

Outdoors

To corn, or not to corn

The topic of hunting deer over corn seems to have a lot in common with religion. Many conflicting doctrines exist among hunters and are devoutly held and stoutly defended. Every true believer is convinced that his is the one true gospel, and that all others should be denied entrance, if not to Heaven, then at least to the record book.

Some regard baiting as a sin and an abomination, unsporting, unfair to the deer, and not worthy of the title "hunting." These are obviously in the minority.

Something over 90 percent of all bucks harvested in Texas are said to die very close to an active corn feeder. According to Texas A&M professor Dr. Neal Wilkins, Texas hunters buy 300 million pounds of corn each season, which figures out to about 75 pounds for every living buck, doe and fawn in the state. If all that corn were purchased in bags at \$5/bag, it would work out to a \$60 million annual pop to the state's economy ... but it wasn't; many tons are delivered in bulk.

One 20,000-acre hunting lease reported buying 388,000 pounds of corn in one recent season. (I'm snitching these figures from Ray Sasser's brilliant article in volume 2, issue 3 of the beautiful new magazine, Texas Sporting Journal. If you haven't seen this magazine, you're missing an exceptional read.)

These numbers make Texas deer hunters something of a laughingstock in some other states. I've heard non-residents sneer that Texans aren't deer hunters, but snipers. There is, of course, a grain of truth in this. Baiting non-migratory game, however, is legal in Texas (and elsewhere).

As Sasser points out, the Boone and Crockett Club fair-chase rules, which for many hunters are the stan-

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dard of hunting ethics, say nothing about legal baiting and accept corn-fed trophies for entry into "the book".

Many biologists, ranchers, hunting outfitters and guides, and hunters testify that corning is beneficial to the deer themselves, permitting more accurate judgments of age and antler quality, and thus more discriminating selection of bucks for harvest, as well as more precise shooting for cleaner kills and fewer lost cripples.

In some parts of East Texas and most of South Texas, it's nearly impossible to hunt successfully without somehow luring bucks out of the dense thickets. There is a case to be made for baiting, although opponents may not admit it.

There's also more than one style of baiting. Most familiar is the automatic feeder, activated by a clock timer. Another is the "sendero feeder" on the tailgate of a pickup truck, from which corn can be scattered while driving along a ranch road by a switch activated by the driver. A buddy of mine uses a hand-pushed lawn fertilizer spreader to corn areas accessible only on foot.

My wife once started a single-kernel line of corn at an arroyo several hundred yards from her South Texas tripod and walked the bait straight to the stand, one kernel every few inches. A huge 10-point buck – easily 160-class – soon appeared at the far end of the line and followed it kernel by kernel to within 50 yards of her position. I know about the



Photo by John Wootters

One justification offered for hunting over corn feeders is the difficulty – if not impossibility – of getting a clean shot at a buck in thickets like this – which cover most of east and south Texas and parts of the Hill Country.

buck because she forgot all about shooting and recorded the whole thing on videotape. (We never saw that buck again.)

Old geezers like me began hunting back when baiting was unheard-of. We also learned hunting skills and tactics that seem forgotten today. I've hunted whitetails for more than 60 years and have collected well over 200 bucks (I lost count long ago). The only bucks of that number that were shot over a feeder were management culls.

That's because I find it, well, unsatisfying, to shoot a buck that has been "trained" to come to the same place at the same hour every day. I therefore avoid the use of automatic feeders except for harvesting does and cull bucks. But I'm not a purist: I do use a sendero feeder to corn roads at stands when

hunting there, not more often than every three or four days. This may stop or slow down a crossing buck, perhaps giving me a few more seconds to judge his age and antlers and/or make a careful shot.

This is a purely personal decision for each of us. I'd never try to tell you how to hunt. As long as it's legal, do it in whatever manner suits you. And good hunting. **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."**