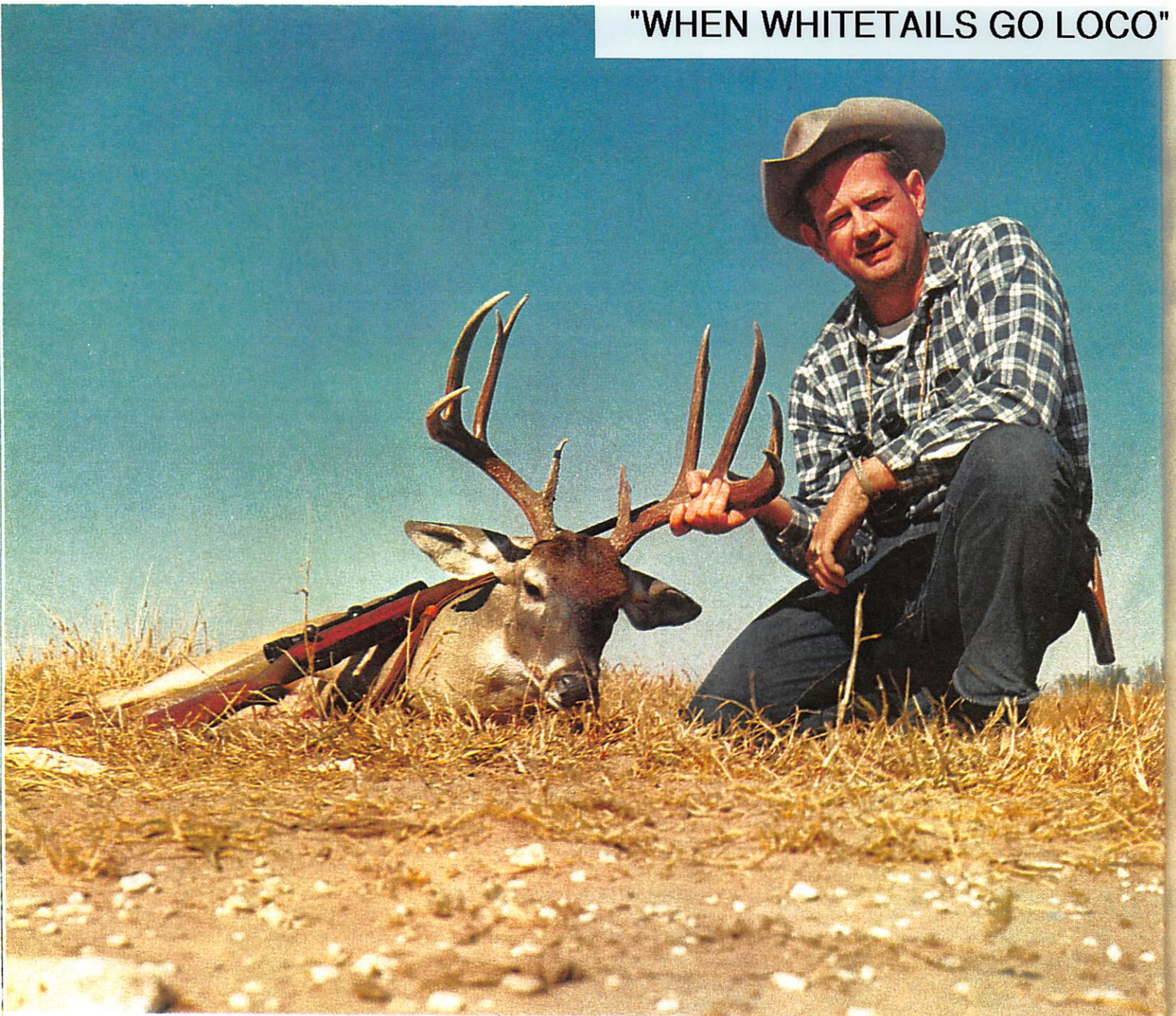


"WHEN WHITETAILS GO LOCO"



The rut makes idiots of smart bucks. Here is what you need to know about this strange time...

WHEN WHITETAILS GO LOCO

By John Wootters

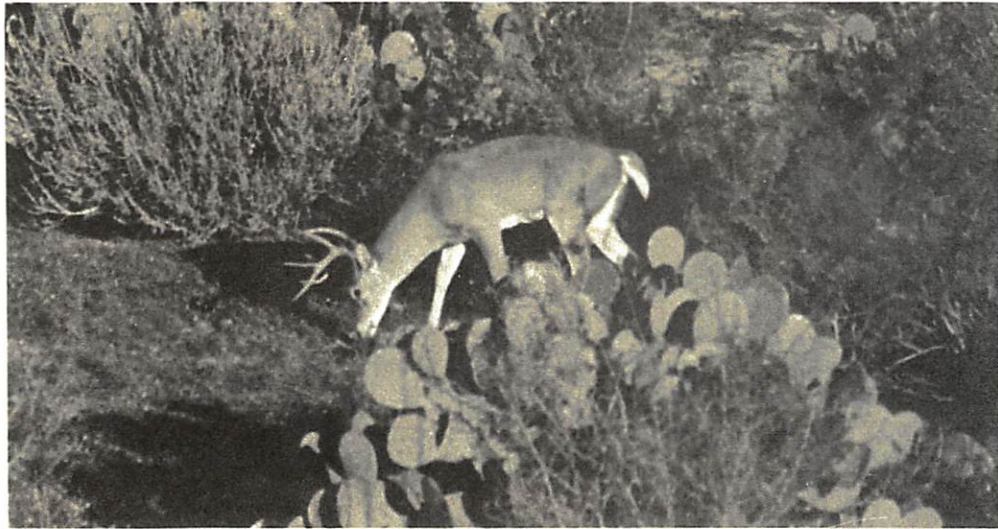
Photographs by the Author

■ The big buck was restless that frosty, clear morning in south Texas. He wandered purposelessly here and there through the mesquite brush, just after the last sunrise he would ever see. Although his flanks were hollow, he did not feel hunger, and his nibbling at the browse was only reflexive. His swollen neck and the moist, black hock glands on his hind legs told the story—he was a whitetail at the peak of his rutting urge.

Suddenly he threw up his head, ears cupped forward to catch a distant sound. As he listened, the hair on his neck rose like an angry dog's. The sound was that of two whitetail bucks doing battle. He could hear the clash and rattle of antlers, and the scuffing of hoofs driving against the gravelly soil. At intervals, his experienced ears caught the crashing of brush as the combatants disengaged themselves and demonstrated their ferocity to each other by attacking nearby shrubs. At the next impact of antlers the big buck broke into a run toward the battleground more than 300 yards away. The rival bucks fighting were within his own breeding territory, and he went charging to defend his proprietary rights to this scrap of ground he knew so well.

Arriving at a point where he should have been able to overlook the area of combat, he paused within the last screen of brush, puzzled. He could see no gladiators; the scene was perfectly peaceful.

Actually, he was looking straight at me, but I was motionless, blended into a clump of prickly-pear cactus in complete camouflage. I could tell that the buck carried a heavy, high rack of 10 points, but I couldn't see his body well enough to risk a shot. For a long minute we both were still, then, when I decided that he wasn't going to step into the clear without some urging, I tickled the tines of the whitetail antlers in my hands together, ever so gently, keeping them behind a cactus branch to conceal the movement. The buck reacted as though stung by a bee. He bounced stiff-legged into the clear, mane erected and mouth open, blind belligerence in every



Remarkable picture shows whitetail buck in the act of following the trail of a doe.

line of his body. My bullet in his neck, at 40 yards, ended his life so abruptly that he could not have heard the rifle crack.

All this happened on a chill, still morning in November, 1969, which is the rutting time for whitetail deer in Texas. This article deals with most of the important elements of the whitetail's breeding procedure for the benefit of hunters in Texas or Nebraska or Florida or New Hampshire . . . wherever these deer roam. I've hunted these wonderful animals for 29 years, and hundreds of campfire conversations have indicated that a great many hunters—even veterans—have an incomplete or distorted concept of the whitetail's rut.

For example, you may hear that bucks fight over does, that bucks range farther and more unpredictably during this breeding season, and that the males are the aggressors and initiators in the reproductive relationship. None of these things is strictly true.

The most critical fact in the whitetail rut is that breeding bucks are strongly territorial. The species tends to inhabit a surprisingly small home range the year round, but with the onset of the rut each mature buck stakes out an even smaller area as his exclusive baliwick. Not every buck can establish and hold such a territory, and since the overwhelming majority of matings are performed by territorialized males, this fact insures that the genes of the strongest, most

virile bucks will be passed along.

These dominant bucks know the exact limits of their own territories. They mark their boundaries by scent, using a secretion of the lachrymal glands at the forward corners of their eyes. This substance is rubbed on small trees and bushes, and many of these same bushes will also show the damage done by the proprietor's antlers as he works off excess sexual energy by savaging the brush. These "rubs" are of two kinds; one is made earlier in the autumn when the bucks begin to strip the velvet from their hardened antlers, and the other is produced a month or two later in the process of establishing a territory.

The difference is important to the hunter, and can be judged by the apparent age of the rubs and the degree to which the plant was punished. Saplings used for breeding rubs are sometimes almost demolished, and the buck's rage will be evident from hoof scars and even antler prints in the soil around the base of the trunk. Velvet-cleaning rubs tend to be on resinous trees such as juniper, cedar or pine, whereas the breeding rubs are more likely to be found on smooth-barked saplings.

There is a belief among Texas hunters that the bigger the buck, the bigger (in diameter) the trees he picks to rub. I've never been able to prove or disprove this to my own satisfaction, but there's little doubt that the *higher* on the trunk the rub, the bigger the buck that made it.



Only 20 feet away, 8-pointer with rut-swollen neck glares toward hidden author who surmoned it by clashing antlers together.

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Somewhere within this circle of boundary markers the resident buck makes one or more "scrapes," and the difference between a rub and a scrape, to a buck hunter, is critical. The scrape is on the ground, most commonly along a trail in a small clearing. It appears as a muddy, pawed-out patch of earth, about 12 by 24 inches. In making his scrape, the buck urinates in such a posture that his urine runs down his hind legs over his secreting hock glands and carries the musk to the ground. Then he churns up the muddied soil with hoofs and antlers, rolls in it, and sometimes ejaculates on it. The scrape is his advertisement to the female deer world that he is *mucho hombre* and that he is standing at stud for all comers. His scrape is his place of business, and he will rarely be far from it, normally checking in several times each day.

Comes now the object of all this passion and expenditure of energy, the doe deer in sexual season. When

the heat comes on her (it will last only about 30 hours if she is not bred), she goes in search of a buck. She may, of course, encounter him personally, but more frequently her sensitive nose leads her to an active scrape. Since only dominant, territorialized bucks maintain scrapes, she is unwittingly certain that the scrapemaker is a worthy sire.

If said sire is temporarily absent, she leaves her own calling card before wandering away by urinating and depositing glandular secretion in or near the scrape. Upon the buck's return, he detects the invitation and takes the trail, literally trailing the doe like a hound with his nose to the ground.

Sooner or later he will catch up with the lady, and the chase will begin.

The chase, which is seen by so many hunters and which is interpreted as a sign that the bucks are the initiators of the mating effort, is usually brief. As in the case of people, the

buck chases the doe until she catches him. The actual mating which follows is quickly consummated.

Some authorities say the buck remains with a doe as long as she is in heat, servicing her needs repeatedly. I doubt this. My observations, made over the course of almost 600 days afield in rutting season, cause me to believe that the liaison lasts for a few hours at most, after which the buck retires to his scrape. A vigorous buck can and will serve as many as 30 does in a season, which usually lasts at its peak only two or three weeks. If a doe escapes being bred during her first heat, she will come back into season every 28 days until she conceives, which accounts for the slow diminishing of signs of rutting activity and sporadic outbursts of such activity for a month or two after the rut has ended for most of the herd.

If at any time during the rut another male invades the established territory of a buck, a battle will ensue. But no two bucks will fight unless

they are in the territory of one or the other, which explains the not-uncommon spectacle of two or more males chasing the same doe at the same time without conflict between them; this kind of group fun simply happens not to be within the baliwick of any of the participants.

Those hunters who happen upon a whitetail battle in progress often report seeing a doe standing demurely to one side, and presume her favors to be the prize of the tournament. However, females in heat frequently come to hunters rattling horns, and their presence during a fight may be coincidental. Also, a fight may be sparked when a hot doe leads one buck out of his own territory and into that of another buck; if so, the battle *is still over territorial rights* and not over the lady herself.

It should be added that even where whitetail populations are at the saturation point, breeding territories are not continuous across the landscape . . . large unclaimed tracts may exist between occupied territories. These no-man's-lands are the only places where a young buck is safe from persecution, and where he may just possibly have some chance of mating by intercepting a doe on her way to a scrape.

This resumé of the love life of the whitetail illustrates why the old Texas hunter's trick of horn rattling works. The technique is designed to take advantage of a buck at his most vulnerable time. As in the case of my kill described in the beginning, the hunter takes a stand within the territory of a buck, preferable close to his current scraping place (always upwind, of course), and imitates the sounds of a buck fight. The local proprietor rushes to investigate the fraudulent fight taking place in his territory. Often he comes at a gallop with little of the whitetail's characteristic caution, and the rattler gets a set-up shot at short range.

Although rattling antlers is the ultimate method of using the rut to a hunter's advantage (it has been reasonably well proved almost everywhere in the whitetail's range), a basic understanding of the deer's breeding habits is invaluable regardless of the hunter's chosen technique.

For example, he will not spend much time seeking the favorite feed-

ing grounds once he knows the rut has begun. A buck in rut reduces his food intake by about 50 percent, and his exertions cost him as much as 10 to 20 percent of his body weight in about one month. The rut-wise hunter spends his time scouting for scrapes and fresh rubs. During this feverish season, bucks not only alter their routines drastically and range in different areas, but their hours change as well. Rutting activity continues more or less around the clock, and the animals are likely to be on the move at any hour, regardless of wind, weather or phase of the moon.

At the peak of the rut, the trick is simply to spend as many hours as possible in the field. The deer—both sexes—are restless and more apt to be stirring at any time, with better odds on being seen by an alert hunter who skips the noontime nap. A buck is as likely to check his scrape at noon as at dawn or dusk.

Nor does he pay as much attention to the barometer as usual. Field researchers tell us that low humidity and bright skies are the most important weather factors in promoting whitetail movement, but these patterns, like the normal feeding-resting cycles, are disrupted by the breeding madness. All of the deer hunter's treasured axioms about new moons and cold mornings and high (or low) barometers now go out the window. A breeding buck has other things on his mind. He moves when the spirit moves him, and sex is a very lively and demanding spirit.

It's important for the hunter to know when the rut actually begins in his locale, since the onset of this special time is the signal for major changes in tactics. Of course, the discovery of active scrapes is an infallible indicator, but scrapes are not really all that conspicuous. The people who live on the land usually know, even though they may not be serious hunters. Ranchers, farmers, rural mail carriers, linemen and others who spend their time in the field can pinpoint the onset of the rut within a few days because they will actually see the deer going about their breeding business.

If the hunter can get his binoculars on a few specimens in the local deer herd, he can see for himself, provided he knows what to look for. A buck

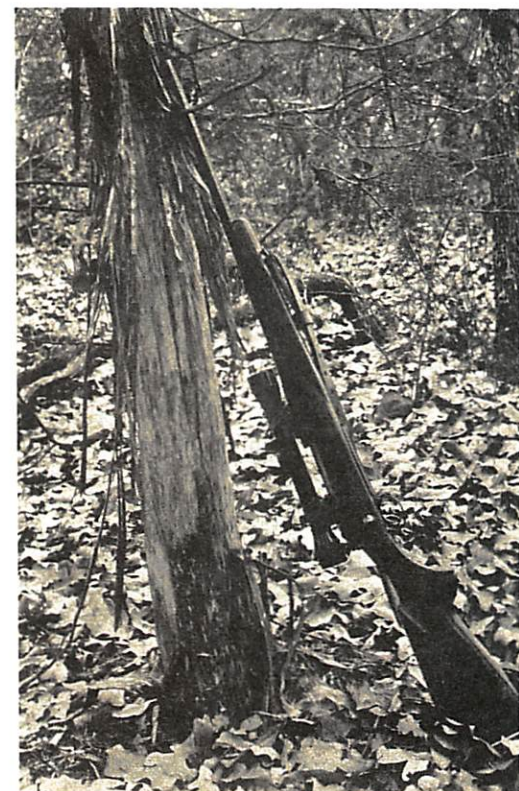
in breeding condition shows three physical changes—his neck becomes noticeably swollen, his testicles descend and enlarge, and his hock glands turn dark and seem to grow larger. This latter mark can be seen at surprising distances in good light, and is exhibited by doe deer as well as bucks.

A doe still followed by twin fawns has not yet come into season and she will not permit a yearling male to accompany her then (twin whitetail fawns almost invariably include one male).

Of course, the rut doesn't simultaneously strike every animal in the herd, and the sighting of one healthy doe with her fawns of the year doesn't mean that no other does in the region have begun the rut. Bucks are usually ready to perform their reproductive functions *weeks before* the first doe in the area comes into heat, and they remain capable of serving a female for two to three months.

Breeding habits of mule deer contrast with (*Continued on page 98*)

A huge buck killed this tree by using it for breeding "rub," raking off the bark.



aim forever before the gun barked and a bird bounced on the dry leaves. I thought to myself that a lad on his first quail hunt who drops three out of his first four must have the makings of a great wing shot. I found out later that Jimmy and his dad had spent the past several weekends on trap and skeet.

Again, the singles disappeared into heavy cover. I had two other fields I wanted to check before the quail headed for the woods as the sun began to drop and the late-afternoon chill took over the pinelands. There is a great advantage to hunting small fields of less than 10 acres—either you soon find birds out feeding or you don't.

The last two fields turned up only one covey. We suspected that one of the fields had been hunted an hour before we arrived, as there were fresh car tracks and we heard quail calling back in the woods near the field. Usually a covey that has been scattered will whistle itself back together.

However, the final field turned out to be the greatest. The dog worked the edge of 10 acres of broom sedge and ragweed for half an hour without making a sign of game. I was beginning to wonder if the birds might have headed for the woods a little early. But just as we were ready to quit, Duke fetched up in a point not 50 yards from the car. We had walked right past that area when we started and it seemed impossible that there could be quail almost under the dog's snout.

As we walked up to the dog, Jimmy said, "I see them right on the ground." At first I thought he was pulling my leg, until my eye caught the white cheek patch of a male quail. Sure enough, the entire covey was in a close circle within 15 feet of Duke's bulging eyeballs.

Without a warning the covey suddenly erupted into a fountain of brown feathers. The birds flew directly toward the car which was less than 30 yards away. Jim's gun came up, and I could see nothing but the green station wagon down his gun barrel. He waited until the birds swung past and then neatly dropped one with his second barrel. Jimmy's gun barked twice, and to his amazement two fell at his second shot.

It was now getting on toward 4 p.m. and with a bag of nine quail we cased the guns for the day. We had hunted only about six hours and flushed four covies, fair enough quail hunting by any standards, though there have been days when we have flushed 10 covies on a Saturday in January, using two dogs.

This little hunt certainly convinced Jim Snyder that not all the good bobwhite shooting lies well south of the Mason-Dixon line. But then, this Jersey hunting is always a pleasant surprise . . . particularly to guys living in the state when they first find out about it.

—Pete McLain

When Whitetails Go Loco

[Continued from page 27]

those of whitetails in several ways. Most important is the fact that mule bucks do not stake out a rigidly defined breeding territory, perhaps because the species, unlike whitetails, is migratory. A dominant mule deer buck gathers a small, loosely held harem of does, but he exercises no such authoritarian discipline over them as does a bull elk over his females. Mule bucks do fight, apparently over the favors of a harem or an individual doe, but these battles are neither as frequent nor as savage as those between well-matched whitetails.

Interestingly, mule deer bucks have been "rattled up" in somewhat the same fashion that south Texas hunters use on whitetails. I know of at least three such events, in west Texas and Colorado, but the technique has been used so little that hard conclusions are impossible.

The big-game seasons of several western mule deer states are closed before the peak of the rut has been reached, so that mule hunters can't make the most of the deer's moon of madness except in some of the special post-season hunts. A few whitetail states, too, have short seasons which don't coincide with the rut's climax but these are in the minority.

Considering the importance of scent in all this, the question of using one of the commercially prepared scents must arise. Many of these are advertised as appealing to the mating instincts, but I've found results with them to be unpredictable. Now and then bucks are definitely attracted to these odors, but they're usually young (unterritorialized) specimens. At other times the animals seem to ignore the scent entirely.

I have never killed a buck when using the scent that I think I wouldn't have got without it. On the other hand, I've never seen it harm my cause, either. The scent probably does offer the hunter a certain amount of camouflage, at least by masking his human odor from deer. Field observations include so many variables and so much simple chance that the effect of a single factor such as the use of a scent, is almost impossible to isolate.

The actions and reactions of a whitetail buck in the grip of the rutting urge are unpredictable. These shy and wary animals, with their knack for being inconspicuous, can become almost frighteningly bold, and occasionally even dangerous. A rancher friend in the Texas hill country once hand-raised a doe fawn. When she was grown he placed a collar around her neck with a sheep bell attached to protect her from

hunters. She came and went as she pleased but, by choice, spent most of her time in the rancher's yard. Wild deer are thick on this property, and the tame doe integrated well enough to produce a fine pair of fawns in her second year. These, too, learned to regard the ranch house as "home" and the rancher and his family as friends. He also belled the fawns, but never kept them captive.

Late one afternoon during the peak of the rut the next season, the rancher heard a terrible commotion out back, with frantic jangling of deer bells and the pounding of hoofs belonging to a pair of saddle horses being kept in the yard overnight. The dog added to the din by barking hysterically. The man grabbed a rifle and ran out of the kitchen door to find himself eyeball-to-eyeball with a fine, wild 8-point buck. The animal's neck was swollen and his swaggering attitude spelled rutting madness. One of the tame does was obviously in heat, and the buck had jumped the fence, terrorized the two horses, and completely bluffed the dog. Nor did he show any willingness to back away from the man, who shouted and waved his arms. Finally my friend fired his rifle into the ground and the buck retreated. In a few minutes the doe jumped the wire and joined her swashbuckling suitor, and peace was restored to the evening.

Another friend swears that a rutting buck once threatened him while he was a few yards outside camp, armed only with a roll of toilet paper. Only a few years ago the owner of a captive buck, a hand-reared household pet, was actually killed by his spike-horned pet when he entered the pen during the animal's rutting peak.

A south Texas hunter related to me, while proudly showing the mounted head of his finest trophy whitetail, how he'd left his vehicle, loaded his rifle, and walked a few feet into the brush one morning. For some reason he paused to break off a small branch. The buck, apparently mistaking the sound for the brush-horning that regularly accompanies buck fights, leaped into view and stood, quivering with fury, only a few feet away while the astonished hunter raised his rifle and fired. Many a horn-rattler—myself included—has had a good buck charge the sound of the horns with such determination that he almost shot in self-defense.

It's obvious from all these happenings that a whitetail buck at the peak of his rutting frenzy is literally not the same animal he was a few weeks earlier. His entire personality changes, along with his habits, motivations and routines. The rut-wise hunter understands the necessity of changing his own tactics to take advantage of this. And he's the fellow who always seems to score, year after year.

—John Wootters