

Sports/Outdoors



Photos by John Wootters

Bucky and the author's wife, Jeannie, had a mutual love affair, and the deer would follow her anywhere for a bite of fruit. The poodle, Peso, was jealous but there was never any friction between the animals.

The legend of Bucky

For 22 years, through Y2K, my wife and I owned Los Cuernos Ranch down on the border near Laredo in Webb County. A lot of interesting critters lived there, the most fascinating of which was a whitetail buck named (naturally) Bucky.

He was born on the ranch next door to a pet doe and roamed freely over parts of at least three ranches. His mother "raised him gentle" so that he did not fear humans, but he was never penned up or confined in any way.

He lived truly free, interacting normally with the local wild deer herd. Like any other wild buck, he came and went as he pleased and participated actively in the rut. He fought savage battles for breeding rights, and won many of them.

Unlike wild bucks, however, he regarded people as friends. He took food from our hands and would follow my wife, Jeannie, around, as she usually had a tidbit of apple or banana for him.

He seemed to enjoy being handled and petted, and would even tolerate (but didn't like) having his antlers touched while in velvet. He sometimes came to me to have cactus spines plucked out of his hide.

As you might imagine, acquaintance with Bucky was priceless to me, as a writer specializing in white-tails and their habits. Consider being able to stand within a few feet of a white-tail buck as he made and used scrapes and rubs and performed all the other rituals of the rut.

He taught me more about the lifestyle and language of a wild whitetail buck in the Brush Country in four years than 30 years of field observations. When the rut was upon him, I'd follow him around the yard, observing

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and photographing — up close — the details of his behavior, while he utterly ignored me.

I was always careful during such activities, however, not to make myself unnecessarily vulnerable to a possible sudden attack by Bucky, though he never showed any sign of aggression. Bucks that have lost their fear of people are notoriously unpredictable during the rut. Many "tame" bucks, hand-reared and fearless of humans, have turned on their owners without warning and seriously injured or even killed them. No matter how well you may think you know him, never trust a pet buck during the rut.

Too many memories of Bucky crowd in for the space available. Like all white-tails, Bucky loved tobacco, and he once left a doe in the pasture when I called him by name and waved a cigarette. He trotted 100 yards down a fence line to me, ate the cigarette from my fingers, and raced back to his girlfriend — leaving my companion in the truck, who hadn't heard about Bucky, wide-eyed and speechless.

Over at the neighboring ranch, Bucky entered the house at will and socialized with everyone present. We have pictures of him lying on the living room rug watching television with the family.

We never permitted him

inside our ranch house, but he never hesitated to enter our barn or garage and once nearly frightened to death a man working on our water system. We were not there, so the repairman was working alone, in an extremely remote area often traveled by illegal immigrants. The man noticed a shadow from the open door behind him and turned to find himself literally nose to nose with a full-grown whitetail buck.

"I liked to have jumped out of my skin," he chuckled.

People ask me why free-roaming Bucky never got himself shot by hunters. We tried outfitting him with a bell, a wide blaze-orange collar, and/or conspicuous ear tags, but he quickly managed to lose them all. In the end, his mediocre rack probably saved him.

I've been around many pet white-tails, but Bucky was unique. Everyone who met him fell under his benign spell. We treasured him and did what little we could to help when he showed up with a serious antler wound in the paunch, but we couldn't save him.

He died at age six and a half years. We grieved for him, but he lived a long and exciting life for a Texas buck. It was more than a decade ago that we lost him, and we still miss him.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Peterson's hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for "Shooting Times," "Rifle," "Handloader," "Guns & Ammo" and Peterson's "Hunting."