Why Do They Fight?

Territorial dominance, female favors, just plain aggression—the rut could be what you wait for.

By John Wootters

Color Photographs by Jerry Smith

Aggression! The word has an ominous ring to it. In human society, it causes wars, violent crime, and a host of assorted social evils. In the wild world inhabited by big-game animals, however, what we call aggression has a different value.

Predators secure their livelihood by aggressive action, and prey animals sometimes survive a predator's attack through aggressive behavior. The future of a species, in the form of cubs and calves and fawns, is often secured by the aggressive defense of her young by a mother animal—and anyone who doubts that has only to mess with a couple of grizzly cubs in the presence of Mama to find out about it!

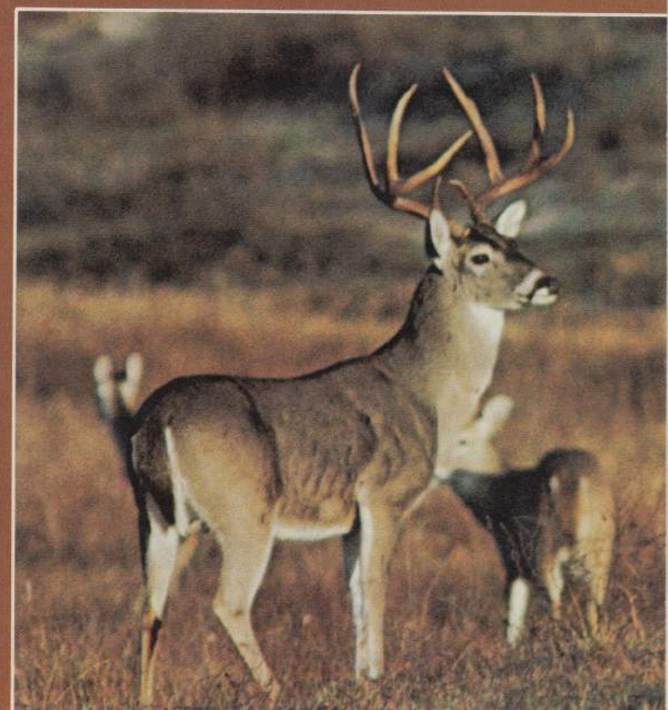
Wild animals often exhibit aggression toward others of their same species in order to secure a prime feeding spot, an action that helps the individual survive. It is not always the biggest or strongest specimen that succeeds in these brief encounters, but often the most aggressive. I have watched this process in my wooded backyard for ten years when the two dozen or so wild raccoons I feed every night settle their spatial requirements with savage, slashing attacks upon intruders. Certain animals, known to be characteristically more aggressive, consistently dominate larger specimens. In this case, at least, it would appear that nature is actually selecting aggressive tendencies for their ultimate survival value. Surely a timid lion or a coyote that was shy and retiring in the presence of cottontails would have poor survival prospects, so it seems that this trait of being willing to attack and fight fellow members of the species is not necessarily the ugly, evil, negative thing we humans make of it in our own species. Instead, it may actually have positive survival values in the real world.

The form of aggression most familiar to big-game hunters—battling between male animals for breeding rights—has very real benefits for the local population. In most cases, this kind of aggressive behavior tends to ensure that the superior males—the strongest, most vigorous, and most aggressive—will sire most of the young, passing on in their genes the best possible prospects for the survival of the herd. It's often called survival of the fittest, but in this case it might better be termed "breeding success for the fittest," with the final objective being survival of the entire species.

These battles are of two different kinds. In one kind, the contending males may actually fight over a receptive female or a harem of females, while in the other, the combat is for possession of a breeding territory, to which the victorious male hopes to attract receptive females after having won control of the area. Whitetail bucks, for example, fight principally for territory, although a doe may precipitate the war by leading a strange buck into the domain of another, territorialized male. Mule deer bucks do their fighting over one female or a small group of females, and territory has little or nothing to do with the battle. The American wapiti falls into this same category.

The most striking example of the territorial mode of breeding with which I'm familiar is in the Uganda kob, an African antelope of the waterbuck family. Male kobs stake out small, round territories, only a few yards across, and fight savagely for the most desirable locations. There may be scores of these pads, almost adjacent, in one small area, each one inhabited by an anxious buck; and it appears that the more central territories are the most desirable. The bucks pay no attention to the competing bucks in plain sight all around them, concentrating on the females that wander through the area. Evidently,

Photographer Jerry Smith captured this remarkable example of animal aggression during the rut. From top left: Two reasonably well-matched bucks approach each other, and the smaller deer is obviously willing to have a go at it. Horns lock and muscles strain, but the big buck is too strong. The weaker male breaks free, is hooked in the flanks to help him on his way, and then is chased off to a safe distance. The dominant buck can return to peacefully guarding his harem.



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Photograph by Len Rue, Jr.


Photograph by Leonard Lee Rue III

Two battling bighorn rams is one of the most dramatic sights in the animal world. Although the sound echoes for miles and the impact is fierce, only rarely does serious injury result. Moose, however, are more likely to injure each other badly.

the females prefer the bucks holding the centrally located pads and must thread their way among many other, lesser males to reach the domains of the dominant males. Thus, as a young kob enters his breeding career, he is able to secure only a pad on the outskirts of the colony, but as he grows stronger and better armed he fights his way toward the center, year after year. Then, in his declining years, he is pushed outward again as his fighting prowess wanes.

Since the kob is a horned animal, whose horns continue to grow throughout its life, the oldest animals are usually the best trophies, but these may be found on the fringe-area territories because, although carrying the most impressive horns, they've lost the physical strength to wield these weapons to best advantage. In antlered animals (including all of the deer species), the best trophies are usually the young-middle-aged animals in their physical prime, and, among whitetails at least, they would be found occupying the most desirable territories. Unfortunately, unlike the kob, the social organization of the whitetail is not such that these territories can be easily identified by humans.

It is a very rough, general rule (with many exceptions) that herding animals—especially those that migrate to any extent either horizontally or, in the case of mountain species, vertically—tend to do their fighting over specific females, whereas solitary and sedentary species, when they fight, do it over territory. This group includes most of the large predators, such as the bears and big cats, although the African lion might be considered an exception. Moose fight over territory, whereas mountain sheep and goats, pronghorns, and caribou fight over individual females. In some of these species, the social structure seems to cause much less fighting of any kind


Photograph by Irene Vandermolen

Although fascinating, the fight itself isn't of first importance to hunters, but rather the sounds or actions that bring it on, such as the bugling challenge of this big bull elk.

than in others, however. Mountain rams, for example, are notorious battlers, while pronghorn bucks are seldom seen in earnest combat. Similarly, local conditions and population dynamics can radically affect the frequency of breeding battles between males. The male-to-female ratio in the herd has an important influence on the incidence of fighting, with a high percentage of males in the herd increasing the competition for each receptive female, as well as the odds that two evenly matched males will encounter each other and thus have the opportunity for aggression. Whitetails are a perfect example. The ratio of bucks to does in a natural (unhunted and not subject to abnormal predation or poaching) herd seems to be about one to two or slightly higher. At this ratio, the level of fighting between bucks is quite high. Where a deer herd has been mismanaged so badly that the buck-to-doe ratio is, say, one to seven or even lower, each male is too busy servicing does to be very interested in fighting during the brief, intense rutting period.

Not only does the sex distribution in the herd have its effect on the number and intensity of fights between males, but so does the age distribution in the male segment of the herd. This is because seriously mismatched animals will seldom, if ever, engage each other. The lighter, younger, or weaker bull or buck simply understands at a glance that his adversary is too powerful for him, and he will not fight. Most really serious battles take place between quite

evenly matched specimens, and, of course, between animals that are old enough to be sexually mature and with full muscular development. This means that in a herd in which there are few mature males (true of a great many whitetail herds throughout the United States), there will be fewer fights simply because the few big, mature animals seldom meet a challenger worthy of their mettle. If a bighorn sheep band has only one trophy-grade ram during the breeding season, obviously there won't be a lot of butting going on. The big ram has only to shake his horns at a youngster to send him fleeing.

This serves nature's purposes in another way, too: The younger animal thus avoids possible injury. Any injury, no matter how slight, at this time of the year requires the animal's body to reapportion some of its resources to damage control and repair, and that reduces the individual's survival chances during the oncoming winter. Two evenly matched animals are less likely to inflict serious injury on each other, despite their greater power and weight.

Actually, any fighting at all is inherently dangerous for both participants and risks reduction of their survivability. Therefore, most species have evolved an elaborate ritual seemingly designed to avoid the final, physical combat. Deer and elk work out the local hierarchy well before the rut begins by more-or-less playful sparring matches in which they gingerly test each other's strength, thus avoiding the necessity of so many serious battles in the real heat of passion later on. Even when a pair of matched contestants comes face to face during the breeding season, they indulge in a series of progressively more businesslike threat and warning gestures, including harmless demonstrations of their prowess against unoffending shrubs and saplings. If one animal is intimidated and gives ground, combat is avoided. Only as a last resort, in most species, is the issue settled by physical conflict, and, even then, the encounter is usually quite brief since one gladiator immediately senses the superior strength arrayed against him. The wild sheep's method of fighting, however, sometimes calls for a prolonged bout with repeated head-on clashes of the sheep's armored foreheads.

In any species, very few breeding fights are to the death, although the African lion is, again, a frequent exception. The point of the fight is not to eliminate the rival from the population, but merely to ensure that the winner's genes are passed along to as many offspring as possible.

The hunter very often takes advantage of this process of determining the strongest and bravest of the males, most commonly by imitating the challenge call of the species in an attempt to lure a dominant male within rifle range. Classic examples are bugling for bull elk and rattling antlers for whitetail bucks (in some portions of the range). There are many other examples of the technique, and some of them are fiercely exciting. Calling lions is a well-established hunting method in Mozambique (formerly Portuguese East Africa) and is done by imitating the grunting of a male through a tin trumpet resembling the old-time fireman's megaphone. This is done at night, and although spotlighting is frowned upon in general in this country, I must advise you that in the dubious light of a flashlight, the sight of a full-grown maned lion charging the sound that he takes to be a rival male invading his territory is not a spectacle that most hunters would describe as taking unfair advantage of a wild animal! Believe me, there's a *big* difference between jacklighting a deer and spotlighting an angry, 450-pound cat.

Another experience guaranteed to make your hair hard to comb for about a week is calling up a male jaguar with an instrument called, in Spanish, a *pujandera,* which translates as "grunter." It's a drum-like arrangement made by stretching a piece of rawhide over the head of a gourd or even a lard can, with a pigtail of braided horsehair attached to the center of the drumhead on the inside. With a little rosin on his thumb and forefinger, the caller reaches inside and strokes the pigtail, producing an exact imitation of the challenge call of a tom jaguar. I hunted with two *pujandera* experts in Mexico before the spotted cats went on the endangered species list, and it is not a pastime requiring a great many No-Doz tablets to keep the hunter awake! The cat will answer the call from a distance, and you can hear him coming closer and closer. He sounds fighting mad, and he is. When he gets close, he stops answering and makes his final approach in deathly silence. You know he's out there, stalking you, but you don't know exactly where. When he's close enough, you turn on your shooting light and shoot him. Simple as that.

The only trouble is that I'm not certain how you know exactly when to turn on your light. I asked that question of one of my guides one night, and this man—who is a professional *tigrero* with as many jaguars to his credit as any man alive—gave me the following answer, roughly translated from the Spanish: "When I was a young man, just learning to hunt the *tigre* from an old and experienced *tigrero,* I asked him the same question. He asked me if I had fear, waiting for the *tigre* to come close enough in the darkness, with my light covered, and I answered that sometimes I was a little nervous. Then he laughed and said, 'Boy, if you have not the stomach to call the *tigre* in the night with no light, you're in the wrong racket!'"

It didn't exactly answer my question, as the old *tigrero* had not answered that of the young guide many years earlier, but it does give an insight into the thinking of a professional hunter.

I can personally attest to the fact that one's "stomach" does get involved. I remember one wild night, far up in the head of a canyon in an isolated mountain range in Tamaulipas, when we listened to a male jaguar coming from quite a distance in the

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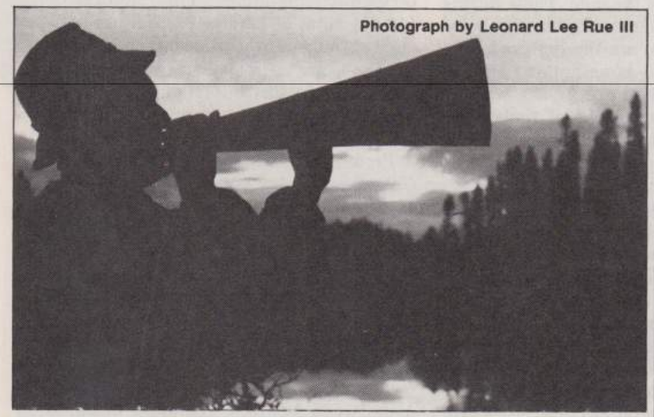
Photograph by Leonard Lee Rue III

Hunters in many lands have learned to imitate the sounds made by animals during the rut. These range from the *pujandera,* a rawhide-covered can used to attract jaguars (left), to a mouth-blown moose call (above), to the Texas technique of horn rattling for whitetail bucks.