single doe, there can be no doubt. But in many herds, it's not all that easy to lay eyes on a buck, much less watch his actions, and in such areas the does can give us some clues. If most of the does seen are still followed by their fawns of the year, chances are they are not yet close to estrus, although these family units sometimes reassemble after the mother has conceived and cycled out of heat. The tufts of long hair which delineate the tarsal glands on the insides of the doe's hocks appear pure white until the rut nears, at which time they turn from brown to almost black. After conception, or between estrus periods, this tarry appearance slowly bleaches out, leaving only a brownish tinge.

If sightings of actual deer of either sex are not definitive, rubs are the best indications of a rut in progress. An abundance of fresh, vicious rubs is a sure sign, and sometimes the incidence of rubs seems to double or triple almost overnight when the rut kicks off in earnest. Rubs are not difficult to see, but you have to look specifically for them; if you're looking for deer, you'll notice few of the rubs which are in sight. Certain areas and certain species of shrubs are more attractive to bucks aching to make a rub, and it pays to learn about them so that, when you find yourself in a promising area, you can shift your visual gears and be alert to fresh rubs. Almost everywhere in the whitetail range, the bucks will choose saplings and bushes with resinous sap above all other available kinds. On my east-Texas ranch, the forest is mostly of hardwoods, post oaks and hickories, with a very, very few loblolly pine trees. The bucks in the area like the young pines around these few big trees so well that they invariably kill every pine sapling before it reaches a trunk diameter of two inches. Pines, hemlocks, cedars and other conifers are favorite rubbing targets everywhere they may be available. Rubs are quite often concentrated along game paths and around the margins of semibrushy clearings, where young trees are pioneering the open land. Whenever I find myself in such an area where specimens of favored rubbing species exist, I take time out from my hunting to look specifically for rubs, and I've killed several good bucks because I did so.

In case you believe that I may have overemphasized the rut's importance, let me tell you a story. Several years ago, a friend and I arrived late at night at the headquarters of a vast ranch on Texas' Mexican border for a four-day hunt. The ranch was famed for light hunting pressure and enormous whitetail bucks, and we were privileged to have about 25,000 acres of prime trophy habitat to ourselves, as invited guests. The manager, an old friend who, unlike rural residents, is not only an avid hunter but an excellent judge of trophy heads, greeted us with the information that hunting, even in this hunters' paradise, had been very poor through the first half of the six-week season.

"We just aren't seeing any bucks," he told us, "and especially no big ones. Even though I've been watching some real mossy-horns all summer and know right where they stay, I can't find them now. You'd almost think every buck on the place bigger than a forkhorn had crawled into a hole. The radio says there's a norther coming and it may help; if not, you boys have got your work cut out for you. I wish you luck!"

Before midnight, a roaring cold front blustered through that country, dropping temperatures more than 30 degrees

before morning. It was still blowing at sunrise, but the skies had cleared and the temperature was unusually low for this subtropical country.

Before 1 p.m. that afternoon, Don Ruthven and I had seen no fewer than 31 whitetail bucks (not counting spikes) on this ranch where bucks had been almost impossible to lay eyes on since the season opened! Every single one of these deer was either trailing a doe or in actual, all-out pursuit of one. That weather front had turned on the visible rut as though a switch had been thrown. The next morning I collected the finest whitetail buck of my career till then, and we saw, but could not kill, the only buck I've ever seen in the wild which I'm certain would have made the Boone and Crockett records. There were bucks everywhere we looked, many of them heavy-antlered brutes in the prime of their maturity, acting like sex-obsessed schoolboys, scampering about in the open in broad daylight as though all caution had been forgotten.

Tactic I: Still-hunting

Still-hunting is not stalking, and neither is it stand hunting, despite the similarity of names. Stand hunting is, as we shall shortly see, sitting in one place and watching for a buck to move within range. The place may be in a tree, or a tower stand, or on a stump, or in a ground blind, or just against a convenient tree trunk, but it is a specific, stationary location. Stand hunting is the most successful of all whitetail-hunting techniques and very often good for trophy bucks, but it isn't still-hunting.

Still-hunting is a sort of blend of stalking and stand hunting. It has been described (by me) as *random stalking*, stalking the cover rather than a specific animal whose precise location is known. But a good still-hunter spends a very great deal of his time motionless, like a stand hunter, watching and listening.

Still-hunting is also a high art. Not one hunter in 50 who says he's been still-hunting actually has been; what he's been doing is walking through the woods hoping to see a deer in time to try a snap shot at a waving white flag. That bears about the same relationship to true still-hunting as your fourth-grader's crayon "art" bears to something by Norman Rockwell. Still-hunting is by several miles the most difficult of all common deer-hunting techniques to master, the most demanding of patience, and the most fatiguing. It is not a particularly productive method in terms of deer sightings, but it is very often the best of all possible ways to sight a trophy buck. It is not applicable to all types of terrain and cover, but there are places in which still-hunting is the *only* way to hunt, and many of these are the places inhabited by monster bucks.

Perhaps a better way to describe the still-hunter is to say that he moves through the forest like a ghost, invisible and utterly soundless, that he sees everything and is seen by nothing. That's the way it *should* be, but, of course, such stealth is beyond the ability of any human. Nevertheless, that's a good model upon which to base your still-hunting efforts.

Still-hunting clothes should be quiet and inconspicuous, which brings us to a ticklish subject for me. The wearing of blaze orange, as required by law in many jurisdictions and by common sense in many others, has proved beyond any question to be an invaluable safety precaution. I recommend it without reservation; there is an extremely good chance that it may save your life.

There is also a good chance that it will cost you the buck of a lifetime. Deer certainly are color-blind and cannot see a blaze-orange vest or jacket in the same way that another hunter sees it, but don't ever let anybody tell you that they can't see it at all! Even in a black-and-white photograph, blaze orange stands out rather conspicuously, because of the almost-fluorescent intensity of the hue. I've proved to my own complete satisfaction that safety garments of blaze orange will attract the attention of whitetails. Obviously, no trophy on the face of the earth is worth the risk of being shot with a high-powered rifle, so the choice is clear in most regions. But wherever visibility garments are not required by law and I'm hunting private property on which I know the whereabouts (and temperaments) of my companions in the woods, I choose to wear camouflage. *Complete camouflage*—head to toe, including face and hands.

I know expert still-hunters who almost go into a trance as they take the first few steps on a morning's hunt. I'm one of them. Look at it this way. In our crowded, noisy, civilized world, our senses are constantly assaulted from every direction with demands for our attention, not to mention just plain racket. As a result, we have developed a remarkable ability to simply tune out sounds, sights, and smells which are meaningless or annoying, never allowing them to become a part of our consciousness.

A wild deer in the forest is not incessantly assaulted in all his senses as we are, and has not developed our automatic defenses against distraction. There are no "meaningless" sounds or smells to him; he hears and interprets every one. And when a still-hunter enters the forest to deal with such an animal on its own turf, he must learn to open up his receptors, to lower his filters, to switch off his defenses against distraction. For most city dwellers, this is almost impossible at first. It takes practice, surprisingly enough, *just to be aware* of your surroundings. I often think that those people with the reputation of "instinctive" hunters are mostly people with an unusually high natural awareness of what goes on around them.

I have killed several bucks which I heard before seeing them, and one or two which I actually smelled first, but, for the most part, the hunter's most valuable sensory organs are his eyes, and he can train his eyes to be better than they customarily are. By concentrating, he can learn to notice detail which would escape him in his normal environment. Little exercises—like forcing himself to notice the vein patterns in the leaves of his wife's indoor plants, or trying to note every single item in a store window as he walks past it (writing it all down and checking the list against the actual window)—really do sharpen up the eye for *observing* the world around us. Most of all, the hunter's eye can work in conjunction with his brain, which can tell it where to look and what to look for.

The fact is that a flesh-and-blood buck, especially one in the trophy category, will seldom be observed standing boldly in the open, away from confusing undergrowth, and if you're going to see him at all it will have to be by picking out pieces and parts of him and mentally fitting him together like a jigsaw puzzle.

One way to do it is to train your eyes to look *into* and through the brush instead of at the outside perimeters of it. Always assume that the deer will be motionless; any movement will catch your eye instantly and you don't have to consciously look for it. A pair of good binoculars is invaluable (yes, even for still-hunting in heavy cover), precisely for the reason that with them you can focus out the first screen of brush and look back into the cover. Until you try this, you won't understand how striking is the effect; very often you'll spot a blob a few feet inside the edge of the brush which may or may not be a deer, but which a slight twist of the focusing knob on your

binoculars will resolve into a full-fledged, real-life buck, sharply seen in all his outlines. A scope sight on your rifle will not yield this effect, in addition to which raising the rifle makes too much movement and is quite tiring. I have my binoculars up and down two or three times each minute while still-hunting, and would just about as soon go hunting without a rifle as without my compact, light-weight Leitz "Trinovid" 8x32s.

The all-important mandate for still-hunting is to go *slowly*. This is the most difficult thing to learn, and it's what makes this pastime so tiring. Depending upon the cover, a few hundred yards in an entire morning may be too fast. Very commonly, I've still-hunted from sunup until noon, and then turned and walked back to my car in less than 15 minutes. Most people discover that such hunting demands an unexpected reserve of self-discipline and patience. You have to keep telling yourself that just a dozen impatient steps can cost you the buck that you've planned for during a whole year. I find that it helps me slow down if I actively imagine just that buck, constantly standing just behind the next patch of cover. I picture him in my mind's eye, seeing just how he'll be turned, imagining his astonishment at seeing me, and picturing how easy the shot will be if I can just do everything right for a few more minutes.

Never take a single step until you have visually examined every possible cranny in the cover which is visible from your position. Then take one step, or ten, smoothly and quietly, to secure a fresh vista, and stop and stand motionless while you probe the cover again with your eyes. In some areas, this rule will allow you to move fairly fast, perhaps a half mile per hour, while in others your progress may not be at one fifth that rate. Time must be of no importance, a difficult thing for modern man to believe, because it's of no importance to the deer. How much ground you cover is nothing, provided you cover it correctly, which is to say that you see literally everything there is to see.

Keep yourself inside the edges of the brush, as a buck does. When you must cross an opening a few yards wide, do it smoothly and swiftly, after satisfying yourself that you're alone. When you stop, always choose at least a wisp of cover into which your figure will merge as you stand motionless, looking. Never skylight yourself, and remember your silhouette; if you're in deep shadow with a bright meadow behind you, you'll be more conspicuous than if you were standing in the center of the meadow in full sunlight.

If all this sounds like an awful lot of trouble, be assured that it certainly is, and that this is why there are so very, very few skilled still-hunters on the face of the earth.

Tactic II: Stand Hunting

If still-hunting is the epitome of the hunter's arts, then stand hunting is the peak of his wisdom. Hunting from a stand is the going-away best of all methods of seeing whitetail deer, and I know many serious trophy hunters who have never killed a buck in any other way. The reason for this outstanding success is twofold: first, whitetails are inclined to follow similar patterns of movement from day to day if not disturbed, and second, the hunter is motionless while the deer is moving. Since whitetails'

eyes are incredibly keen for motion, and those of the typical hunter not so hot for anything *except* motion, this situation shifts the odds considerably in the hunter's favor.

In areas where stands are legal, tree platforms are probably the most common sort. These may be anything from a board in a crotch to very elaborate roofed and carpeted structures. Or they may be nothing but a chair on a tripod, on up to regular little houses with sliding glass windows. Either kind of stand elevates the hunter's eyes high enough to cover a good deal of country which couldn't have been seen from the ground, and, in theory, places him above the normal line of vision of the animals he hunts.

There are problems unique to a tree or tower stand. One is that the simplest forms are downright dangerous, especially well-aged tree stands. I have a close friend who fell from a tower stand and broke his shoulder and back, and I know of a few deaths resulting from a rotten board or branch suddenly giving way. There are also a few cases of a dropped rifle striking the ground on its butt and firing straight up, with regrettable consequences. Always make certain the structure is sound, well guyed (if a tower), and easy of access, and that the rifle is unloaded while ascending or descending.

Another problem is wind, not only because it may almost freeze a hunter in his elevated perch, but because the movements of a tree, waving in a gusty wind, offer a fascinating extra dimension of challenge in long-range shooting. Despite drawbacks, elevated stands are just the ticket in many areas and good ones are well worth the trouble and expense to set in place.

This should be done, I must add, many months in advance of the hunting season, to permit the local whitetails to become accustomed to their presence. A hulking new structure of unseasoned wood in his bailiwick turns an old buck off about as effectively as a new runway for jetliners would, at least until he has a chance to decide that it presents no threat. Old bucks arrive at such decisions with great deliberation.

Tactic III: Horn Rattling

"Rattling" is neither a myth nor a tall Texas tale. It works in Texas, and it will work anywhere if conditions are right. First, the local deer herd must be in or near the peak of a rut if the rattling antlers are to produce. Where a hunting season fails to overlap the rut, rattling is of no use to a hunter. Second, there must be a fairly good balance to the herd, with a decent buck ratio. When five to ten (or more) does exist for each breeding buck, rattling may work, but too rarely to rely on as a regular hunting method. In much of America's deer country, including some parts of Texas, exactly this condition does occur.

Third, for *consistent* results, a horn-rattler must know what he's about. If there's a secret, it's in knowing when and where to rattle, rather than how to rattle.

There is also the matter of knowing where *not* to rattle, and heavily hunted public land is one of those places. Expert rattling, on public land, may be tantamount to suicide! Imagine the state of mind of the average public-land hunter, stumbling around in the woods looking for deer, when he hears the sounds of two bucks fighting furiously. As he approaches the scene of the supposed

battle, he sees a movement in the bushes, and he *knows* it has to be a buck. Guess what happens next.

Some veteran rattlers believe that bucks come to the sound of the horns because they believe the fight to be over a receptive doe, and they hope to make off with her before the combatants notice. I think this gives the deer too much credit for reasoning ability. I further think that battles between bucks during the rut are over territory, rather than individual females. Although I have seen bucks of every size from nubbins upwards respond to the sounds of the rattles, those which came in most furiously were the biggest bucks (territorialized, dominant, breeding males), and they usually responded close to an identifiable breeding territory. In any case, nothing in deer hunting comes closer to being a lead-pipe cinch than rattling the antlers downwind from a fresh scrape.

We see two different kinds of responses, the "chargers" and the "sneakers." The chargers are the bucks that literally charge the sound of the horns, eyes blazing, nostrils flared, hair standing on end, ears drooping and laid back (a characteristic threat gesture). They may come from any direction, occasionally including downwind, and they come at a dead run, swatting and slashing with their antlers at inoffensive small shrubs which get in their way. It's quite a sight, and one which can produce quite a variety of reactions in a first-time hunter, from frozen astonishment through various degrees of hysteria. The chargers sometimes wind up within a few feet of the hunter, and there's an almost irresistible impulse to shoot in self-defense.

The chargers are always exciting, but very few bucks put on such an exhibition when coming to the rattling horns. Most appear walking briskly or actually stalking the sounds, circling and testing the wind, reluctant to expose themselves until they have the situation sized up. Really big bucks may respond in either way, and no one knows why the differences. Whatever it is, the hunter must set himself up for the sneaker in every case; the charger will be easy if one happens to show up.

The ideal rattling spot, therefore, is one near an active scrape or at least in an area known to be inhabited by a dominant buck, with good concealment for the hunter, and good visibility in all directions, especially downwind. Rattling is largely futile on really windy days. Cold, dead-calm, bright weather is perfect, and a little breeze

The Ethics of Marksmanship

Superior marksmanship with a rifle (or sighted shotgun, where required by law) is not merely *nice*; it's *necessary*, if one is to call himself a sportsman. To me, purchasing a hunting license and carrying a rifle into the woods does not give anyone the right to fire at a living animal. To earn that right, he is obligated to practice enough to develop skill, enough skill to be morally certain that he can make any reasonable shot presented for a sure, humane kill. There can be no excuse for losing a buck from which blood has been drawn. I've done it (once), and there was no excuse for it that time. The memory of it still haunts me, a full decade later. In my camp, the failure to find a buck known to be wounded is a distinct stigma, keenly felt by all of us. With more than a dozen hunters, such events do not occur more often than once every four or five years, or perhaps not more often than one out of every 100 deer fired at. Even that one is one too many.

is acceptable, but a strong wind cancels out rattling as a viable technique.

The most common error made by inexperienced horn-rattlers is timidity. The trick is to make a *lot* of noise, but the right kind of noise. According to my lights (equally successful rattlers are sure to disagree), the right sequence of noise is roughly as follows. I try to locate my position next to some dry brush, and, if the locality is gravelly, so much the better. I begin by clashing the two sawed-off antlers together as loudly as possible, and then mesh the tines and shake them, pushing them together very hard, to produce a somewhat disjointed sequence of rubbing, clattering sounds. After perhaps 30 seconds of this, I rip them apart and immediately use them to thrash the dry brush and pound on the ground to simulate thumping hooves and antlers against the shrubbery. I often rattle standing up, in which case I stomp furiously with my own feet and bash the limbs of whatever tree I'm using for camouflage. All this is done as loudly as I can make it; the more I can sound like a pair of bull moose having at it, the better I like it.

I then lay the rattles aside and get my hands on my rifle. It's very common to have a buck on top of you even before you complete this whole sequence of racket. If nothing shows up, however, within ten to 15 minutes, I go to work again.

The Trophy Hunter's Future

Over coffee, after a meal of prime backstraps, a man can sit back and contemplate the fact that the true trophy hunter of American deer is a somewhat lonely figure in today's world, not because he is a holdover from an earlier day, but because he is ahead of his time. In those earlier days when a successful hunt meant survival, there was no time for trophies, however much a primitive hunter may have admired a big buck when one appeared. The quality-hunting concept is just now emerging in an age when competent research has given us the tools for professional management of the herds. As we have seen, well-managed herds are herds which include trophy bucks; by definition, a deer herd without any mature males is a badly managed herd. We are beginning to understand that biologically sound big-game management and trophy management are the same thing.

The real holdovers from a bygone day are those who advocate management for *quantity* rather than quality, and those who shout for no management at all, the well-meaning but ignorant preservationists whose philosophy caused 90,000 deer to starve in one year in the Kaibab.

The trophy hunter is, in this sense, a pioneer, a sportsman who blazes the trails toward a hunting ethic which can—and must—bring hunting as a wholesome sport into its proper perspective in the public mind and the needs of that public (including the nonhunters) and the wildlife of America into a new and more realistic balance.

To do so, he will have to learn how to deal with the media, the bureaucrats and politicians, and his fellow hunters, in addition to the uncanny cleverness of the old bucks themselves. It's a formidable challenge . . . but then, I never said that taking a trophy whitetail—or even having them to hunt—would be easy. ■

Photograph by Jerry Smith

