

Outdoors

Rattling the horns

No, I don't mean the kind that makes you jump if you hear it in the grass around your feet; I mean the kind that makes big whitetail bucks run up to you and shake their racks at you.

Rattling antlers, in other words. With about 35 years experience in this method of hunting, it isn't surprising that I've some fairly firm opinions about how, when and where to do it. There may be a few hunters around who've rattled-up more bucks than I (Bob Ramsey, out at Hunt, is one) but not many.

First, some basic rules. Never, ever, rattle on public land, or even near the boundaries of private pastures. There are "hunters" out there that have only to hear the horns and glimpse a movement in the brush to start shooting. Second, always set up so that you have a good view downwind. I say it again: you will take most of your bucks on the downwind side. It took me years to learn this simple lesson, and here you are, getting it for free in the local newspaper.

These are the two most important lessons about rattling. No. 3 is to plan and execute your approach to a rattling stand so as not to be

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seen, heard, or smelled by deer in the vicinity. Always approach upwind and never skyline yourself.

Next, assuming you executed No. 3 successfully, begin your rattling sequence with just a few subdued clicks instead of a great honking clash of the horns. You'll be surprised at how often you can get a buck in your face within seconds if you can get close without spooking him and start your routine softly.

As to technique, I have little advice to offer, mainly because it really doesn't matter much. Real bucks have no script for their fight, and every battle sounds different. Several different rattling "dialects" are popular, and they all seem to work about equally well. I tend to follow the border school of loud aggressive rattling with lots of sidebar sound effects —

grunts, thrashing brush, stamping the earth — but I really have no particular pattern to my rattling performance. I sort of let the deer tell me by their responses how they want the horns rattled that day. As with any kind of game calling, however, it's easy to get carried away and overdo it, so I try to hold each sequence to about 30 or 40 seconds.

The most productive antler-rattling tactic is a two-man deal, one shooter and one rattler. The rattler sets up about 50 yards upwind from the shooter, and bucks that try to circle the source of the sounds often all but run over the shooter. It goes without saying, of course, that you have to know and trust your partner in this enterprise.

Most serious horn rattlers prefer to use real antlers, although there's no doubt the various man-made rattlers on the market will call bucks.

Most of us have tried every conceivable potion, oil, and magic liquid imaginable to preserve the good sound of a favorite pair of horns. None work as well as simply keeping the antlers in a stable environment (such as an air-conditioned house) year-'round.

Hanging them up in a hot



Photo by John Wootters

Horn-rattling calls for both cover and concealment, plus full camouflage, especially including the face and hands.

garage between seasons is the worst thing you can do to them, and the second worst is soaking rattles in water. They do sound good for a while, but the more you soak the more you have to soak them, until they need to be soaked every night before use the next morning. Then they literally rot from the

inside out.

Good rattles — which are a rare and precious possession, and maybe a little magic, deserve better than that.

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."