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HUNTER TAKES
MUZZLELOADER
GIANT
PG 38

NEW YORK
NON-TYPICAL
STEALS THE
SHOW
PG 46

HOW TO LOCATE
MATURE BUCKS
ON ALL SIDES OF
THE MOUNTAIN

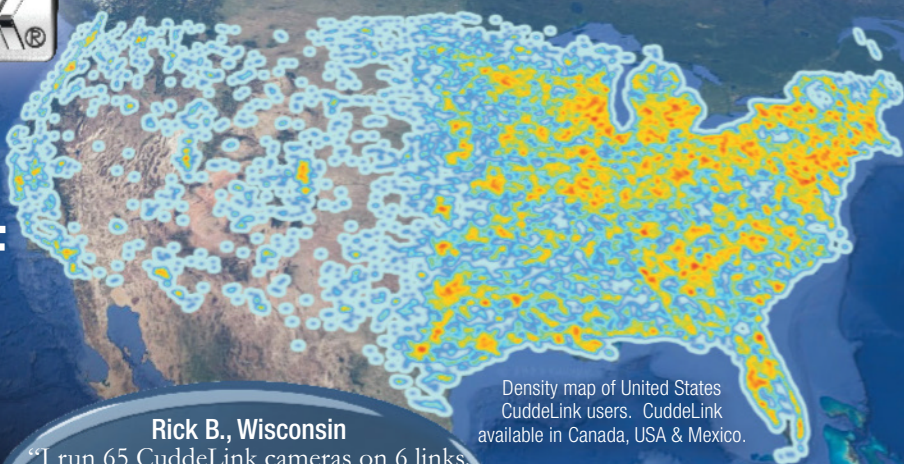


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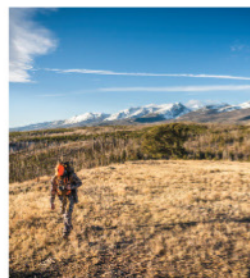
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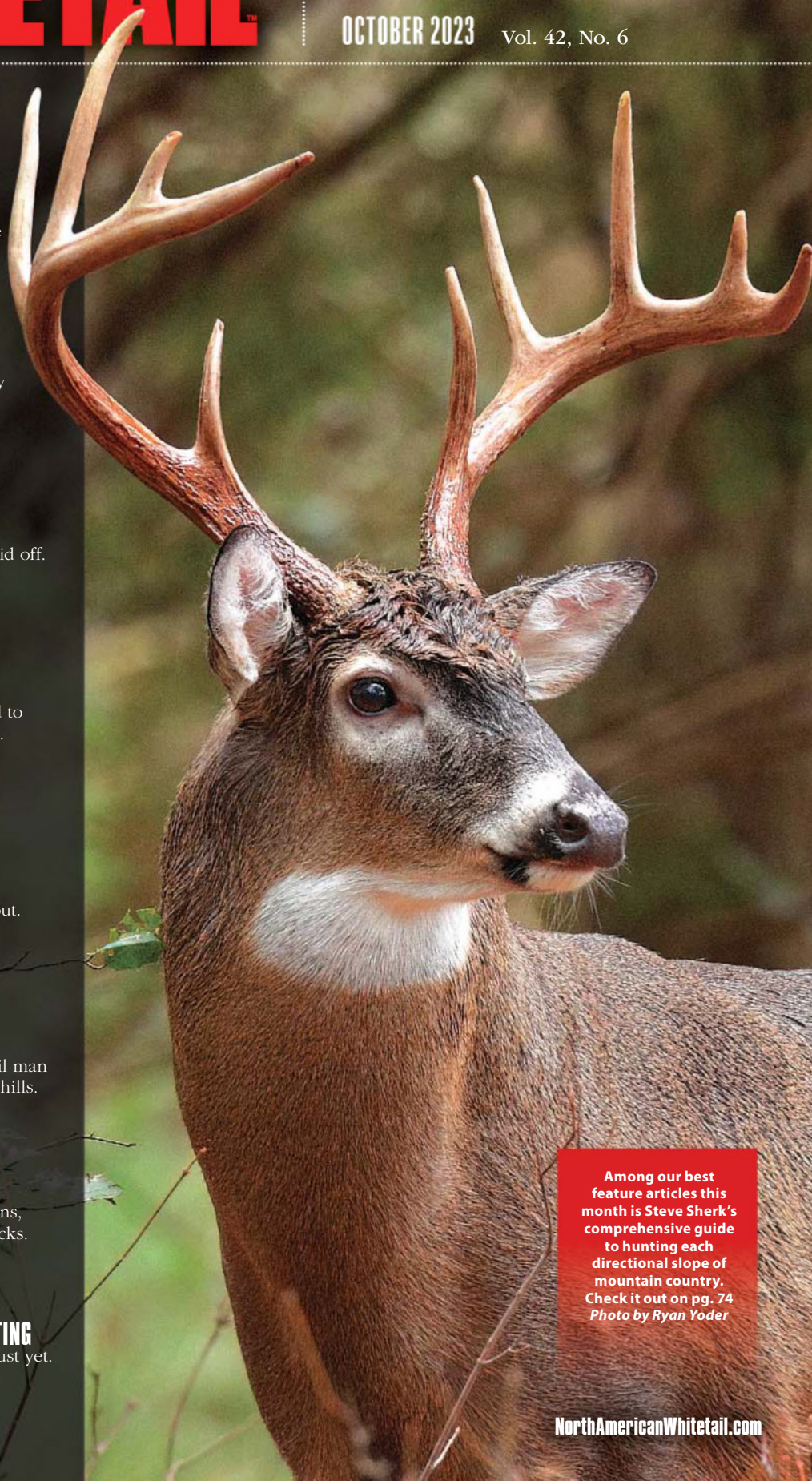
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THE LOST ART OF IN-SEASON SCOUTING

Don't hang up your scouting boots just yet.

BY ALEX COMSTOCK



Among our best feature articles this month is Steve Sherk's comprehensive guide to hunting each directional slope of mountain country. Check it out on pg. 74
Photo by Ryan Yoder



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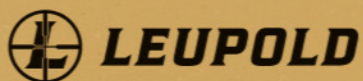




Photo by Clint McCoy

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Every piece of hunting land is only ours temporarily.



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Curt McCarty's outstanding Iowa typical scores 195 5/8 net. Photo courtesy of Curt McCarty

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Tune in every Tuesday at 7:30 PM ET on Outdoor Channel to catch episodes of NAW TV. This month, we kick off season 20 with several exciting episodes.

This month on NAW TV, Stan Potts is back chasing big bucks near his home in Illinois with his Bowtech. Tune in this month to see Stan have two successful hunts in the Prairie State.
Photo courtesy of Stan Potts

WEEK OF OCT. 2-8:

"Saskatchewan Slammers": Haynes Shelton and his dad head to Northway Outfitters in Saskatchewan to chase giant whitetails in temperatures far below zero. In Dr. Deer, Dr. James Kroll discusses timber elements and how they affect deer movement. In the Big Buck Profile, Haynes Shelton profiles Iowa's new No. 2 typical by bow: the Curt McCarty buck.

WEEK OF OCT. 9-15:

"Bucks Out West": Blake Garlock heads to Wyoming in pursuit of whitetails with his Bowtech at Trophy Ridge Outfitters. Dr. James Kroll talks staging areas and how bucks use them in Dr. Deer. During the Big Buck Profile, Haynes Shelton profiles Josh Heuser's 250-class Missouri non-typical that was featured on the Dec./Jan. 2023 cover of North American Whitetail magazine.

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WEEK OF OCT. 16-22:

"Moments to Remember, No. 1": Stan Potts is back with a heart-pounding bowhunt in his home state of Illinois this week. In Dr. Deer, Dr. James Kroll discusses the role water holes play in the whitetail's landscape. Haynes Shelton profiles Iowa's James Reed buck from 1988, which has never been featured on *North American Whitetail TV* before.

WEEK OF OCT. 23-29:

"Moments to Remember, No. 2": Stan Potts returns to the big screen with another action-packed hunt in Illinois, this time with a slug gun. Dr. James Kroll breaks down all-things trails and travel routes in Dr. Deer. Haynes Shelton profiles one of Iowa's best-ever archery non-typicals, the Kyle Simmons buck, which has been on the cover of *North American Whitetail*.

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CELEBRATING 20 YEARS OF



Avid readers of *North American Whitetail* know the magazine has been in circulation since 1982, as celebrated in our October 2022 40th Anniversary Special Issue.

But what about *North American Whitetail TV*? Have any top fans kept up with how many seasons our brand's television show has premiered on Outdoor Channel and Sportsman Channel? It's another big anniversary for us. When our 2023 episodes began airing this June, it marked NAW TV's 20th season on air!

To celebrate the two-decade milestone, we're airing "throwback" episodes on back-to-back weeks on Sportsman Channel. Primetime slots are scheduled for Wednesday, Sept. 6 and 13 (both are Wednesday nights), at 9:30 PM ET. Both episodes also air on Outdoor Channel on Tuesday, Dec. 5 and 12, at 7:30 PM ET.

These shows are packed start-to-finish with our cast members' favorite hunts dating back to when the show launched in 2003. These include special episodes from NAW Editor Emeritus Gordon Whittington, Biologist Dr. James C. Kroll, whitetail expert Stan Potts,

NAW TV airs its 20th season in 2023, a special two-decade milestone for our team. Since 2003, we've been committed to bringing our fans exciting and educational content on Outdoor Channel and Sportsman Channel, focused entirely on free-range whitetail hunting across North America. NAW Staff Photos

and one other team member with a far shorter tenure than the aforementioned . . . me!

It was a fun project going back over 20 years of exciting free-range trophy deer hunts to find these videos in our archives. Many of these hunts I remember watching for the first time with my dad, on the television screen down in his trophy room. I was literally a kid when the NAW TV "old heads" first knocked these bucks down on film.

Which memorable hunts did our cast members select for their anniversary throwbacks? Without revealing them all, here's a few of my favorites. Throughout the course of the two shows, you'll see Stan Potts' infamous 2006 Ohio muzzleloader hunt for a 200-inch bruiser buck — one of the first 200-class whitetails ever taken on video camera.

Plus, Gordon Whittington rewinds the clock back to 2008, when he put

a successful stalk on a 15-point giant buck at Two Rivers Outfitters in South Dakota. And, Dr. James Kroll travels back in time to an Arkansas hunt in 2012 with David Jordening at Two Rivers Hunting Club, where he shoots a legit B&C-class buck on an action-packed rut hunt.

As for myself, I chose a couple great hunts of my own from more recent years. These include an early November 2020 crossbow hunt at Real McCoy Outdoors in Adams County, Ohio, and a September 2019 bowhunt for velvet bucks at Trophy Ridge Outfitters in northeastern Wyoming.

These aren't even half of the classic NAW TV hunts you'll see during our two weeks of special 20th Anniversary programming this fall on Sportsman Channel and Outdoor Channel. We hope you enjoy rewatching them as much as we did reliving them! Here's to two decades of NAW TV, and hopefully many more to come. **NAW**

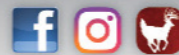
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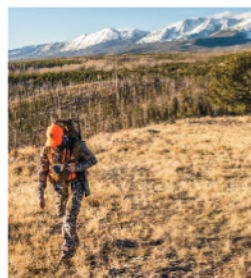
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**DR. DEER**

BY DR. JAMES C. KROLL

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**WILDTREE****PART 5**

MANAGING WHITETAILS ON PRIVATE LANDS

What is deer habitat? Well, any animal's habitat includes the physical area in which a specific population lives, and includes forage or food, cover and water. In other words, deer habitat is the *landscape* in which your deer reside.

Just like the landscape of your own home, there are key elements that enhance the needs of daily life. Years ago, we concluded that defining the perfect whitetail landscape was the sole way to improve habitat for deer. Since the species is distributed almost over the entire western hemisphere, defining the deer landscape is a pretty tall order! Early on in our research, we learned that the elements of habitat have two attributes — form and function.

The form of habitat relates to what it looks like structurally — the whole, not the specific species of plants distributed over the landscape. Cover is an excellent example. It really does not matter what plants (and structure) are present, only that they look like what is needed for that specific type of cover. Recognition of the form (the way it looks) leads to the benefits (function) provided by that habitat component.

So, as a deer walks around your property, it is constantly assessing the form and function of every "patch" of habitat. You should think of your land as an assemblage of patches. Yet, there is another element to all this; the way the various habitat components (patches) are distributed. And how they relate to each other.



Water is one of the necessary elements of the deer landscape. Water can be a stream, pool, pond, lake or artificial source such as a livestock water trough. Photo by Rick Small

In the 1970s, we were involved in an intensive study on home range, movements and habitat preferences of whitetails in eastern Texas. To do so, we had to capture deer, place radio-collars on them, then track their locations and movements over time. At the same time, forestry was

converting from uneven-aged management to even-aged management, meaning that clearcutting became the preferred silvicultural technique.

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The first intrusions into even-aged management involved cutting very large areas, with little regard for the environment or wildlife habitat. At the North Boggy Slough Hunting & Fishing Club, belonging to the Temple-Inland Corporation, we were lucky enough to have acquired baseline data on deer movements collected prior to total clearcutting.

Based on these data, home range size prior to clearcutting indicated relatively small home ranges of less than 300 acres. Once clearcutting commenced, home range size and shape increased dramatically, leading us to investigate the cause(s) for this increase. It turns out the large blocks of clearcuts did not provide what the deer needed at a reasonable spacing to reduce effort to satisfy a deer's needs!

Fortunately, Boggy Slough was so large, we had the opportunity (and permission of the company) to experiment on timber harvest size.

Long story made short, we used a tricky experimental design to learn we actually could make home ranges smaller. Even prior to clearcutting, a deer home range was classically elliptical in shape, due to the distance between the most important habitat elements. As we made smaller and smaller cuts, the home ranges not only became smaller (about 80 acres), but were almost circular! We declared this 80-acre home range size the minimum management unit!

Boggy Slough lies in the Southern Coastal Plain, a very mesic, almost subtropical climate. As our later work expanded into drier climates, the minimum home range (management unit) increased from 80 acres to 160 acres, and finally as much as 640 acres. At our research area in Mexico, we now consider the minimum management unit to be around 500 acres.

But what does this mean, and how does it apply to developing a habitat management plan for YOUR property?

HABITAT ANALYSIS FOR YOUR PROPERTY

So far, we have learned that deer have a built-in image of the habitat elements they need for their life requisites. And each of these elements must be present in the proper location and abundance. The plant composition of the elements can be irrelevant, as long as they provide the function needed.

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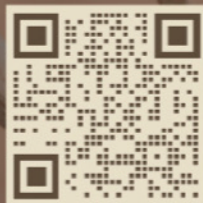
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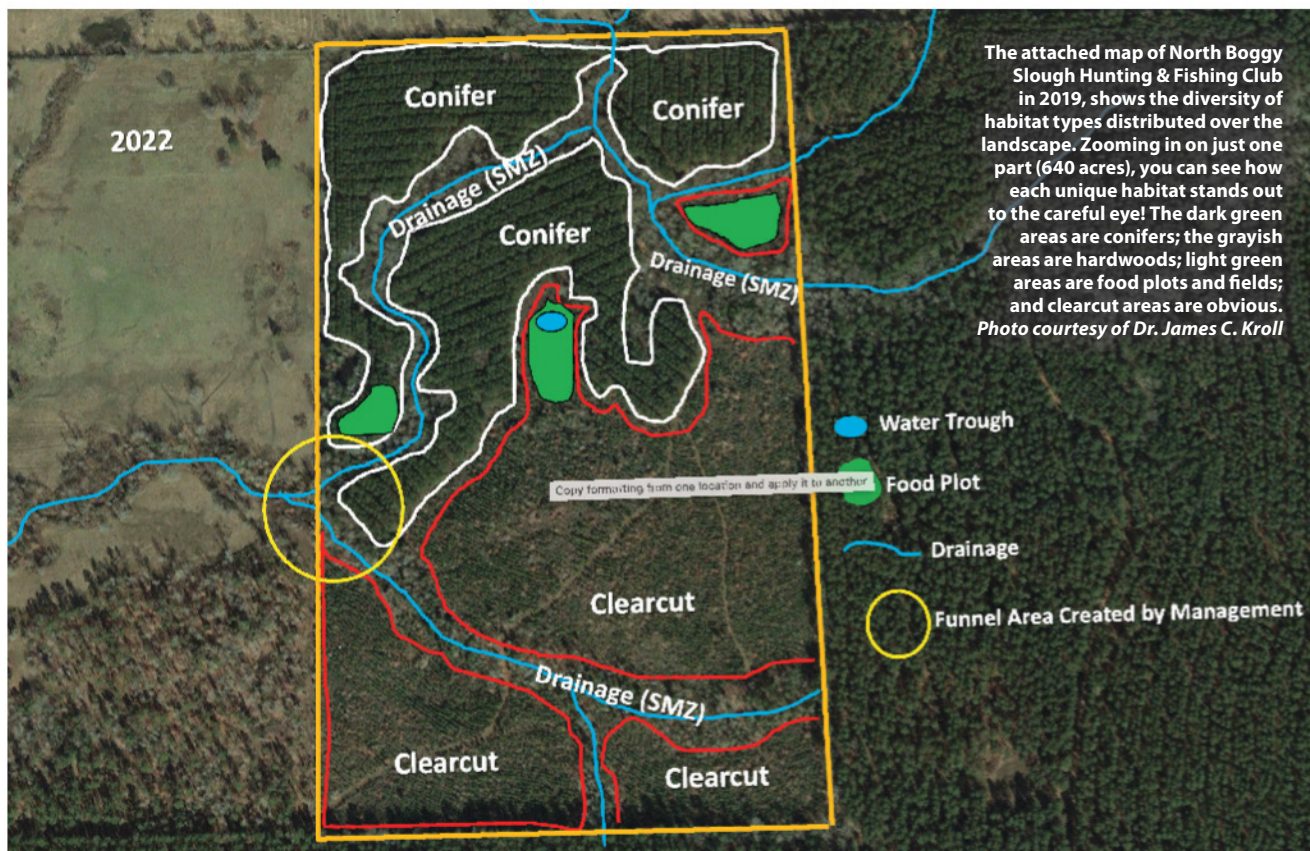
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For example, do you think a deer really cares about the grass species it is using for bedding cover, as long as the function is satisfied? So, a deer near Coahuila, Mexico, finds just as much benefit to bedding in a Buffelgrass hillside as one near Wichita, Kansas, lying in a hillside of Giant Bluestem!

The same two deer may find equal utility of summer thermal cover in a thicket of Huisache or Chickasaw Plum. It does, however, matter where these habitat types are located in the deer landscape. So, the first step in developing a habitat management plan for your property begins with an aerial image, which is used to map the landscape elements. Today, aerial imagery is easily acquired using Google Earth or popular mobile hunting apps.

In this article, I've included an image of Boggy Slough in 2019, showing the diversity of habitat types distributed over the landscape. Zooming in on just one part (640 acres), you can see how each unique habitat stands out to the careful eye! The dark green areas are conifers; the grayish areas are

hardwoods; light green areas are food plots and fields; and clearcut areas are obvious.

No matter what geographic area you reside in, the key elements for deer habitat will remain the same. The must-haves of the Deer Landscape are: winter thermal cover, summer thermal cover, escape cover, forage (browse and mast) and water.

Bedding cover is a subset of winter, summer and escape covers. Winter thermal cover is comprised of a fairly dense overhead canopy and dense understory that impedes snow and wind flow. Summer thermal cover is composed of a somewhat open canopy and low understory that permits wind flow. Escape Cover is any area that has vegetation tall enough and dense enough to hide a deer after it runs no more than 25 yards.

Forage habitat consists either of vegetation no taller than 4 1/2 feet and contains preferred forage species; or, trees that produce mast (hard or soft) during some time of the year. Water can be a stream, pool, pond, lake or

artificial source, such as a livestock water trough. In the attached map photo, you'll see the property I'm referencing contains all these elements in one management unit.

From a broad landscape perspective, the property is bordered on the west and north by large open areas, which are cattle operations. The owner to the west has left drainages intact, and the southern portion of this property is mixed conifer-hardwood, with some browse production. This means it is probably a forage area with adequate browse.

The owner to the north did not leave drainages intact, and there are no inherent travel corridors! The property to the south and east is an intensively managed conifer plantation, apparently thinned circa 2009 (note thinned rows). Benefits to forage growth after 14 years are minimal. There are small openings, representing logging decks; but other than those, the landscape is very low in diversity!

The property itself has two stands of conifers that, we learned from historic

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imagery, are 17 years old. Subsequently, they were thinned in 2012, leaving Streamside Management Zones along drainages; and the remainder of the property was clearcut at that time. The benefit of thinning to increase browse has been lost after 11 years. Drainages were left vegetated to reduce erosion, providing excellent travel corridors.

HABITAT ANALYSIS

Now, let's develop a suggested habitat management plan for this property, using this information. When doing so, you must ask yourself: "What does this property have that the neighboring properties do not have? And, what can we do to make deer "see" this property as having the right habitat elements in the right places?

The pastures to the west and north only provide native weeds (forbaceous), which are ephemeral; and there are three ponds that deer probably have to travel to at night. The pasture to the west has a mixed conifer-hardwood area on its southern edge, which provides escape/bedding cover and browse. The conifer plantation should serve as good winter thermal cover, but not much more.

There are two drainage systems (SMZs) running roughly east to west across the property. The only permanent water sources are three ponds on adjacent properties (blue areas). The drainages are not perennial, and they go dry during the summer and early fall. At this time, deer using the property obviously have good travel corridors (east-west) through the thinned conifers and clearcut area.

The latter serves as a browsing and escape cover area. The SMZs in the pasture to the west are critical to aiding this movement pattern. Although there are missing elements on the property, each of the adjacent properties have even less to offer. It can be landscaped to become the "epicenter" of deer activity.

The first missing element is water. We recommend at least one permanent water source per 80 acres, so just a single one would do wonders! This can be done with either a new pond or a simple water trough connected to a storage tank. A preferred location for a

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water trough is marked on the map.

There also is a need for summer thermal cover, which is absent or scarce for all the properties. The best way to generate summer thermal cover on the property is to prescribe burn the conifer stands every other year. This also will encourage forage growth and keep the vegetation low. Note the water station is strategically located adjacent to this cover.

“ The must-haves of the Deer Landscape are: winter thermal cover, summer thermal cover, escape cover, forage (browse and mast) and water. ”

There is nothing in the way of agriculture in the adjacent area, creating an opportunity for both warm and cool season food plots. We recommend planting 2-3 percent of the area (ca., 2 1/2 acres) in food plots adjacent to the travel corridor SMZs. Three food plots are marked on the map, each containing about an acre or less.

Finally, it is obvious from the imagery the area marked with the yellow circle is the “hotspot” for intercepting deer crossing the property. It is a perfect “harvest” location, and the habitat management practices recommended will serve to funnel deer through this area. Subtle shooting lanes can be cleared across this location. With these improvements, the deer landscape should be highly attractive to resident and visiting deer.

This is just one example of how a Habitat Management Plan should be developed during the complete planning process. It all begins and ends with a map! Historic aerial images will help you determine what went on in the past, and they’ll guide you in interpreting the present habitat. **NAW**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Kroll is founder and director of the Institute for White-tailed Deer Management & Research in Nacogdoches, Texas.

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ULTRALIGHT HUNTING

SADDLE HUNTING HAS BEEN AROUND FOR DECADES, BUT IN RECENT YEARS THE MOBILE DEER HUNTING TACTIC HAS EXPLODED IN POPULARITY. THE QUESTION IS, ***DOES SADDLE HUNTING LIVE UP TO THE HYPE?***

SADDLE HUNTING:

Myth

0

There are plenty of myths and misconceptions out there regarding saddle hunting. The author says that the mobile hunting method is deserving of serious deer hunters' attention. Photo courtesy of Tethrd

I'm 44 years old. I'm not as flexible as I used to be, and the athletic body I had in my 20s is long gone. If I had to tell myself, I'm about 25 pounds too heavy and my lower back hurts all the time from years of farm work and large animal veterinary calls. With these things considered, I decided to try out a saddle hunting system made by the popular Tethrd brand in 2021.

Saddle hunting has been around for years, and it has held a bit of an "underground" presence in the mobile hunting space for as long as I've been hunting. In short, I knew saddle hunting existed, but I had never done a deep dive on the tactic.

When I opened the shipping box in the summer of 2021, my mind immediately went into panic mode. My first thought was: *What have I gotten myself into with this rig?* The saddle looked like a waist band with leg straps and an Amsteel "bridge." The kit included two thick ropes for climbing and tethering yourself to a tree, and a tiny platform for my size 12 boots. I was certainly navigating uncharted waters, and while I have been a strong advocate of mobile tree stand hunting for some time, this little setup intimidated me.

BUSTING MYTHS

Safety: I must admit, my first impression of saddle hunting gear was not positive. I was skeptical of the tactic for various reasons. Above all else, I was worried about climbing safety.

In 2006, I fell from a tree stand and broke my back in two places. I have been terrified of falling since that day, and I have strived

to remain "tied" to the tree from the ground up and back down to earth again. I broke the equipment out of the shipping container and took it to a bare telephone pole in the corner of my front yard for my first climb, but I wasn't about to get very high off the ground!

I hung the platform about shoulder height on the pole and added one climbing stick below it. I secured the saddle around my waist and legs and found it to be very safe and reassuring when climbing with the supplied line-man's rope and tether for the bridge. In short order, I found out that saddle hunting whitetails can be just as safe from accidental fall as conventional tree stands, maybe even safer!

The Learning Curve: After getting comfortable with a tree saddle at head height, I began to experiment with the rig. At first, I figured the learning curve to get myself up to par would be horrendous, but nothing could have been farther from the truth. Setting up for a shot with a bow or a gun was relatively easy, but I did have to adjust my "hunter's mindset" to set up successfully.

I am used to hanging a mobile tree stand with my strong side to the left of the setup (as a right-handed hunter). With the saddle platform, I found that if I intentionally positioned my left shoulder perpendicular to the expected route of deer travel, I could manage a shot with minimal movement and good concealment. After a few minutes of "shadow boxing practice," I was ready to actually shoot my bow from the mini practice pole.

Limited Use: At face value, I thought saddle hunting was a complete gimmick; but after 30 minutes of trial, I found myself peeking around the telephone pole and "hiding" from my foam target. I was blown away by how easy it was to find versatility in both angle and concealment, and I reasoned that using this method in close quarters to a mature whitetail buck would yield positive results.

I later experimented with trees that had a severe lean or offered little-to-no cover, and I decided that saddle hunting was a method that had its place in my arsenal of weapons to use every fall. A word to the wise: saddle hunting whitetail deer is no gimmick!

Physically Taxing: After ample yard practice, the saddle was in my repertoire for the coming 2021 deer season. At 42 years of age, I was worried about trying this new style of hunting. I have always subscribed to the theory that it is difficult to teach an old dog new tricks, and I will admit this mindset may have limited my discovery of saddle hunting much earlier in my hunting career. After my first few hang and hunt missions via saddle, I was cured of this false narrative.

I hunted with the tree saddle and platform on a warm day in early October 2021. I didn't have a predetermined tree to climb, I just went right into a small woodlot that I knew housed an old buck I'd been working on for a couple seasons. After my first successful ascent and saddle hunt, I was floored by the relative ease and lack of sweat it took to have a clean hunt. The platform was a

R

Merit?



Hunters chasing whitetails from a saddle need to determine what they want to get out of their platform. Various companies offer minimalistic options, as well as larger platforms for those wanting more surface area in the tree. Photo by Clint McCoy

breeze to strap into the ash tree I had chosen, and I hunted for nearly three hours until dark that first evening. I encountered three does and a young buck right below my position, and I considered my first saddle adventure a success.

I had originally considered saddle hunting to be a young-man's game. After using the Tethrd system for a few early season hunts, I reckoned the method to be less physically

taxing than packing and hanging a full-sized tree stand and four climbing sticks. Coupled with the speed and stealth of set up and take down, I resolved to use the saddle much more often after my first few uses.

Athleticism is Required: In the same theme as physical taxation, I had always viewed saddle hunting as an athlete's game. After my first whole

season of using the method, I can tell readers that nothing could be further from the truth! Again, at 42 years old, I was not as athletic as I was in my 20s!

I have two lumbar discs that are a total anatomical mess and have seen two different neurosurgeons about getting fixed. At first glance, I was apprehensive about saddle hunting because of my poor lower back structure, age and lack of flexibility. Likewise, I figured saddle hunting was for folks with a waistline less than 42 inches. In short, I felt old and fat at first when I climbed my first tree with the saddle, but after three full seasons of use, I no longer feel this way.

Saddle hunting is most certainly easier to do than hanging full-sized tree stands, especially if you are old and fat like me. You do not have to be a young, athletic stud to use this tactic for whitetails! I actually found using a saddle to be more friendly to my lower back than sitting in a conventional stand.

Saddle Hunting is Expensive: Do you already own a ton of tree stands and climbing

equipment? I did when I first obtained the saddle system! And after a couple years of use, I've whittled my saddle setup to a few critical pieces.

First, I invested in a set of Dan Infalt's Beast Sticks for climbing trees. While a set of four sticks set me back a pinch over \$300, I found them to be supreme in their versatility and tree-gripping ability. With minimal weight at 2 pounds each, these sticks nest together very well and can help hunters climb the gnarliest of trees.

This is everything it takes to make a "complete" kit for saddle hunting. All that is required to get started is a saddle, sticks or steps for climbing, a platform and safety ropes. Photo by Clint McCoy



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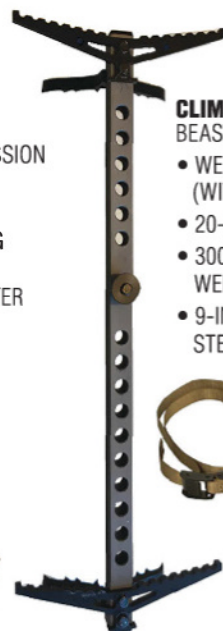
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When it comes to the saddle itself, one can spend countless dollars and internet research hours trying to find the right fit. I have finally settled on the Tethrd Phantom XL for both my budget and my robust waistline. The saddle fits me very well, even while wearing the thickest outer layers during cold weather hunts and is a joy to hunt from. The saddle system has an MSRP of \$425 and is made in the U.S.

After my first saddle season in 2021, I decided to try a larger platform and purchased the Trophyline Mission platform at an MSRP of \$200. The platform is huge and weighs 5.4 pounds, boasts a leveling system, an offset bracket, a 300-pound capacity and folds flat for

The author uses these gear ties to keep accessories close while saddle hunting. Many saddle hunters modify their systems until they get the kit that is perfect for their hunting style. Photo by Clint McCoy

ease of carry. My favorite part of this platform is the stand-off built into the post to increase foot hold space and make weak side shots easier to accomplish.

When you tally up the receipts, I have purchased about \$925 worth of hunting equipment for a completely safe and versatile saddle hunting outfit. Though this sounds expensive, the dollar figure is relative here! Our new bows are costing us hunters over \$1,100 out of the factory without sights, a rest, stabilizers, arrows and broadheads! Likewise, premium mobile hunting hang-on tree stands cost \$600-\$700 without climbing sticks. Is saddle hunting an investment? Absolutely! But is the method more expensive to invest in than other styles of mobile hunting? Absolutely not!

CONCLUSION

Over the course of three full seasons, saddle hunting became a new way for me to

tag mature bucks. I no longer worry about the learning curve, because saddle hunting came to me much easier than I initially thought. The comfort, portability, versatility and cost should all be factored in before your next purchase, and you should give the tactic a try.

A fair number of dyed-in-the-wool tree stand hunters scoff and ridicule saddle hunting, but they do so because they have never given the method a fair shake. In 2022, I used my saddle system to harvest a mature doe on the first evening of the Illinois archery season, and I had multiple encounters with shooter bucks during the heart of the season. I nearly killed a 9-year-old target buck with my saddle on a cold, snowy day in mid-November. Since that date, I have considered all the preconceived notions I had about hunting deer from a saddle system to have officially been debunked! **NAW**



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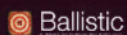
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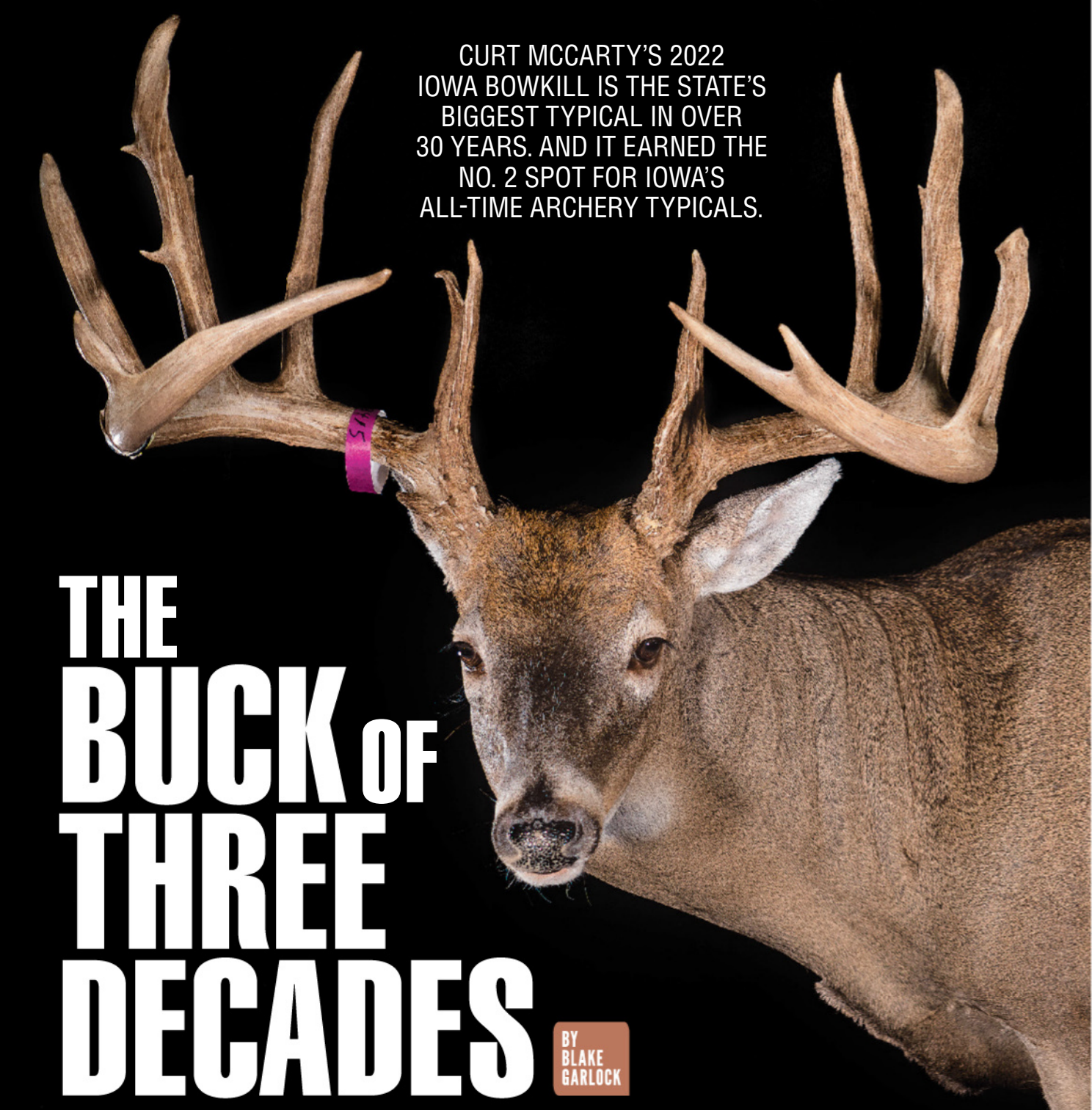
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IOWA BOWKILL IS THE STATE'S
BIGGEST TYPICAL IN OVER
30 YEARS. AND IT EARNED THE
NO. 2 SPOT FOR IOWA'S
ALL-TIME ARCHERY TYPICALS.

THE BUCK OF THREE DECADES

BY
BLAKE
GARLOCK

From 22 feet up in his tree stand, Curt McCarty could see his lighted nock beaming from the ground below. The broadhead was buried in the dirt, but there was no blood on the arrow. As his heart sank, Curt watched the world-class typical make its way out into the field to feed with the rest of the deer. For now, it looked as if Curt had missed his shot of a lifetime.

ALL ROADS LEAD TO IOWA

Curt McCarty grew up in Central Florida, where he received an introduction to hunting deer, hogs and other game. Later in life, Curt's career carried him south to Miami, where his whitetail hunting opportunities were limited compared to those of his youth.

"I fished and spearfished a lot when I moved to Miami," Curt says. "I

definitely liked hunting more, but there were more options in the water around Miami."

While on a work trip to Las Vegas, Curt met a colleague who lived and worked in Iowa. After getting to know Curt, she invited him to come checkout her operation if he ever found himself in the area. Ironically, Curt had been planning to hunt on a friend's land during the state's shotgun season, so



Curt McCarty arrowed this giant typical on Oct. 13, 2022. After the mandatory 60-day drying period ended, the McCarty buck officially scores 195 5/8-inch net, making it Iowa's new No. 2 typical by bow. Photo by Dale Evans

living his dream — he now called the land of giant whitetails home, and things like tag draws and distance from the state would no longer limit his ability to hunt there. Curt had put himself in a position to have incredible hunting, and it would only get better.

A LIFE-CHANGING DEER

When Curt began preparing for the 2022 hunting season, he didn't have an ultra-mature whitetail picked out with years' worth of history in the bank to hunt. Actually, it was quite the opposite. Curt knew of one buck when fall arrived that carried an impressive rack, but after studying photos of the deer and talking things over with his friend from Midwest Habitat Company, Rob Lange, he determined the buck was most likely immature and needed another year. So, in mid-September, Curt hung a Reconyx cell camera over a scrape along the edge of a ladino clover patch to see what bucks were frequenting the area.

Just a couple weeks after hanging the camera, on Oct. 6, Curt received a photo of a newcomer buck. Curt knew that he was looking at a really good deer; he thought the buck would score in the 175-inch range. So he decided to show the picture to Rob and get his opinion on the buck.

"When I saw that first picture, I didn't think he was as big as he is," Curt says. "I showed my friend Rob Lange the picture, and Rob told me, 'That deer is bigger than you think he is.'"

As any serious whitetail hunter would, Curt decided it was time to dial-in his scouting efforts to locate the buck. Curt deployed additional cameras, and it didn't take long for the efforts to payoff.

"I knew I needed to figure out specifically where this deer was living," Curt recalls. "Well, I found a scrape about the size of a truck hood, and I knew it had to be from him. So I hung a camera there, and on October 10th I got an awesome shot of him looking at the camera."

Any doubts Curt had about the buck's size had just been disregarded when the second photo came through. In that photo, the giant typical is looking directly at the camera, and Curt could tell the deer would score well over 175 and was fully mature.

he agreed to explore Iowa more during his upcoming trip. Eventually, Curt's work environment began changing in Florida and he personally felt like he needed a change, so he decided to leave the city life behind and move to the mecca of Midwest whitetail deer hunting.

"I was like, I think I've got one more rodeo left in me," Curt laughs. "So I moved to a whole new place at 45 years

old, started over and established a new life in Iowa."

Regarding chasing whitetails, it didn't take Curt long to land on his feet in Iowa. Curt found hunting opportunities in various parts of the state, and he began applying herd and habitat management principles that he had learned on previous ventures to Illinois on some of the places he hunted in Iowa. Curt was

Curt knew that with the latter part of October approaching and bucks' testosterone levels rising, he needed to act fast before the giant became unpredictable. However, Curt also knew that the buck staring directly into the camera meant he'd been alerted to it, so he couldn't just bomb into the deep-timber camera location and hang a stand to hunt the deer. So, he sought out some advice.

"The second I got that picture, I called my buddy, Rob. And he said, 'I'll be right over.' He knew exactly why I was calling, and we were going to find a way to hunt this deer," Curt says. "We found a tree 150 yards from the camera that took the most recent photo. The location worked on different winds, and I knew I could easily get in and out of there. We weren't talking; we trimmed as few limbs as possible, and then we were out. It was like we couldn't even breathe."

NOTHING GOES AS PLANNED

Curt didn't pursue the buck immediately after prepping his stand site because of poor conditions. Put simply, it was just too hot to produce reliable deer movement. Curt knew he had to respect the weather and wait on the right conditions, but the idea of early October passing and rutting behavior kicking in still made him nervous. Fortunately, he didn't have to wait too long. Curt saw a cold front moving in on Thursday Oct. 13, and he felt his

"THIS WAS NOT ONE OF THOSE HUNTS WITH A LONG AND COMPLICATED STORY; THIS WAS MORE LIKE A SURGICAL MISSION. I FOUND THE BUCK; IT WAS THE MIDDLE OF THE SEASON, AND I KNEW I HAD TO GET HIM QUICKLY."



Curt first received trail camera photos of the giant typical on Oct. 6, 2022. Initially, he didn't know how big the deer was; but when the next set of photos came through a few days later and the buck was shown facing the camera, Curt knew he was special. Photos courtesy of Curt McCarty



opportunity to strike was about to arrive. But he had to work...

"I told my colleagues at work that I thought that day was going to be the day," Curt remembers. "I knew I had to get in the woods, and I had to be in there early. I wanted to be in my stand at noon, so I didn't spook any does coming to feed in the field early. All the girls that work in our office were telling me to chill out because it was just a deer, but I assured them this one was special."

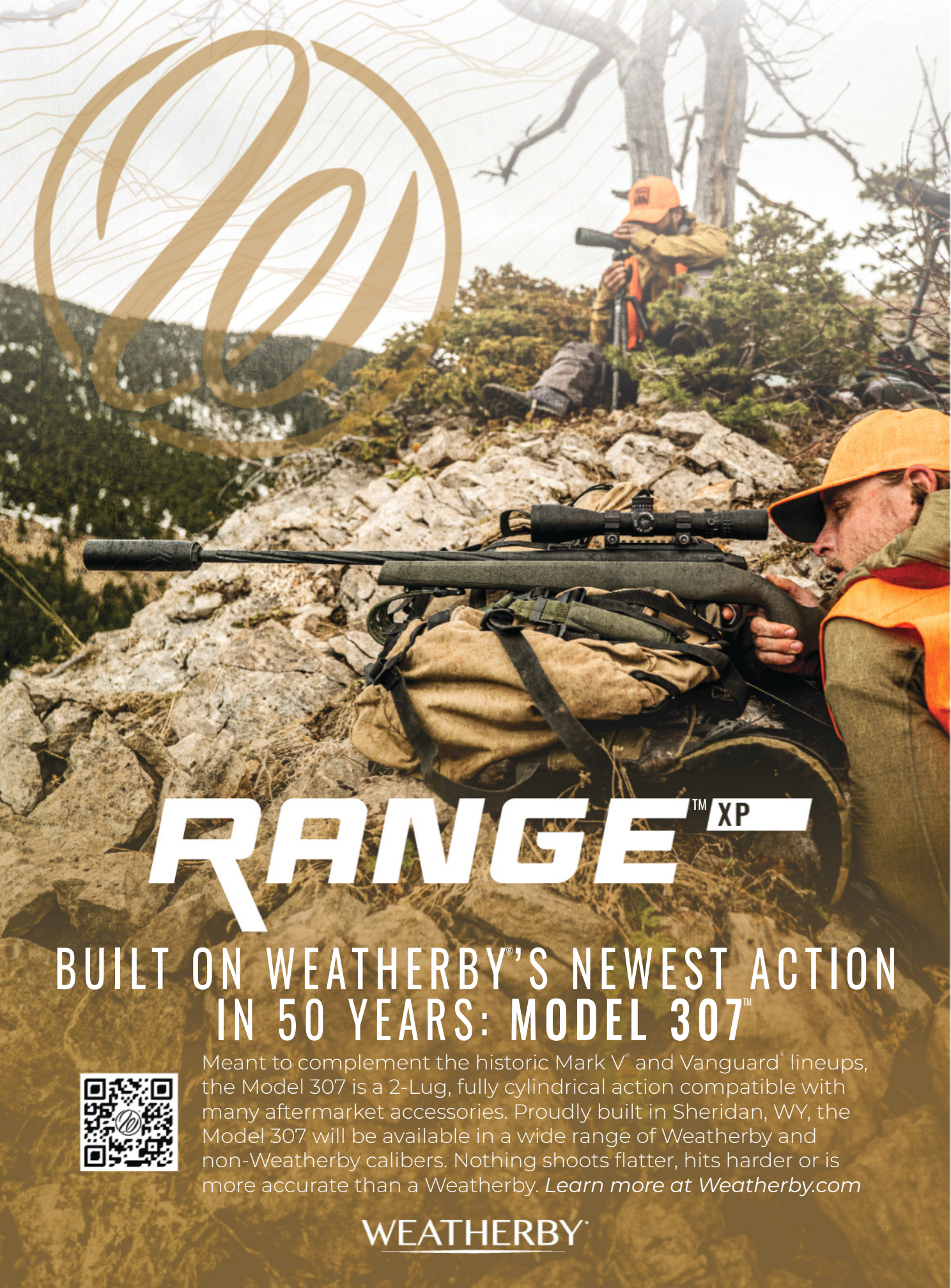
Despite Curt's desire to get in the woods early, he never got the opportunity to. The workday got busy, and he didn't leave work until 3:00 p.m. As quickly as possible, Curt rushed to the property, climbed on his ebike and slipped into his tree stand.

Luckily for Curt, no does were in the

field when he arrived. And it didn't take long for deer to begin filtering out of the timber and into the food source. The cold front had hit just as Curt expected, and the 15-degree temperature drop brought semi-windy conditions with it. The field quickly filled with does and younger bucks, and about 45 minutes before dark, Curt caught movement in the timber just 60 yards to his right. It was the giant typical.

"He just looked like a tank coming through the woods!" Curt recalls.

Curt is right-handed, so he had to turn himself 180 degrees in his tree stand to get a shot at the buck on his right side. Once situated, the deer stopped perfectly broadside to Curt just 35 yards away, so Curt drew, took his time, and watched as his arrow



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Ultimately, Curt shot the buck on Oct. 13, just a week after learning about it. He actually missed the deer with his first shot, but the buck circled back around and Curt made the second arrow count. Photo courtesy of Curt McCarty

CURT McCARTY BUCK

Scorable points 15 (7R, 8L) | Total length of abnormal points: 6 4/8
 Tip-to-tip spread 7 2/8
 Greatest spread 26 4/8
 Inside spread 23 3/8

Areas Measured	Right	Left	Difference
Main Beam	30 4/8	30 6/8	2/8
1st point (G-1)	6 5/8	6 0/8	5/8
2nd point (G-2)	11 3/8	10 7/8	4/8
3rd point (G-3)	13 1/8	13 3/8	2/8
4th point (G-4)	8 6/8	7 1/8	1 5/8
5th point (G-5)	3 0/8	4 1/8	1 1/8
6th point (G-6)	—	2 0/8	2 0/8
1st circ. (H-1)	5 5/8	5 1/8	4/8
2nd circ. (H-2)	4 3/8	4 3/8	—
3rd circ. (H-3)	4 6/8	4 7/8	1/8
4th circ. (H-4)	4 4/8	4 5/8	1/8
Totals	92 5/8	93 2/8	13 5/8

Gross typical score 215 6/8
 Subtract side-to-side differences - 13 5/8
 Subtract abnormal points - 6 4/8
FINAL NET TYPICAL SCORE 195 5/8

Taken on Oct. 13, 2022, Curt McCarty's giant buck is Iowa's new all-time No. 2 typical by bow.

buried in the dirt 15 feet in front of the buck! There had been a small twig in Curt's shooting lane that he never noticed when he was at full draw.

"My heart totally melted. I couldn't believe it," Curt relays. "I felt like God had just given me the opportunity I was waiting for, and I completely screwed it up."

Amazingly, however, the buck didn't spook. He just turned and headed out to the field to feed. Since black walnuts were falling during this time, Curt believes the buck mistook the arrow hitting the dirt for a walnut falling from a tree.

"I got the binoculars, and that's when the depression started to kick in," Curt

says. "As I watched him feed away from me, I couldn't cry!"

Curt used the time after the shot as an opportunity to calm his nerves and get his head right. He was extremely aware that he'd just missed the shot of his life, but as he watched the giant feed in the field, he became more optimistic and hoped that the deer would give him another opportunity. As daylight waned, some does walked right underneath Curt's tree stand. With the does in close, a young 10-point began walking across the field toward the only opening Curt had for a shot into the food source. And the giant was following only



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With both beams pushing past 30 inches, G-3s over 13 inches and an impressive 23 3/8-inch inside spread, the McCarty buck is the biggest typical taken in Iowa in over 30 years.
Photo by Dale Evans

three steps behind the young buck.

"I couldn't believe I was going to get a second opportunity at him," Curt says. "But I looked over, and one of the does was looking right at me; I could see the whites of her eyes. I knew she was going to blow. The buck came into my opening, and the second she blew he spun his head around. But I was already at full draw and just focusing on that arrow double-lunging him."

Curt's arrow hit the buck hard, and the deer broke into a run, tipping over just 60 yards from where he was shot. Curt couldn't believe it, so he called Rob to tell him the news, and Rob soon arrived with his son to help recover the deer. It was only one week after he'd learned of the buck's existence, and the incredible typical was lying in the field waiting for Curt to put a tag on it.

"This was not one of those hunts with a long and complicated story; this was more like a surgical mission," Curt claims. "I found the buck; it was the middle of the season, and I knew I had to get him quickly."

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The Curt McCarty buck is truly a colossal typical. After the 60-day drying period, the buck officially scores 215 6/8 gross and 195 5/8 net B&C as a typical. With both beams pushing past 30 inches, G-3s over 13 inches and an impressive 23 3/8-inch inside spread, the McCarty buck is the biggest typical

**"MY WHOLE PURPOSE
OF MOVING TO IOWA
WAS TO BOWHUNT
GIANT WHITETAIL DEER.
JUST THE THOUGHT
OF SHOOTING A BOONER
WAS HUGE TO ME, SO TO
COME AND KILL A BUCK
LIKE THIS JUST SO
EXCEEDS ANY OF
MY EXPECTATIONS."**



While chasing this deer, Curt's friend from Midwest Habitat Company, Rob Lange, helped him determine how to hunt the buck. Rob and his son even helped Curt recover the impressive typical.
Photo by Dale Evans

taken in Iowa since 1989.

The 195 5/8-inch net score surpasses Robert Miller's 194 2/8-inch typical bowkill taken in 1977, earning the McCarty buck Iowa's No. 2 spot for all-time typicals by bow. Only Lloyd Goad's iconic typical taken in Monroe County during the 1962 season net scores higher than the McCarty buck at 197 6/8 P&Y.

Although nearly a year has passed

since Curt's successful hunt at the time of this writing, taking a buck of this magnitude is still surreal.

"Killing this deer is such a blessing," Curt says. "My whole purpose of moving to Iowa was to bowhunt giant whitetail deer. Just the thought of shooting a booner was huge to me, so to come and kill a buck like this just so exceeds any of my expectations." **NAW**

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NOT SO TINY TIM

THIS KANSAS BUCK DIDN'T LIVE UP TO HIS NICKNAME, BUT ONLY BECAUSE HE WAS FAR BIGGER THAN EXPECTED!

BY
DONNIE
MONROE

During the fall of 2021, I had two bucks on my hunting property that had great potential, but they needed to mature a little more. One was a 6x7, and the other a typical 10-pointer. Eventually, a mature 8-pointer showed up during mid-October and started pushing all the younger bucks out. I know from experience that if 3- or 4-year-old bucks get pushed around too much, they will likely look for another “core” area to call their own.

I decided to make this bully 8-pointer my target buck. On the evening of Halloween, I slipped into a tree and caught the bully pushing does around. After rubbing a tree and making a scrape, he started heading my way. I knew right where he was going to go and the range. When he got close enough, I drew my bow and put my pin right behind his front shoulder.

When the shot went off, my arrow hit him perfect. The buck didn't go 10 yards before flipping over backwards and hitting the ground right beside the glowing nock of the arrow that was stuck in the ground. It was nice to be able to trick this guy and get my first Halloween buck. After notching that tag, I was curious if I would get the treat of the other two bucks coming back to my property and making it their core area.

It didn't take long before the other two bucks with great potential showed back up. And they stayed in the area until February of 2022. I was hoping to find their sheds, but they must have gone on to a neighboring property and dropped. Even though I didn't find their sheds, I was excited to know that they made it through the previous hunting season. I was looking forward to seeing if they would return during the fall of 2022.

In early spring, I put out some 30-06 brand deer mineral along the edge of a cornfield and didn't get much action right away. I placed a camera on the 30-06 and a different camera in the corner of the cornfield, where a lot of deer transition through. Sometime in June, I got my first photo of a buck transitioning through the corner of the cornfield that already had a good start in growing his new rack.

The buck had character and appeared that he was going to grow splits on his brows. I thought to myself: *Could this be the 6x7 buck from last year?*





Donnie Monroe's resident state of Kansas is home to some of the best whitetail hunting in North America. Donnie proved that in 2022, when he harvested the second buck in his career that scores over 200 inches. This 230-plus buck was taken on Sept. 14, during the state's early muzzleloader season. *Photos courtesy of Donnie Monroe*



Hoping the answer was yes, I quickly went in to freshen up the 30-06 mineral, and within a week he showed up on the mineral and had put on quite a bit more antler! At that time, I could tell for sure that it was the 6x7, due to some antler character that carried over. I was shocked at how much this guy had put on, and I thought he could even break the magical 200-inch mark if he continued putting on antler.

The big velvet buck continued to hit the 30-06 for a while but eventually disappeared. I didn't get any more pictures of him at this location.

Knowing that bucks like to get in bachelor groups and normally like to feed in beans throughout the summer, I started looking at a different part of the farm in attempt to find the 6x7 buck. I also remembered that I had a mineral lick at a different spot the previous year that the 6x7 seemed to frequent. The spot where the 6x7 used frequently the previous year also had beans across the road to the north and the east.

I thought that location might be where he was bedding most of the time. So, I took some corn over and placed

Summer scouting played a critical role in Donnie's strategy for hunting the big non-typical. He first captured trail camera photos of the buck on a mineral site, but to narrow down the buck's exact bedding location, the hunter scouted beanfields and glassed the buck's afternoon feeding habits. Photos courtesy of Donnie Monroe

a cellular camera on it as soon as I could. Within a few hours of putting the corn out, the buck showed up! This told me that he was bedding close. Later that afternoon, before dark, he returned with two other bucks. One was the typical 10-pointer from last year, and the other was a typical 8-point that had a split brow.

The area the bucks were using is thick and has several rubs in there from previous seasons. I realized at that moment I'd located my target buck and had a legitimate chance to kill him. It was time to develop a plan.

When the next Red Moon rolled around, I went down one Saturday morning early to see if I could catch any bucks transitioning out of the beans and going back into the bedding area. I did catch a few bucks with big racks heading to the bedding area, but it was too dark to confirm that it was them, even though I was confident it was.

So, the next evening, I took my QuietKat ebike

Donnie first became aware of the big non-typical he later nicknamed "Tiny Tim" in 2021. That season the buck was a big 6x7 that needed another year to reach maturity. He was running with a 10-pointer, but both bucks left the property when a bully 8-pointer started harassing them in October. When Donnie killed the 8-pointer on Halloween evening, both the 6x7 and 10-pointer soon returned to the farm. Photo courtesy of Donnie Monroe

down to the farm. I rode the bike onto the property to an observation point, where I could melt into a cornfield and hopefully catch the bucks coming out to feed. As the sun was getting close to setting, the typical 8-point and 10-point both showed up. I thought surely the 6x7 would be with them. And about a minute later, he appeared.

I had already been watching and videoing the other two bucks with an Athlon spotting scope but shifted to the giant as soon as he appeared. My jaw about dropped, because at that point, I could tell that this buck definitely would score over 200 inches.

I continued to film all of them until it got dark, and then I slipped out of there. I came back as soon as I could and placed a trail camera on the location where the bucks came out of the bedding area, which was different from where they entered the bedding the previous day.

I never did get their picture there. It seemed that the bucks used many different trails to slip in and out of the bedding, since the beans pretty much wrap around it. I put a camera on a location that was the only way for them to transition from the bedding area to the beans without having to cross the river; it started capturing the bucks quite a bit. As time went on, and the bucks started getting close to shedding velvet, they started to separate. At this time, the giant started using this area to get to the beans.

A serious bowhunter and good friend of mine, Tom Lott, told me that this buck was really going to lose inches when he shed his velvet. As soon as I got the first pic of the buck hard-horned, I sent it to Tom and his reply was simply: "Tiny Timmy." I started to second guess what I thought





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the buck would score, but I just wasn't seeing what Tom was seeing. I was planning to do whatever I needed to get this buck killed.

I felt confident that some of the hunters that were on neighboring properties knew about him and likely had trail cam photos of him. I already had a few stands hung and just needed a north wind to hunt the stand where I thought that I had the best chance to kill the giant.

Finally, opening day of season arrived. I was talking to a couple of friends that knew about my situation. One told me that we weren't supposed to get a north wind for another week, and the other friend said that I should just grab my muzzleloader and go make it happen. Knowing that the Red Moon was coming in two days, I knew that I needed to make something happen before one of the other hunters put their tag on this incredible buck.

That conversation got me thinking, and that evening I developed a plan to take my muzzleloader out and set up on a hillside where it wraps around. I thought that this terrain change could

Donnie hoped for a north wind to hunt the buck during early bow season, but he feared neighboring hunters also were aware of the buck and would tag him first. So, using his e-bike for a stealthy entry, he set up on a hillside where the south-southeast wind was funneling almost due east. This setup, with the aid of his Ozonics and RAW scents, gave him just enough cover to take the buck during the early muzzleloader season on Sept. 14, 2022.

Photo courtesy of Donnie Monroe

affect how the wind was flowing at that location. I quickly shot my muzzleloader at home and got all my gear together to just slip in on the hillside to see if I could get the wind in my favor.

I wasn't sure how far back I would have to sit, which is why I took my muzzleloader. Even though I'm a hardcore bowhunter, I knew that a buck of this caliber doesn't come around very often, and I would rather have my tag on him than someone else.

On Wednesday evening, I road my QuietKat in close to where I wanted to set up, and I started looking for a place that would work. All the while, I was praying that the wind would be in my favor. I ended up finding a spot next to a tree that the wind was blowing more east than south-southeast, which I hoped would keep him from smelling me if he transitioned from the



bedding area to beans.

I also made sure I had my Ozonics HR500 unit blowing ozone in the direction of the wind, and I used some RAW Calming Scent to help cover me if I had any swirling winds that might push my scent down to the trail below.

Once I set up all my camera gear and broke down a few branches that were in the way, I checked the distance and found it to only be 40 yards. I thought to myself: *I should have just brought my bow!*

But honestly, my shooting window was so narrow, that I knew I wouldn't have been able to pull off killing him with my bow — especially while capturing it on video.

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Since the shooting lane was so narrow, I knew that I had to have everything ready as soon as I noticed any movement. Two main things had to happen: I needed to turn on my video equipment and be fast about getting the gun up. As the evening sit went on, I sat with my gun on a monopod and the buttstock resting on my bino carrier on my chest. This would allow me to be as efficient as I could be at getting the rifle shouldered.



Donnie's hunt for this incredible 230-class non-typical was captured on film and can be seen for free on the show called *Team 200 TV*. Be sure to follow them on Facebook and Instagram. Photo courtesy of Donnie Monroe

When it was getting close to dark, I caught movement. I quickly turned my cameras on as fast as I could and turned my head back to the shooting lane. Immediately, I recognized that it was the giant and threw my gun up, cocked it, and stopped the buck. As he was staring up trying to figure out what he heard, I settled the crosshairs behind his shoulder and squeezed off the shot . . .

The buck swirled around and ran back in the direction he came from! I reviewed the footage in slow motion and knew that it was a lethal hit. I simply slipped out of there and called for help. A few co-workers showed up to help track him, and it didn't take long. The buck only ran 35-40 yards.

We did the recovery video and took a few photos before tagging him and loading him up. I also grabbed my trail camera, which was on video mode, that I had monitoring that trail. I was hoping it captured him walking through there before getting to my window. As luck would have it, the camera did capture him, followed by a small buck that I had never seen. Amazingly, the camera also caught the giant running back by before dropping. The camera also had audio turned on, so you can even hear my shot.

Once I got home, my family and a few friends were there to check him out and celebrate. The next morning, I snapped a photo of me trying to put my index finger and thumb around his base. I wasn't even close to touching, and I couldn't resist sending it to my buddy Tom with the words, "Tiny Tim" and a question mark. It made me laugh out loud, and at that point I let Tom know that the giant's name was now officially Tiny Tim.

My buck ended up scoring 230 4/8 gross. He has 23 scorable points, which made another friend think that I should change the way I spell his name. So, now my giant's name is "Tiney Tim" — because he has so many tines!

This is the second buck that I have shot within the past four years that has scored over 200 inches. The first buck was a 209-incher with a 9-inch drop tine that I killed with my bow on my personal property. Both bucks were self-filmed, and you can watch the hunts for free on a show called *Team 200 TV*. Be sure to follow us on Facebook and Instagram. **NAW**

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Bruce Gardner first discovered this incredible New York buck during the 2021 hunting season. Ultimately, he took the giant at just 20 yards with his bow while still-hunting. Photo courtesy of Bruce Gardner

DURING AN OCTOBER BOWHUNT IN 2022, BRUCE GARDNER ARROWED THIS 210 6/8-INCH NET NON-TYPICAL WHILE STILL-HUNTING HIS WAY OUT OF THE WOODS.

BY
BRUCE
GARDNER

Once in a while, a deer comes along that completely astonishes you; I'm talking about the type of deer that has your heart skipping beats when you see him on your trail camera. It's better than once-in-a-lifetime because he's a world-class animal, and there just aren't words to describe the roller coaster of emotions you get to experience while pursuing such a buck.

For me, finding success on an animal like this depends heavily on the process. I love the process of figuring out a big

buck, and I would say that I honestly spend 90 percent of my time scouting and 10 percent of it hunting. The day I tag out is the day the next season starts, and by March of 2021, I'd located and nailed down several good deer and properties that I could hunt for the upcoming season.

Despite my adequate planning, one night in late September while dissecting

ON THE GROUND IN NEW YORK



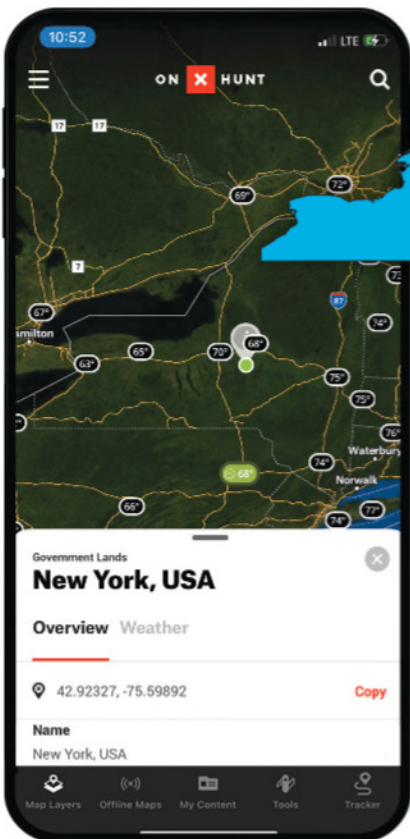
a map, I found a few pieces that I hadn't walked. So I dropped some onX Hunt pins. I have a buddy who also hunts the area, and I asked him if he had ever walked those places. He had, and the sign did not suggest a big buck was around. I decided to take a look for myself, and I confirmed my friend was right; the piece seemed barren.

There was one run going through the center, and it just seemed as though it was the same three deer living there year-round. If any mature bucks were using it, they would most likely just be passing through. On my walk out, I followed the run to the back of the property and found one solid bed and one large track. The sign was old, but I had to soak two cameras in it for a few weeks to learn which deer was using the bed. I set one camera on a pinch

that leaves the property and the other on the run leading to the bed, naming the former "Run Cam" and the latter "Bed Cam."

On Oct. 4, 2021, I filled my first buck tag and slipped in to check the cameras on my way home. When I got to the Bed Cam and pulled the card, I had one picture of what looked like a 180-class deer running toward the other cam. The time stamp told me I'd just kicked him up out of that bed, and you can already guess what happened when I checked the Run Cam. I had him on that run heading out of the property!

I took note of the wind where I thought he was bedding and where he was accessing the piece, picked one tree for a north wind and another for a south wind, then I backed out. I had the same wind two days later, and although rain was in the forecast, I decided to slip in for the afternoon. I sat through the downpour but he never showed. After pulling that card and seeing he had been in there hours



Bruce's incredible non-typical gross scores 223 3/8 and nets 210 6/8. The buck is big for anywhere, but it's especially impressive for New York.



On the day Bruce planned to target the non-typical in 2022, he unfortunately was called into work. Luckily, he got his shot at the buck the following day. Photo courtesy of Bruce Gardner

before I'd arrived, I realized that he most likely was using a different bed and had seen me go in. It's funny how we always think we have things figured out!

I sat that piece two more times, but since he never showed and I'd already invested time on another awesome deer that I had history with, I shifted my focus to the other buck. I did, however, leave five cameras spread out over a 1 1/2-mile radius in hopes of collecting some data that could help me take him during late season or the next year.

In mid-December, I went and swapped the cards. Sure enough, I had him multiple times in daylight about a mile away. He had been in that piece for about 10 days before once again becoming a ghost. From what I could gather, he summered in one area then transitioned through the area I was

hunting him in during early October. After that he moved to his fall range, and that's where I had him on my cameras.

With renewed hope, I spent all my spare time trying to put eyes on that deer. I walked everything, trying to put the pieces together and pick up his sheds. With no such luck, I could not shake this deer and remained determined to kill him in 2022.

SO, SO CLOSE

I highly anticipated New York's 2022 hunting season. In addition to the giant from the year before, I had been following another buck for four years and couldn't wait to get back on him. I placed two cameras for the other buck and three for the big one, deciding to let them each soak for two months. I cannot begin to tell you how juiced up I was to see if that deer made it!

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When it came time to check the first camera, I had one picture of the top of a large rack. It had a non-typical look to it, but since the pic was blurry, I couldn't tell if it was the big one. I checked the second camera and I had a 160-class 10-pointer on it, so I assumed it was the same deer. The third camera had the big 10, but not the buck I was looking for. I probably had 3,000 pictures from amongst the three cameras, but as I skipped through them, nothing stood out. Still, I was psyched to get back on the big 10.

About a week later, I was sitting on the couch looking at a screenshot of that blurry picture on my phone, and I realized there was no way that picture featured the typical 10-point. Thank goodness I hadn't cleared out those cards! I gathered all the cards and sat there going through thousands of photos one by one. About 1,500 images in, I swiped to a photo of an absolutely giant-framed buck, and I knew the

While still-hunting his way out of the woods, Bruce spotted this buck and a young 8-point just 20 yards away. After releasing the arrow, he wasn't sure if he had hit the giant or not.
Photo courtesy of Bruce Gardner

second I saw it that he was the one.

I got stressed and anxious immediately, and I could feel my heartbeat quicken. I knew that I'd spend the next few weeks thinking through every single scenario that could possibly play out. I am huge on annual data and knew where he would be the first few days of October, as well as for a period in November. My mind was racing: Where would I kill him? How would I access the piece? What wind would I need?

I stayed on that deer for the next few weeks. I knew I may never get to hunt another deer of this caliber, and although I did share him with some close friends, I did not share him with

others who hunted the same area. I'm blessed to have a buddy who hunts the same way I do, and I share everything from tactics to spots with him, but I just could not bring myself to share this deer with him. Fortunately, when I did tell him, he understood and respected my decision.

Come Oct. 1, I took the day off work and found myself scouting the area. I figured I'd walk until noon and then decide where to set up for the afternoon, since I won't hunt mornings in early October without intel. I slipped into the edge of the woods to check Bed Cam, and I could not believe it. The buck



Annual data played a key role in Bruce taking this buck. Since he had intel on the buck's behavior in 2021, he had high confidence that he could find the buck in the same area during October 2022.
Photos courtesy of Bruce Gardner



had walked past the camera and gone into that bed at 2:00 p.m., doing the same thing he had done the previous year.

As I headed home to get my gear, I got called into work. Just like that, 13 months of preparation to hunt this deer in that bed went out the door. I felt absolutely sick. Not only did he read the script, but the following day I discovered he'd gotten up a few hours later to walk right past the tree I would have been in if it hadn't been for that phone call!

Later that night, however, I had a realization. I realized how blessed I was to have the opportunity just to follow a deer of this caliber. I settled into being at peace with missing my opportunity the previous day, so even understanding I might never see the deer again, I thanked God that he'd brought this deer into my life in any capacity. He'd become so special to me that I *almost* didn't want to kill him.

STAYING AFTER HIM

The next day I decided simply to sit. If he did the same thing that he'd done the day before, he would be dead. Again, there was a perfect wind and similar weather, so I saw no reason



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why he wouldn't repeat his pattern or at least be very close to that piece. I would play it by ear for the afternoon.

I sat until 11:00 a.m. and saw nothing. The wind shifted, and I had to get down to set up on the other side of the run. Remember, I also had that big 10 from last year in this piece as a 3 1/2-year-old, and my annual data told me he would be close by, too. However, at 3:00 p.m. I just was not feeling it. The wind had shifted several more

After finally killing the deer, Bruce felt the mixed emotions of a successful hunt. He was ecstatic about succeeding, but he was also saddened that the chase was over. Photo courtesy of Bruce Gardner

times and it felt unlikely it was going to happen. Plus, if I did get an encounter, I wasn't confident I'd have the wind in my favor. So I got down and decided to



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still-hunt my way out. If he was in that bed I'd have the right wind to stalk him, so I concentrated on that bed and seeing him before he saw me.

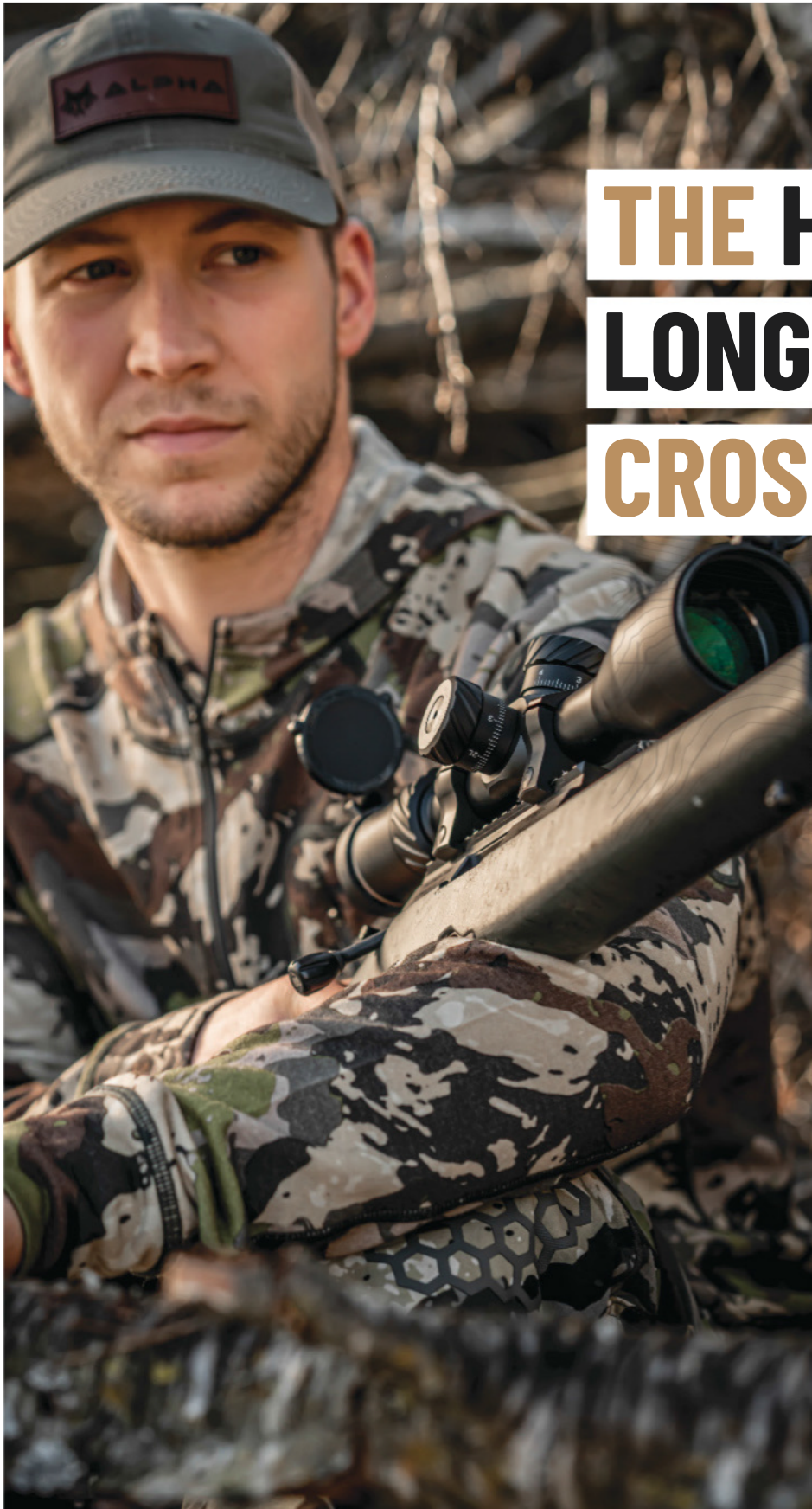
Then it happened. I was coming around the bend when I glanced to my left and saw the giant-framed 10-point standing in a thicket at 40 yards. All I could see was his head and rack; the brush was so thick I couldn't even tell which way he was facing! With an arrow nocked I started to close the distance, and the whole time he just looked at me. I knew the odds were low, but I had to try.

Well, that deer ran hard and never even looked back! I pulled my arrow, put it in the quiver and started walking out. I felt defeated. It was highly unlikely that I would get another shot at that 10, at least not in that piece.

As I got closer to my exit, I caught movement to my left. Looking up on the hillside, I saw a small 8-pointer with a big buck standing behind him. In the moment, all I made out was a big rack that I knew I was going to shoot; I didn't know if it belonged to my deer. The small buck stared right at me and the big one was looking behind him. The deer was at 20 yards, and in a panic I scrambled to range him, despite shaking so much I could barely see through the rangefinder.

As luck would have it, I dropped my rangefinder, nocked an arrow, drew and my peep was rotated! So I let down, over-rotated my peep, and then drew back again just as the big

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one turned and looked right at me. The young buck was blocking most of the big one, but a tiny piece of his chest was visible, and he was slightly quartering to me. So I settled that pin and released.

Most of what happened next was a complete blur, but I do remember seeing one of the deer stumble before they both ran off and I heard one crash. Then, silence. I was not sure which deer I'd hit. As I walked toward where the crash had come from, I couldn't help but wonder, *Did I just shoot a 2-year-old 8-pointer?* But when I got to the spot, I saw the rack and immediately knew it was my buck lying there dead!

I can't even put into words the emotions I felt. He is absolutely beautiful; he is magnificent. I thanked God and prayed for a bit, just taking it all in. As the adrenaline wore off, I was overcome with sadness. I sat there with the animal that had completely consumed me for the past year, and it was all over. For me as a hunter, the end goal is to take the



For Bruce, the process of targeting mature bucks is what it's all about. He says that he spends 90 percent of his time in the woods scouting and 10 percent of it actually hunting. Photo courtesy of Bruce Gardner

life of an animal. But in the process, I come to appreciate that specific animal and the experience with which it blesses me.

My first phone call was to my good friend, Dieter. And when I explained that I had killed the buck and wanted to keep it to myself, he voiced nothing

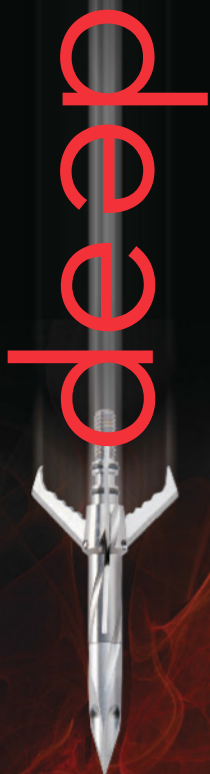
but respect for my decision. I walked him through how it had happened, shared a picture, and promised I'd have a lot more to share when we met up.

LESSONS LEARNED

This deer taught me several lessons. The first is to go with your gut. I went with my gut the whole time while chasing this deer, and in the end, everything came together. Lesson two: leave no stone unturned. More often than not, these big deer use pieces of ground that are completely overlooked. The third lesson I learned is to always gather annual data. Just because you didn't get to take him one year doesn't mean you won't get your chance the next. Finally, I learned

to always trust in God's plan. So much happened while I was hunting this deer that had me questioning myself and my abilities. However, the experience of chasing this 223-inch gross giant has taught me to stay true to who I am as a hunter and as a man. And then just leave the rest to God. **NAW**

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Sunday, Nov. 13, was Michael's day off work. He left his house at 1:15 p.m. Michael approached his ladder stand by walking through a backwater area, making no noise and leaving no scent. Later that afternoon, this giant buck appeared in a food plot filled with several does. The curious buck entered the plot, giving the bowhunter a clean shot. Photo courtesy of Michael Paige



ILLINOIS
BOWHUNTER
MICHAEL PAIGE
ARROWED THIS
240-CLASS NON-
TYPICAL AFTER
YEARS OF WAITING
FOR ONE FINAL,
HEART-POUNDING
ENCOUNTER.

THE RIGHT 40 ACRES, AND PLENTY OF PATIENCE

BY
RON
WILLMORE

Michael Paige has been bowhunting for 10 years. Fortunately, he has had close friend Jason Pollock

(JP) to help him along the way, speeding up the learning curve associated with being a new bowhunter. Michael has been very successful, as evidenced by him taking 10 bucks and numerous does in his first decade of hunting.

On Nov. 12, 2022, all those bowhunting lessons were about to culminate in one shot. Michael stood in his 20-foot ladder stand and whispered to himself: "It's my only shot, and I know I can make it."

When you, as a hunter, begin to focus on one individual deer, be prepared. You are about to learn the meaning of the word "patience." In 2019, Michael got a trail camera photo that really got his attention. The photo showed a really nice non-typical buck that he guessed would score around 180 inches.

The buck had a lot of "trash," which made it difficult to estimate his score. Michael hunts in an area with sparse cover, and the bucks in that area can move a long way between various properties. Michael hunted 40 acres of private land that year, but never saw the non-typical from his stand the entire season.

Under these circumstances, Michael couldn't help but think to himself: *Is he still alive? Maybe he got killed by someone else.* When the season ended, there was no word of a buck that size being taken, so Michael at least had hope that the deer was still alive.

When the trail cameras were set out in 2020, anticipation was high as Michael started looking for the big non-typical. When a giant buck may be moving through several properties, it's often amazing how "silent" the local hunters become in communicating any sightings.

Once again, Michael got a trail camera photo of the giant buck. The new estimate of his rack size was slightly over 200 inches. Again, the elusive buck was never seen from Michael's tree stand the entire season! This was becoming a reoccurring theme, and it seemed the buck was just not spending that much time on the 40 acres Michael could hunt.

Fast forward to 2021. Michael and JP were trying to come up with a new strategy to get the buck to spend more time in their area. Each year, Jason puts in food plots for various people, and they decided to try a food plot at the 40-acre area Michael hunts. The 2021 season was in full swing with rut activity increasing when Michael got his first opportunity

at the giant non-typical.

While hunting one afternoon, the buck he had been dreaming about for three years suddenly showed up to check the food plot for does. Michael is an excellent shot with his bow, frequently practicing out to 80 yards. His philosophy is that if you can become proficient at 80 yards, you can feel confident of any shot at a distance less than that.

On that afternoon in 2021, Michael had ranged a couple of trees ahead of time. The big buck was close to one of his marker trees at 40 yards. When Michael came to full draw, the buck needed to take two or three more steps to clear the brush he stood behind.

Whether it is luck or a sixth sense, big bucks frequently make the right turn to keep themselves out of trouble. The giant non-typical simply turned and walked away, keeping the brush between himself and Michael, resulting in no shot. That was the last time Michael saw the buck that season!

In 2022, once again Michael and JP established a good food plot on the 40 acres Michael hunts. The deer seemed to have discovered the second-year food plot. On Oct. 7, Michael got a photo of the giant non-typical at the food plot.

He got additional photos of the buck on Nov. 11 and 12. Michael already had a ladder stand in place near the food plot.

On Saturday Nov. 12, Michael had a birthday party to attend that afternoon and evening. While at the party, Michael got a trail camera photo of the non-typical standing in front of his ladder stand, in the daylight! An acquaintance of Michael's, who also knew of the big non-typical, was at the party. When the conversation turned to the non-typical, he told Michael, "I'm going to kill that buck next weekend during gun season."

Michael replied, "No, you're not! I'm going to kill him tomorrow!"

The next day, Sunday Nov. 13, was Michael's day off work. He left his house at 1:15 p.m. Michael approached his ladder stand by walking through a backwater area, making no noise and leaving no scent. Michael was in his tree stand by 1:45 p.m. and started seeing deer within 15 minutes.

For the next two hours, he watched small bucks pushing does around near the food plot. When he got in his stand, the first order of business was to range several spots and trees for future reference. Michael had just checked

After four years of chasing this non-typical in Illinois, Michael finally got his opportunity in November 2022. Ultimately, Michael arrowed the buck at 60 yards in a food plot. Photo courtesy of Michael Paige.



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THE RIGHT 40 ACRES, AND PLenty OF PATIENCE

his watch. It was 4:10 p.m., and when he looked up, he saw the buck he had been hunting for four years on the corner of the food plot.

After five minutes, the buck started to approach one of the trees he had ranged at 60 yards. Michael slowly stood up and got his bow in his hand. He set his sight at 60 yards and watched as the buck began to walk. When the buck came out from behind some cover, Michael grunted to stop him.

Michael could see that the buck was within a few steps of seeing several does in the food plot. He figured when the buck saw the does, he would take off after one of them, putting him out of range for a shot.

The buck started to move again as Michael came to full draw with his Matthews VXR. Michael took a couple of seconds to calm down and grunted again to stop the buck. He released the Rage Trypan-tipped Axis arrow. The shot was a little back from his aiming point, but it was a pass-through and looked like a good hit.

The buck reacted fast and ran several yards away. The buck then stopped at about 40 yards from where he had been shot and started swaying. Then he laid down. About two minutes later, Michael saw him lay his head down.

Not wanting to mess anything up at this point, Michael texted JP that he had shot the giant non-typical. JP was hunting about a mile away. JP's



Michael's trophy has a green gross score around 244 inches and a net green score around 240 inches. The buck has a gross typical score of 189 inches. All the circumferences are over 5 inches, with two over 6 inches. He also has over 55 inches of abnormal points. The buck was most likely 7 1/2 years old. Photo courtesy of Michael Paige

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response was, "No you didn't." Then when he realized that Michael had indeed shot the buck, he told him, "Don't move, stay in your stand and watch the buck."

Michael responded, "I'll stay in the stand until midnight, if I have to." Michael then texted his wife, Ashley, and said, "I shot the big one!" He also texted a friend who was bowhunting in another county. That friend's response was, "I'm on my way."

Michael stayed in his stand until 5:45 p.m., well after dark. Then he snuck out to his truck to meet JP and his other friend. After describing everything that happened, they collectively decided to wait for a while before going to where he thought the buck was down.

They went to a gas station and got some snacks and something to drink. At 9:30 p.m., they headed back to look for the buck. Michael told them, "I want to go where the arrow should be first." They found the arrow, covered with blood. JP had a thermal monocular and saw the buck and said, "He's down." The buck was laying right where Michael had seen him go down.



Michael's words of wisdom to anyone else hunting a giant buck on a small tract of land are simple: be patient and take the first good shot opportunity you get. This mega-buck came from a 40-acre parcel in Illinois. Photo courtesy of Michael Paige

When Michael walked up to the buck, the realization of just how big the buck was began to set in. The giant non-typical has a green gross score around 244 inches and a net green score around 240 inches. The buck has a gross typical score of around 189 inches. All the circumferences are over 5 inches, with two over 6 inches. He also has over 55 inches of abnormal points. The buck was most likely 7 1/2 years old.

They were able to drive the truck right to the buck. He was later taken to Whitetails and Wings Taxidermy (Jason Donovan, Chapin, Illinois). Michael's buck will undoubtedly be one of the largest non-typical deer taken in the state of Illinois during the 2022 season.

Michael's words of advice? "Patience, patience, patience. And take the first good shot you get." Great advice, even if the patience part can be a challenge sometimes! **NAW**

An advertisement for Duck Creek Custom Calls. The main image shows a large, hand-carved wooden duck call with a signature. To the left is the Duck Creek Custom Calls logo, which features a duck and the text "DUCK CREEK CUSTOM CALLS". Below the logo, the text reads "BIG BUCKS ARE DYING TO HEAR OUR CALLS!". Further down, it says "100% Hand made... Hand tuned... ONE at a time. Grunt, Mallard and Wood Duck calls". At the bottom, the website "duckcreekcc.com" is listed. On the right side of the advertisement, there are three smaller photographs of hunters with their harvested deer. The top photo shows a hunter with a large buck. The middle photo shows a hunter with a smaller buck. The bottom photo shows two hunters with a buck. A small "Duck Creek Custom Calls" logo is also visible on a wooden call in the bottom right corner of the main image.

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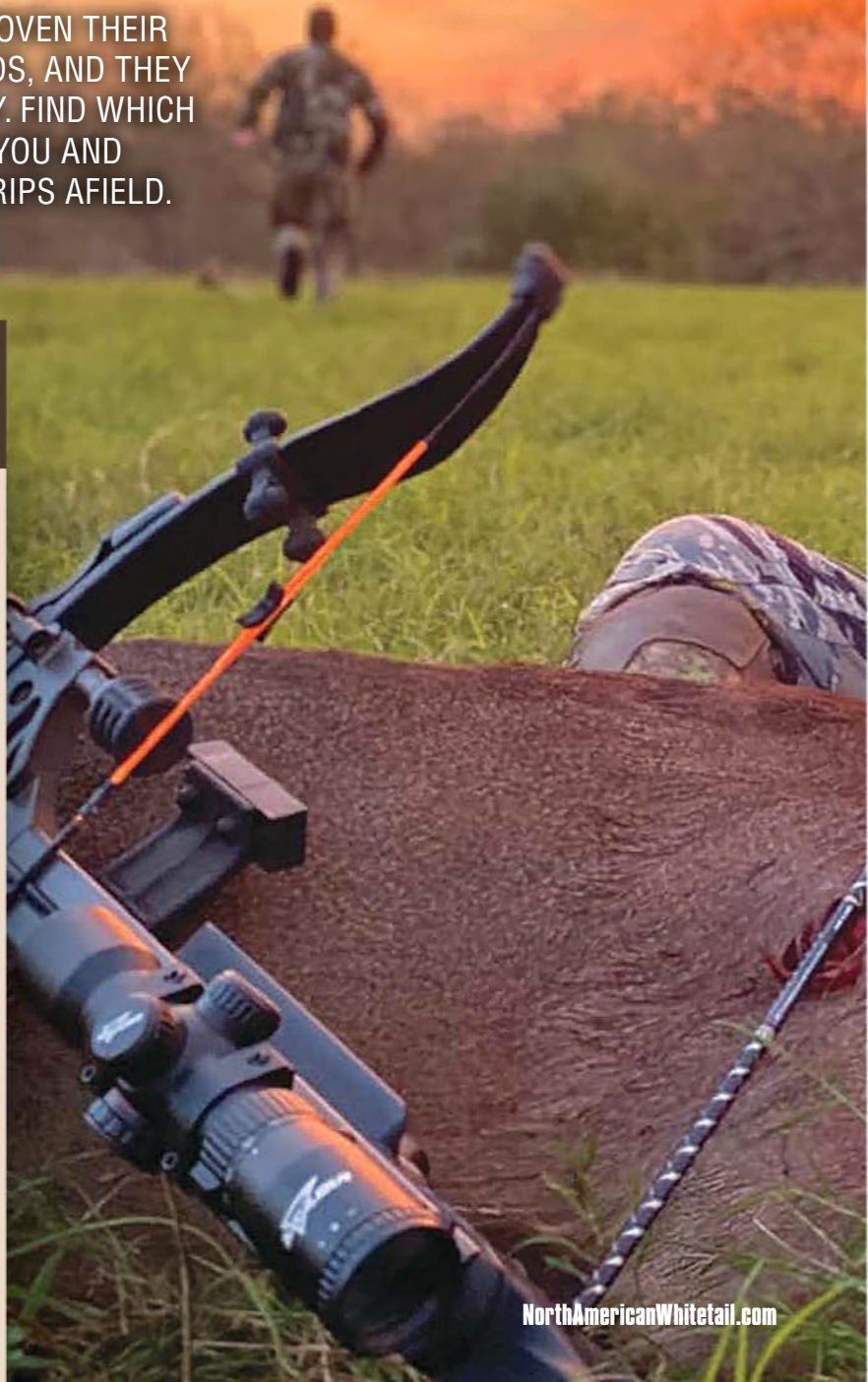
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BY
JOSH
HONEYCUTT

Whitetails are some of the most elusive animals in the woods. They are difficult to get close to and even more difficult to kill, and pressured deer are even more challenging. Over time, deer learn how to avoid the bulk of the hunters in a given area, which allows these animals to reach older age classes. So, how do hunters tag these deer? Some get lucky, but most of the time these deer are harvested by expert whitetail hunters who hunt differently. Here are tips from 10 top-shelf deer hunters who implement mentalities and tactics that most hunters don't use.

As someone who mostly hunts public land, Dan Infalt prefers to find overlooked pockets of bedding or habitat that hold pressured bucks. Photo courtesy of Dan Infalt



DAN INFALT OVERLOOKED BEDDING COVER

The Hunting Beast's Dan Infalt says that most of his big bucks — say, the top 15 that surpassed the 5 1/2-year-old mark — were deer he knew about before harvesting them.

"I saw it on an observation sit, trail camera, or otherwise saw him in the area," Dan says. "Then, I homed in on that area. Those deer survive to that age by finding a niche area that no one looks at. The majority of what I'm hunting is public. But even on private parcels, that still seems to come into play. They find a hiding spot no one would think of as a hunting spot. The average hunter looks at woodlots. Instead, look for the overlooked spots."

Dan's niche is finding their bedding areas. Then, he moves in for an off-season scouting mission. "I get in there for one day during the spring, figure everything out, and don't come back until it's kill time," Dan says. "At the same time, while in there, study the sign and figure out what time of year this buck is here. While some older bucks live in the same area all the time, most are in there for a span of time."

DR. DEER MAP BUCK SIGN

Those who spend time hunting the same properties each year can take their off-season scouting to the next level. According to Dr. James Kroll, well-known to *North American Whitetail* readers as Dr. Deer, counting the buck rubs and scrapes on a property can help determine the volume of traffic, and how bucks use the area.

"Count the rubs on the place where you hunt," Dr. Kroll says. "Do that and look at a map to determine how they travel on that property. Unless it changes habitat-wise, deer should use the same trails every year. Mark rubs as one-way and two-way rubs. That will provide more information. One-way rubs are rubbed on one side, and two-way rubs are rubbed on two sides."

DAN JOHNSON

STUDY DOES

Another tactic for hunters who spend a lot of time hunting the same properties each year is to learn the nuances of each doe group. This can help predict the timing of the rut.

"Know the deer herd on an annual basis and identify when the does are coming into heat," says Dan Johnson of the Nine Finger Chronicles podcast. "Is it an early doe group? Is it a late doe group? If you spend enough time in the tree and observe the behavior, it will tell you.

"For example, on my main farm, the first five days of November are still pre-rut," he continues. "There are no does in heat, and the mature bucks are still acting like it is pre-rut. When you identify this, you can then forecast when the does are in heat, and you can attack that timeframe. As it gets closer, I can hit my best stands just before the chaos of the rut ensues. Then, I'm able to target specific deer."



Dan Johnson studies when the doe groups in his hunting areas go into heat to help plan his hunts each year.
Photo courtesy of Dan Johnson

GREG MILLER

CAMERA INTEL

North American Whitetail contributor Greg Miller knows big whitetails. He's hunted 23 states, bagged deer in 17 of those, and most were DIY deals.

"More than anything, cameras are key," Greg says. "I feel like the more you can put out, the better. When dealing with mature deer, and people put cameras out, they often check them again and again. That's pressure. When running cameras for sensitive deer, put it up and leave it alone, or use cell cameras. It doesn't take a lot for them to relocate, even slightly. So, when you start getting pictures of deer, check cameras less often. That's the time to back off. Let him have some peace and quiet."

As a well-accomplished DIY bowhunter, Greg Miller utilizes cameras for fresh intel. He prefers to check his cameras as little as possible to avoid pressuring the areas he hunts. *Photo courtesy of Greg Miller*



MARK DRURY

RECORD ALL DATA

Mark Drury's big-buck hunting secret is all about gathering information. He uses recordkeeping at the highest level, to decide when and where to hunt specific target bucks. His methods especially apply to trail cameras.

"If anyone wants to take their game to the next level, keep every picture and all data that comes within those pictures," Mark says. "Then, start making assessments and decisions based on historical information, as opposed to information in the here and now. It has changed the game for us. That's a differentiator for me.

"I have every rack buck photo I've ever taken from 2007 to present day," Mark continues. "I have every year's moons documented, so I know when it was dark of the moon and full moon. I'll go back and look at a particular buck and identify when he was in my hunting area, as home ranges vary. But oftentimes, they are habitual in when they are around and when they will daylight. I'll look at photos of



Dubbed by many as the "Mad Scientist," Mark Drury intimately studies each target buck on his properties and how their behavior correlates with various weather and hunting conditions. Photo courtesy of Mark Drury

bucks for years at a time and put a file together on a particular buck. More specifically, I'll find years with similar moons and look at when daylight activity was greatest on a moon that was full on Nov. 7 versus Nov. 17. And then I'll compare it to what it was like that October or November when we had the same conditions eight years ago."

Of course, he stresses that weather trumps moon. Even so, he says year-over-year moon phase trends reveal patterns in rut activity and daylight deer movement. These patterns will

show correlating daylight movements.

"We kill 70 to 80 percent of our bucks in and around the full moon, including the seven days that precede and follow the full moon," Mark says. "The two weeks are when we see the most daylight and kill our best bucks."

So, don't just react to real-time trail camera data. Instead, analyze all facets of historical trail camera data for generalized trends, and then get more specific on target bucks. This will help to anticipate future deer behavior and movement.

NICK MUNDT

GO WITH YOUR GUT

Bone Collector co-host Nick Mundt has killed a lot of deer and learned a lot of lessons. Despite all these to pull from, it's a simple yet profound one he urges deer hunters to remember.

"One thing I learned when I was a guide, is that I let people talk me out of my first instinct," Nick says. "For years, people would be like, 'Let's not set up here. Let's go down the ridge and set up there.' We'd do that, and then we should have been where I wanted to be. It bit me in the butt a bunch of times."

Today, he goes with his gut instinct, which is usually his initial feeling. He says it's easy to talk yourself out of the right situation, but when you feel strongly about something, listen to it. That feeling is usually correct. Then, invest some tree stand time and envision success.

"Time spent is the biggest asset," Nick claims. "I don't get discouraged.



With experience hunting whitetails all over the continent and guiding hunters, Nick Mundt believes it is important to always go with your gut. As a former guide, he says that not going with his initial gut feeling is one mistake he has seen bite him multiple times. Photo courtesy of Nick Mundt

Sure, there are times when I'm not seeing deer, and I'll get out of there. But when the time comes to seal the deal, you should've played that scenario out in your mind of being successful over and over and over. When that

buck comes through there, you must make it count. Whether it's 10 yards or 50, be ready to execute. In that moment of truth, there are a lot of people who can't put it together to seal the deal."

GORDON WHITTINGTON

MID-MORNING FOOD SOURCES

North American Whitetail's Editor Emeritus, Gordon Whittington, knows more about mature whitetails than most hunters will ever hope to. Throughout his career, he's hopped around from state to state, and he's learned to be open-minded about tactics that work for mature whitetails. But that doesn't mean these tips work in all areas, or during all times of the season.

"Many tactics are great in one region but for some reason don't produce as well elsewhere," Gordon says. "Others are fantastic during a certain part of the season but practically worthless at other times."

However, no matter the habitat type he's hunting, he's had good results conducting morning rut hunts around major food sources.

"I've had surprisingly good results

hunting around major food sources in mid-morning," Gordon says. "Conventional wisdom holds that fields and food plots are evening locations, but during the rut, I've often found big bucks cruising the edges around 8:00 to 10:00 a.m., hoping to pick up "hot"

does. This activity tends to come after does and young bucks that were feeding at first light have made their way back into cover to bed. I've learned that if I just hold tight and be patient, I'll often get a crack at a good buck several hours after daybreak."



Although Gordon Whittington has hunted all over the world for whitetails and has seen nearly all accepted tactics for big deer have success and failure, he has seen one tactic prevail in various regions: mid-morning rut hunts around food sources. He says he's seen plenty of big bucks cruising food sources for does between 8:00 and 10:00 a.m.
Photo courtesy of Gordon Whittington

MILES FEDINEC

FIELD STALKING

Big game hunting guide Miles Fedinec spends a lot of time chasing American critters, including the white-tailed deer. He spends time in the Southeast, Midwest and West, hunting all manner of game.

"I've killed a lot of big whitetails hunting them like I would a mule deer," he says. "Like, in Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, Kansas and Texas, during the rut, we drive around and find bucks bedded in CRP fields instead of the woods. They get a doe, take them out there and lock down. Then, we stalk those bedded deer with bows. If you would have sat in your tree stand in the woods, they're never walking by you. During the lock-down, people think they must sit in a stand and ride it out. But I've killed a lot of deer by searching and catching them bedded in those fields where no one looks."

As a big game hunting guide, Miles Fedinec is experienced at spotting and stalking various species. For whitetails locked down with does, he prefers to stalk them in open fields.
Photo courtesy of Miles Fedinec



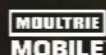
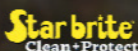
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BILL WINKE DON'T SPOOK 'EM

Perhaps the best tactic that *Midwest Whitetail* founder and outdoor writer Bill Winke implements, is staying off the radars of all deer in the area.

"If there is something that I do better than most deer hunters, it is probably going to extremes to keep the deer from knowing I am hunting them," Bill says. "If the deer don't know you are hunting them, you can kill them, eventually. That is the whole basis for all my strategies — keep them in the dark and put in the time."

Naturally, if you spook a target deer, you aren't likely to kill that animal the same day, or even soon. "But not everyone knows that even bumping non-target deer can be a real hunt killer," Bill says. "Their body language while moving in that area will tip off other deer that something isn't right. All the deer become more cautious and stop moving naturally. Go to extremes to control how many deer you bump by



A proven big buck killer, Bill Winke says he always tries to prevent any deer on his properties from knowing that he's hunting them.
Photo courtesy of Bill Winke

taking a thoughtful look at every step you take. Apply a creative approach to get past the tricky spots."

Sometimes, that might mean catching a ride from the farmer, using water access, or another creative strategy. All said, be creative and use micro-man-

agement to overcome challenges. Of course, don't blindly follow what everyone else is doing. Instead, take all possible measures to keep deer from detecting you. Bill says if you can't do that, you might be hunting the wrong spot.

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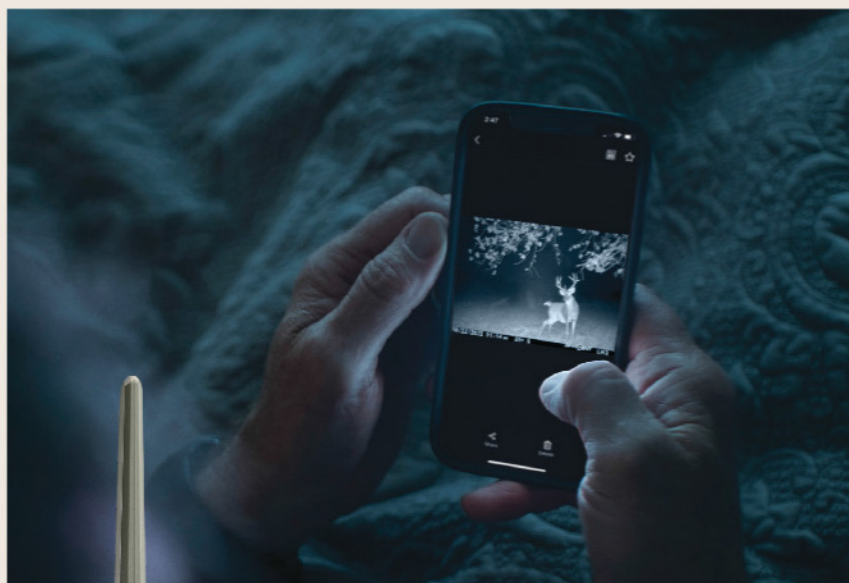
SITUATIONAL TACTICS

The Hunting Public's Aaron Warbritton covers the element of situational tactics. These are tactics that focus on micro patterns that might only last a day or two.

"Unless hunting a giant managed property, you're dealing with a buck that's dealt with hunters. The biggest bucks I've seen, hunted, killed or screwed up on, have been in a unique situation," Aaron says. "When I look back on these situations, they're very specific. You might find similar aspects to compare, but when you find mature bucks that are really old, situational tactics play a major role."



For Aaron Warbritton, adapting to the situation and micro patterns he's seeing in real time are key for success on mature bucks. Photo courtesy of Aaron Warbritton



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He used an example from last season to illustrate this concept. It was during the Iowa late season, and he was hunting during a blizzard. "We knew of a location with south-facing solar and thermal bedding cover with cedars and pines," Aaron says. "Along the back edge of that south-facing bedding cover was some lowland transitional habitat. It goes from timber to marshy terrain. Along that transition, there was a lot of honey locust. Deer love those pods, especially when it snows and during the winter. All these factors contributed to several large bucks bedding in this spot. They were bedded in the thick cedars during the blizzard and came out on the low side of that — to encounter less wind and snow — and fed in that sheltered area below the bedding."

That's a specific example of situational tactics, though. It isn't repeatable all the time. It was specific to that blizzard, which gusted 40 mph winds and dumped 10 to 12 inches of snow. However, the conditions forced the deer into that spot. Hunters who learn to study the conditions surrounding the local deer herd can better predict what deer are doing. Don't think of patterns in months or weeks. In many cases, patterns are measured in days or even hours. That's why situational tactics take center stage. **NAW**



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A large buck with impressive antlers stands in a forest. The buck is facing right, looking slightly towards the camera. Its antlers are large and multi-tined, with a reddish-brown color. The buck's coat is a mix of brown and grey, with a white patch on its throat. The background is a blurred forest scene with green foliage and brown tree trunks.

n over 25 years of hunting mountain whitetails, I've learned that each face of the mountain and every creek bottom has its own benefits for deer. From food sources to bedding cover, each area has something to offer. In my lifetime, I have found that deer use all these areas of the mountains, but not often on a daily basis. Understanding seasonal shifts related to sunlight, food sources and weather are the key to having consistent success hunting mountain whitetails.

NORTH SLOPES

I love hunting north slopes. North slopes generally have a lot to offer whitetails. Here in Northwest Pennsylvania, we get a lot of south winds, so north slopes tend to hold a lot of leeward buck bedding and deer bedding in general. Mature bucks often bed on the upper portion of the ridge where there's wind coming from the south and thermal currents coming from down below. This gives bucks a scent-checking advantage from almost any direction.

Outside of winter, deer prefer cooler areas that get less sunlight. North slopes get the least amount of sunlight compared to the other three faces of the mountain. On hot days, deer tend to move less, but you can almost always find movement on a north slope since it will be several degrees cooler.

North, south, east and west-facing slopes all hold deer; however, they don't all hold bucks during the same time periods. Each slope has its own window to offer whitetails quality food and bedding.
Photo by Ryan Yoder

WHEN TO HUNT EACH SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN

BY
STEVE
SHERK

THIS GUIDE TO WHEN DIFFERENT PARTS OF THE MOUNTAIN OFFER PRIMARY COVER AND NUTRITION FOR MATURE BUCKS WILL HELP YOU TRACK DOWN DEER IN STEEP TERRAIN.

North slopes tend to host more bedding than feeding, but on a year when no acorns are available, north slopes will also produce the bulk of the feeding activity. One of the most sought-after mountain food sources later in the fall is fern roots. Ferns grow best on north slopes, because they are shade lovers. After the first two or three frosts, you'll notice a shift in feeding areas. This is when a lot of green browse sources start to dry up, and if there's no mast available, deer will seek fern roots and other bulbs from plants. I hunt both Northwest Pennsylvania and Southwest New York, and we have not seen acorns in the past two hunting seasons. In 2021, I harvested a beautiful 9-point on the second day of the New York gun season. I had scouted several days

in a row prior to the season and was finding minimal sign. However, it seemed like every time I checked a north slope, I was seeing deer or finding fresh rubs and scrapes. That was the key for me in killing that buck. When the season opened, I put all my focus on north slopes and tagged out on the second day.

North slopes can be deer magnets during drought years, too. You can almost always find water on north slopes. Not only do they hold water, but most of the browse is full of moisture. This makes north slope browse a great combo for both food and water. Anytime a mature buck can find a situation where he can get food and water, yet preserve energy, he will tend to hold tight to that area.

SOUTH AND WEST SLOPES

I grew up on a south-facing ridge in the Allegheny mountains. During my early years of hunting, the majority of it was done out my back door. It seemed like back then we would have a bumper acorn crop every fall, and when the acorns began dropping, those south slopes would be loaded with deer in October. However, I didn't see this abundance of deer outside of fall and winter.

South and west slopes are probably the least preferred side of the mountain for whitetails, outside of a good acorn crop. Most oaks prefer a lot of sunlight, which makes south and west faces great places to hunt when you have a good acorn crop. White oaks flourish on south slopes, and we all know how much deer love white oak acorns. During a good acorn year, deer will relocate from miles away to take advantage of falling acorns. I swear Mother Nature has a way of telling deer that there is better food available in a new area, sometimes miles away. I've seen individual bucks shift their entire homerange when acorns were available somewhere else.

Early in the fall, there's a lot of new browse still available and much of that is located on southern slopes that receive full sun. South-facing clear-cuts can be deer magnets in early autumn, especially select cuts that have standing trees available for shade. You'll find many clear-cuts in the northeastern part of the country that have standing evergreens within them. These evergreens make for great bedding, as they produce much needed shade for whitetails. If you don't have shade trees on a south-sloping clear-cut, you won't find deer bedding within them unless there's unseasonably cool weather.

You have to keep in mind that most wild plants need at least 4 to 6 hours of sunlight per day, so the bulk of quality browse during the early season will likely be on south slopes. But like I said before, once the weather



While scouting prior to the opening of New York's 2021 gun season, the author only found concentrations of sign on north slopes. So, when the season began, he focused entirely on north faces and tagged this beautiful 9-point on just the second day. Photo courtesy of Steve Sherk

turns colder, a lot of green browse will die off and deer will change feeding areas.

South slopes are also very attractive during the winter months. I've had a lot of success hunting and guiding on south slopes during gun season. If it's brutally cold or we have heavy snow, deer instantly shift to south-facing points and ridges. Southern slopes always have less snow and produce warmer temperatures because of sun exposure.

Several years back, I shot a mature 8-pointer on a south slope bedded with a doe in near-zero-degree temperatures. It was so cold that my firing pin froze on me. I had pulled the trigger three different times on the buck and the firing pin never moved; it was frozen solid. I ended up leaving the buck bedded there and walked close to a mile back to my truck to try and thaw the gun out with my heater. As I walked back, I had also unloaded the gun and tucked it inside my coat under my

armpit to help thaw it out. When I got to my truck, I dry fired the gun and the firing pin sounded off. Miraculously, I hiked all the way back to the ridge where the buck and doe were bedded and shot the buck just as he stood up from his bed.

I'm not a big fan of west slopes, unless they hold a food source or bedding cover. I do have a couple good bedding areas that I hunt on west faces that are consistent, because they have good bedding cover. When cover is limited, deer will bed wherever it's available. So you can't always put your focus on any side of the mountain, especially with mature bucks. Security and cover are almost always their main priority. If limited bedding cover is only available on the west side of the mountain, it's likely a good buck will be using it.

I will say, I've noticed a lot of mature bucks traveling down the west sides of the mountain during the late afternoons when thermals start to drop. As the sun starts to set in the west,

thermals start to drop dramatically on west slopes. Deer love to move with the thermals at their backs. They use their eyes to see ahead and the thermal currents to protect them from behind.

Also, if red oaks and white oaks fail to produce, keep an eye out on the chestnut oak crop. Chestnut oaks tend to be very common on west slopes. The chestnut oak produces one of the least favored acorns, but when other preferred food sources aren't available, they will become a highly preferred source of food.

EAST SLOPES

The upper portion of an east slope is probably my number two location for mature buck bedding in the mountains. The east part of the ridge is another common leeward sign, because a lot of wind tends to blow from the west. I also pay close attention to east slopes during and before weather fronts.

In the eastern part of the country, the majority of storms come from the west, which will typically push deer to the east side of the mountain. Also, the first place a mature buck will often bed in the morning is on an east-facing ridge. As the sun rises, the east side of the hill usually has the best thermal currents, and bucks will often set up their bedding to take advantage of those early-rising thermals.

The east side of the mountain usually gets the least amount of wind, because eastern winds are extremely uncommon here in Pennsylvania. That being said, they can be tricky to hunt. Minimal to no wind is a tough hunting situation for whitetail hunters trying to control where their scent goes. I've set up on east slopes in the past, and it seemed like my scent was spraying slowly in all directions. It's much easier to take advantage of a consistent wind and to hunt with the wind in your favor than to have no wind at all. No wind does not mean you are going to be undetected from a whitetail's nose. In the mountains, there are always thermal currents passing from different directions throughout the day. However, wind will override those currents when it blows consistently from one direction. Consistent wind is a huge advantage for hunting mountain whitetails.

I don't often find a lot of quality

browse sources on east slopes, unless they are more southeastern-facing. But in the northeast part of the country, beech brush is very common on east slopes, and it provides tremendous bedding cover. Beech will hold a lot of its leaves right until spring before it starts growing again. When all other brush and cover has dropped its leaves, the woods start to really open up, and deer will feel less secure in those places. However, the beech brush will still be holding leaves, and it tends to really attract mature bucks later in the fall for security cover.

CREEK BOTTOMS

This past season, during the early part of November, the only place I was seeing rut activity was down in the creek bottoms. We were dealing with both drought conditions and extremely warm weather during the early part of our rut. When the upper mountain springs dry up, deer will concentrate down low closer to water sources, especially the does. Does always stick close to food and water.

I've also found that water is a huge factor during the rut. When green

The author found this mature buck bedded on a south-facing slope in near-zero-degree conditions. He tried to shoot the buck, but his firing pin was frozen, causing him to squeeze the trigger three times unsuccessfully. Ultimately, after walking a mile back to his truck to try and thaw the firing pin with the vehicle's heater, he killed the deer in the same south-face bed where he had left it. Photo courtesy of Steve Sherk

browse starts to fade, deer get less water from what they eat and spend more time around water sources. You also must consider that during the rut bucks drink more water, because they are burning more energy than normal. Throw in warmer than average temperatures, and water becomes a huge factor on locating deer during this time.

Whenever I'm dealing with warmer than average temperatures, I always start checking creek bottoms. Not only do deer seek bottoms for water, but they tend to hold cool air as well. I can't emphasize enough how much

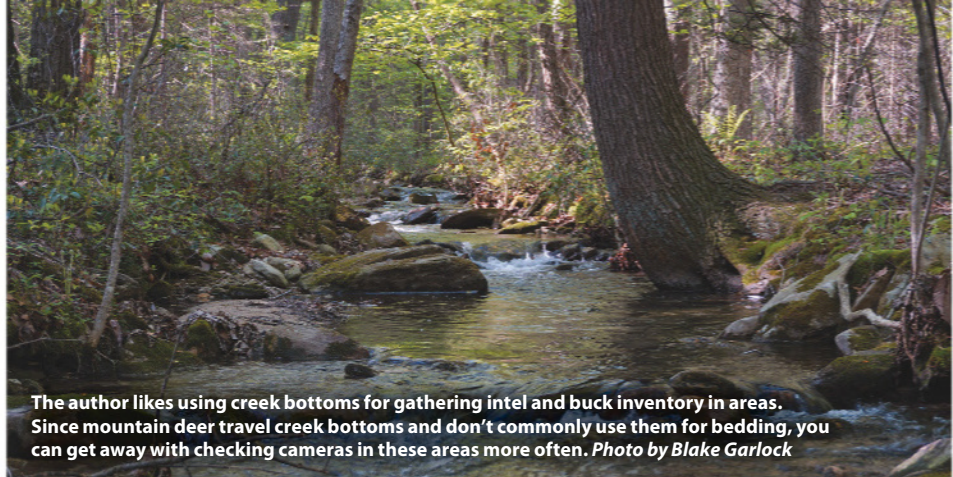
temperature plays a role in deer activity. Deer always look for cool air when they are dealing with warm weather.

Another situation where creek bottoms can produce is when there is increased hunting pressure. Creek bottoms are often overlooked in the mountains. They also hold a lot of cover, such as green briar, red brush and cattails. These are the kinds of areas most hunters don't want to hunt. In the mountains, the average hunter prefers to find road access up high, so they don't have to climb up from the bottom. They also stay up high so they can eliminate a tough hike out. Older bucks catch onto this and know that creek bottoms become safe havens when hunting pressure starts to increase.

Creek bottoms might not be my all-around go-to area, but at the least they are great places to get intel on mature bucks. Mountain deer naturally gather and socialize in creek bottoms during the night hours. I have a lot of success placing trail cameras on primary scrapes down in creek bottoms when trying to locate areas that have big bucks. The creek bottom is often the starting point on narrowing down a mature buck's travels and patterns. These areas rarely host bedding, so you can get away with going in often and checking cameras to get intel since a lot of the activity is at night.

IN CONCLUSION

Mountain bucks are in their own league in the world of whitetail hunting. There's a time and a situation for hunting each side of the mountain or down in the bottoms. If you're able to adapt and understand mountain deer, along with accepting the ultimate whitetail hunting challenge, you can find great joy and success hunting mountain whitetails. **NAW**



The author likes using creek bottoms for gathering intel and buck inventory in areas. Since mountain deer travel creek bottoms and don't commonly use them for bedding, you can get away with checking cameras in these areas more often. Photo by Blake Garlock





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PREDICTING BUCK PATTERNS

BY COMBINING YOUR KNOWLEDGE OF SPECIFIC BUCKS' HABITS WITH AN UNDERSTANDING OF SEASONAL AND WEATHER SHIFTS, YOU CAN ANTICIPATE YOUR TARGET BUCK'S NEXT MOVE.

BY
STEVE
SHERK

One of the biggest challenges in hunting mature whitetails is knowing their seasonal shifts and changes in patterns and movements. What you find happening in the woods today could be entirely different tomorrow. Through many years of trial and error, I've learned it's better to try and predict what a buck is going to do next than to go on what he did today or most recently.

EARLY FALL SHIFT

I see several shifts each fall that can leave hunters dumbfounded when it comes to figuring out where a buck went and why he vanished. The early fall shift is one of the most well-known shifts you see bucks make every year. A lot of hunters are aware that it's going to happen, yet they can never seem to prepare for it or take advantage of it. You can keep tabs on a buck the entire summer, which is the time of year when he is most predictable, then one day he will disappear or completely change his habits in the blink of an eye.

The two big keys in knowing when a buck is going to break from his summer pattern are when he sheds his velvet and when he leaves his bachelor group. This usually happens in late August or early September. The good thing is, both changes usually occur at about the same time. Rising testosterone levels will turn a buck into a completely different animal; that's what causes him to shed his velvet and break away from his buddies. Testosterone will change the way he thinks, eats and sleeps. All early season hunters need to be aware of this and prepare for it to happen.

When a mature buck makes this shift, he tends to become way more nocturnal. He will also likely shrink his core area to a few acres of ground. His core area is always linked to his bedroom. At this time of year, bucks spend more time in their bedding areas than any other location. In my opinion, the bedding pattern is the best strategy for harvesting an early season buck after the early fall shift.

The sooner you recognize a shift or a change in movement, the more your odds increase at capitalizing on it. Even better, if you can plan for these shifts to happen and know when they occur, you'll kill a lot more big whitetails.

THE RUT SHIFT

Many confuse the rut shift with the early fall shift. These are two completely different moves a buck will make during the fall. I see the rut shift generally taking place around mid-October.

At this time, bucks will leave their core areas and begin focusing their movements on what the does are doing within their homerange. I've found that most mature bucks tend to seek out the closest doe groups in relation to their core areas. So, a lot of times, this move a buck is making is not a far one. But similar to the early fall shift, a lot of his needs and priorities start to change.

This is especially a time when breeding starts to outweigh his needs for food and cover. Even though it's unlikely he will breed at this time, most older bucks prepare 1 to 3 weeks ahead of time for the rut. This preparation mode is when they will start rubbing and scraping around doe feeding and bedding areas. They will also shift their

A large buck with impressive antlers stands in a field of tall, golden grass. The buck is shown in profile, facing left, with its head slightly turned. Its antlers are large and multi-tined, with a light brown color. The buck's coat is a mix of brown and tan, with a white patch on its throat and a white stripe on its hindquarters. The background is a soft-focus field of tall grass and some trees with autumn foliage.

Bucks shift their ranges and core areas multiple times during the hunting season. If you stay on top of these changes, you can increase the chances of tagging a trophy buck.
Photo by Vic Schendel



The author arrowed this great buck on public land during mid-October. When he noticed fresh buck sign popping up on the edge of a doe bedding area, he knew a big deer had just made his rut shift. He tagged the deer just two days after finding the sign. *Photo courtesy of Steve Sherk*

bedding to mainly downwind of doe bedding areas.

The mid- to late-October period has been my best part of the season for killing mature bucks. This is one of the most overlooked times of the year. In fact, many call this the "October Lull" and refuse to hunt until closer to November. When I think back on some of the bucks I've taken around the rut shift, most of them were taken from finding fresh buck sign around doe feeding and bedding areas, or on scrapes that bucks were visiting to interact with does.

I took one of my better archery bucks during the middle part of October, while hunting over some hot sign that started popping up on the edge of a doe bedding area. I had no trail camera pictures of the deer, but based on the sign I was seeing, I knew a good buck was frequenting the area to check does. I found that sign on a Monday and ended up killing the buck two days later during my first sit. I knew what I needed to do based on the time of year. It wasn't trail camera photos or a recent sighting that led me to that buck; I just understood when the rut shift would happen, and I adjusted my scouting until I found hot sign around a doe bedding area.

Knowing just as much about the does in your hunting areas as you do the bucks is extremely vital for success during the middle and end of October. Second to that, you have to be willing to put boots on the ground to find what doe groups the bucks are monitoring. If you can combine consistent doe activity with fresh buck sign, you are in the money. Not every group of does will be monitored by a good buck come mid-October. However, it is almost guaranteed there will be a large amount of buck sign in the places these bucks are checking does.

I've had a lot of success placing trail cameras on scrapes around doe bedding areas in advance to

the rut shift. Most of these cameras I set up in the spring or summer. The majority of the pictures tend to only be of does, but a couple times later in the summer you'll see a mature buck work one of these scrapes. That's a clue to knowing what scrapes you should be hunting during the rut. By late October, a lot of these scrapes will be visited on a more frequent basis by bucks you saw there only once or twice during the summer. If the does stick around, you can bet on the bucks returning later in the fall.

WEATHER CHANGES

Arguably the greatest factor effecting deer movement is weather. You can even make a stronger case of that

The author says that the first noticeable shift a buck will make is called the early fall shift. This generally occurs in late August or early September, and it usually coincides with bucks shedding their velvet and abandoning their bachelor groups. *Photo by Bruce MacQueen, Shutterstock*





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being true for mature bucks. When I see weather changes in the extended forecast, I always adjust my hunting strategies according to the weather. Some weather conditions increase our odds, while others decrease our chances for success.

I love to see cold weather in combination with the rut. I don't believe there is a better formula for success related to weather and deer movement than hunting mature bucks during the rut in cold weather. In my experience, which is close to a decade of journaling rut movement based on weather and trail cameras, I have found that the best days to hunt rutting whitetails are days when the high temperature is in the 30s, and the low temperature is 32 or less.

These are what I call 30-30 days. In fact, I save some of my best rut stands for those prime days. Most of these stands are placed along travel corridors that produce year after year. These days are when mature bucks roam the greatest distances. A good travel corridor is similar to us taking the express way on a long-distance vacation. A lot of these routes only get used when a buck is covering a ton of ground. You don't need recent intel or hot sign to kill a mature buck on a travel corridor, all you need are prime weather conditions combined with the right time of year. You can plan these hunts well in advance by watching the 10-day and two-week weather forecasts for your hunting area.

Warm weather has been my greatest enemy for hunting whitetails. It doesn't matter the time of year, I struggle to kill mature bucks in hot weather. However, as a guide who runs close to 200 trail cameras per hunting season, my data has shown me that bucks are definitely killable during those hot days, if you know where they are bedding.

The cameras also have taught me that bucks get up often throughout the day, but most of the movement occurs in or around the bedding area. Even during the rut, most of the movement is near bedding when it's hot out. Mature bucks will rut completely different during those hot days. The movement occurs during a much smaller window most of the time, too.

I also watch in advance for rain in the forecast. Light rain will trigger movement throughout the time it is raining, but heavy rain often locks bucks down. However, right after a heavy rain you'll almost always see a big increase in movement.

I came close on a giant buck from the ground once right after a rare, early-October thunderstorm. This was one of those more severe storms. I knew where the buck was bedding, but he would never leave his bedroom until after dusk. When the weather report had called for a severe afternoon thunderstorm, I had a good feeling that buck would get up out of bed early that evening. I remember the storm ending around 5:00 p.m., and I can recall heading into that area while dodging acorn-sized hail and 50 mph winds, hoping the storm would end once I got to the edge of the buck's bedding area.

Indeed it did, and at about 5:30 p.m., the buck got up from his bed and walked a trail that was just 20 yards from my setup. Unfortunately, he caught me drawing my bow back just when I had an opening to

shoot him. That was probably one of the few times I knew of that buck leaving his bedding area early, but I predicted his movements in advance based on the weather forecast. I still count that hunt as a success!

Almost any kind of weather change is going to alter a mature buck's movements and patterns. Some have a positive effect, and some will be negative. Regardless, in any weather situation, a buck is still likely killable; it's all about planning ahead and understanding how weather influences movement. The biggest thing mature buck hunters need to understand is that you have to always be one step ahead of the deer you are hunting. The key is getting to know bucks as individuals, and you also need to know how and when their environments change. **NAW**



Aside from seasonal shifts, the author pays close attention to how weather events alter buck movements and patterns. For example, he's noticed that a heavy rain will lock bucks down, but you will see a big increase in deer movement immediately after a heavy rain. Photo by Tony Campbell, Shutterstock

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THE LOST ART OF IN-SEASON SCOUTING

Not all scouting is done in the pre-season. Lace up your boots to find fresh fall deer sign and hunt changing buck patterns.

BY
ALEX
COMSTOCK

I was just sitting down for dinner and saw my phone ringing. It was my hunting buddy Luke Eilefson giving me a ring, and I knew it had to mean one thing. It was just getting to “primetime” for whitetail movement that evening, and I knew Luke was in a tree stand in an area we had just scouted a couple days prior. This had to mean one thing.

As I answered the phone, I heard heavy breathing and Luke exclaiming on the other end, *Big Buck Down!* I couldn’t have been more excited for Luke, and that buck wouldn’t have had an arrow sent through him had it not been for some in-season scouting.

In-season scouting seems to be a lost art. I hear it time and time again that it’s taboo to be walking around the same timber you’re going to hunt just to scout while it’s hunting season. And though I believe there are certain things you should not do while scouting during the season, it definitely can be done.

In-season scouting is the focus of this article, and some of the following tactics could possibly change the way you look at white-tail hunting. Before we get into the nitty gritty, do’s and don’ts, and how I like to conduct in-season scouting, I’ll illustrate the power of it by diving deeper into the hunt from the opening paragraph.

SEPTEMBER 2022

It was opening week of archery season in Minnesota. Here in Minnesota, myself and my buddies Luke and Garrett do all our hunting together. Opening weekend was a little slow with some bad weather, but as we got into the first full week of hunting, Luke and I decided one of our stands wasn’t in the perfect spot.

We’d catch glimpses of deer out beyond bow range, but for whatever reason, deer weren’t coming through where we figured they would be. We were hunting in a completely new area to us, so after a few days of hunting, we decided to do a quick scout.





For many hunters there's a stigma that scouting efforts must occur before the hunting season opens. However, this is unrealistic for whitetail hunters who chase deer on public land, knock on doors for permission to new properties, etc. Even if you're hunting familiar ground, there are real advantages to in-season scouting for fresh, "hot" deer sign. This includes everything from oak trees raining acorns to fresh rubs and scrapes.

Photos by Alex Comstock



The author's hunting buddy connected on this fine Minnesota buck after discovering a small group of oak trees dropping acorns. Though the two men had a lock-on stand setup 100 yards away, deer simply weren't coming into bow range of their setup. An in-season scouting mission with mobile hunting gear put these hunters right where the "X" marked the spot. Two hunts later, the mature buck was down.
Photos by Alex Comstock

We went in to hunt with our mobile saddles on and stand platforms on our backpacks, and instead of going to that same tree, we pushed up to where we had been catching glimpses of deer. Our objective was to see if there was anything obvious there, which was a hundred or so yards from our lock-on stand setup. As we tip-toed through the timber, it became obvious fast.

There was a small cluster of oak trees, and they were absolutely dumping acorns. The ground was torn up with deer sign, and we knew this was the spot we had to be. We picked the best tree, climbed up and waited. That first sit we were covered in deer. Does, fawns, small bucks and a couple decent bucks all walked by us within 20 yards.

We knew this was the spot to be. Fast forward a couple days to the next available hunting day, and even though I couldn't get out, Luke went back to that tree. He again was covered in deer, and that evening he was able to arrow a beautiful 11-point buck.

As I start to dive deeper into in-season



scouting, think back to this example. Had we not done any scouting right away in the first week of season and waited until spring to do so, we would have missed out on a great opportunity. In a situation like this, this small pocket of trees

really was only productive in the short amount of time that the oaks were dropping acorns.

Once the acorns were all gone, the small area was pretty quiet the rest of the fall. Doing the in-season scouting helped us to fill a tag and learn for future seasons. When you in-season scout though, there are a few things you want to keep at the top of your mind that will no doubt help you.

MOBILE HUNTING

This past fall was my first utilizing a saddle setup, and what it did was help me become an extremely mobile hunter. Additionally, it allowed me to scout and hunt at the same time. The biggest reason I love in-season scouting is that you're able to read the freshest sign available and make moves based on what you find. Pair that with mobile hunting, and you can head to the woods, scout, and (when you find what you're looking for) setup right then and there.

When you are hunting mobile, whether it be with a lightweight tree stand or saddle, it can open up many possibilities through in-season scouting. A lot of times, I'll pick areas on the map that I've maybe never been to, and "scout my way in" until I find hot sign, such as a fresh rub line



What conditions are best for in-season scouting missions? The author prefers to wait for super windy or rainy days to penetrate his best spots. Wind covers up most of the noise made by foot traffic, and rain washes away human scent.
Photo by Alex Comstock

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Gear that hunts

When in-season scouting, avoid disturbing large bedding areas, i.e. "sanctuaries." The same holds true for mature buck core areas. Often, when you go too deep into a buck's home turf, you're looking for sign that you already know exists. So, proceed with caution on all in-season scouting efforts. Photo by Alex Comstock

or a beat-up oak flat. Every person's situation is different, but if you have the ability to hunt mobile, it can be a great gateway into in-season scouting.

WEATHER CONDITIONS

If you're going to strictly in-season scout without mobile hunting, there are a couple other things to consider. The most important to me is weather conditions. There are two main weather conditions that I prefer to do my in-season scouting in: rain and wind.

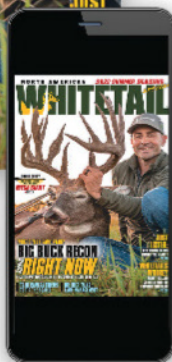
If it's super windy out, you're prob-

ably not hunting. I'm not saying you can't kill a buck in high winds, but sometimes I've found that forgoing a hunt to scout in the season can be more beneficial than hunting in bad weather conditions, especially if it's been slow in the deer woods for you. When you've got high winds, the wind can help conceal the sound you make walking around, allowing you to scout around undetected.

The other weather condition that I absolutely love to do my in-season scouting in is rain. When it's raining

at a decent clip, most of your ground scent is going to be washed away. This allows you to push the limits and scout on-foot in areas you'd otherwise not want to penetrate.

When it's raining, I'll typically do my "bigger" in-season scouts. Maybe it's a chunk of public land I've been wanting to check out, or maybe I've got a buck coming from a certain area on trail cam, but he's always showing up after dark. During a good rain, I'll really comb over an area, opposed to scouting the fringes or tip-toeing through areas



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as I normally would. During a rain event, I'll scout thoroughly, making waypoints and mental checks.

Rain is also great for getting trail cameras up in areas you don't really want to disturb. We utilize a lot of cell cams, and if there's a particular spot I'd love to have a cell cam, but don't want to intrude upon, I'll use the rain to my advantage and get the camera up on those days. It's a great way to in-season scout.

NO GO ZONES

When it comes to in-season scouting, there are a couple types of areas I stay away from entirely. The first is anything I would consider a "major" bedding area. If I've identified a sanctuary or major bedding area, I find no point to go walking through them during the season. I believe that is only going to hurt you. If you need to confirm something or have a theory about an edge or a part of



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the bedding area, I'd suggest mobile scouting/hunting.

Remember, it's always risky to invade a bedding area. However, under perfect conditions, the closer you get to major bedding, the more likely it is you'll have an opportunity on the first sit.

The other type of area I don't like to in-season scout is what I would call a buck's core home range. When I'm in-season scouting, I'm trying to figure out where a buck's home range is or if there's a mature buck in the area at all. If you believe you have a buck's core area already pinned down, you may do more harm than good walking all over the area.

By going too deep into a buck's lair, most of the time, you're looking for things you probably already know are there. All I'm saying here is to be careful, and if you do scout an area like this, I'd suggest doing it slowly and preferably during a rainy day.

IN CONCLUSION

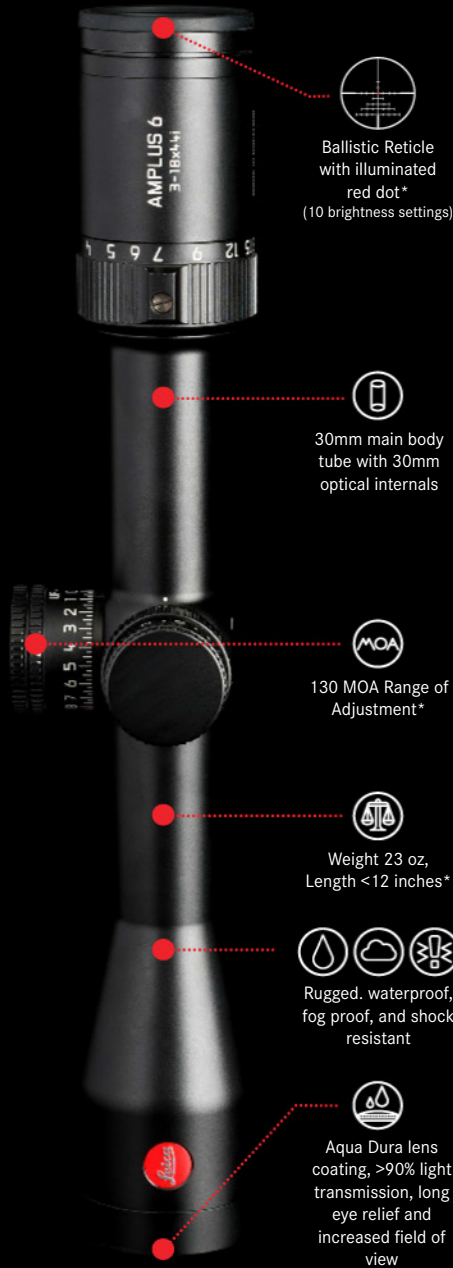
I'd argue that, in some cases, in-season scouting can be more important than traditional spring scouting. It's all about fresh sign, recent intel, and getting on fresh buck patterns as fast as possible. When done right, this tactic can put you in the game in a matter of hours, and lead to punched tags.

There is so much that can change in the whitetail woods from year to year, and nothing is as effective as being able to hunt the deer sign that is being laid down right then. When you find the sign, you hunt the deer. And if you don't make it happen, you can continue to scout and look for new information. Because behind that next corner might be the stand location, and the buck, you've been looking for! **NAW**

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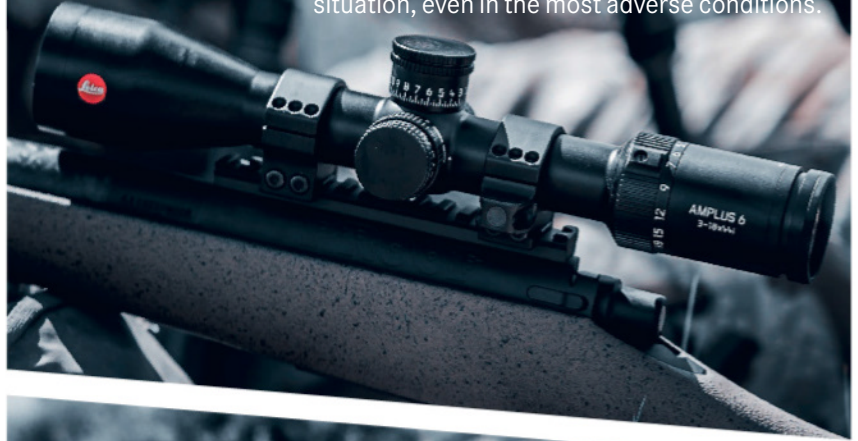
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FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA

PART 1

In ways now obvious, 1982's first-ever issue of *North American Whitetail* made a lasting impression on the hunting world. It rolled back the curtain on a whitetail scene bigger and more diverse than most of us hunters had ever imagined. And it ushered in a new lifestyle: that of the whitetail nomad. Many hunters suddenly started to venture farther from home each season. Some hardcores even went so far as to relocate, uprooting themselves and their families in search of the better hunting they now knew existed elsewhere.

I recall those early days clearly — not

just as a contributor to NAW, but also as one of these nomads. The same factors that perhaps made you want to hunt Ohio, Montana or some other trophy hotspot attracted me, too. And so, I began my annual pursuit of whitetails in places I otherwise never would have visited.

Those decades of autumn travel helped me make NAW a better source of practical information on hunting and managing deer for a geographically broad base of readers, just as

similar hunts now are helping newer members of our staff. Many of my hunts also provided unique content for these pages and, starting in 2003, NAW TV. But beyond all that, these wanderings ultimately let me to achieve something else: one of the rarest whitetail “slams” of all.

HUNTING BENCHMARKS

Best known among the various hunting slams is the so-called Super Slam of all 27 North American big-game species recognized by the Boone & Crockett Club. Bowhunting has its own version of that. There also are slams including all species of native wild sheep. And



Because the whitetail's range is so expansive, spanning literally from the Atlantic to Pacific coast, enthusiasts enjoy a nomadic approach to hunting. The author's travels for NAW hunting free-ranging bucks eventually led him to complete a “coast to coast” slam that spans from Washington and Oregon all the way to Virginia. Interestingly, his path of whitetail success follows somewhat closely the famed Lewis and Clark Expedition. Photo courtesy of Gordon Whittington, Map from Shutterstock Images



then there's the wild turkey. Many hunters who passionately pursue gobblers have completed slams of each available subspecies. Some, in fact, do so annually.

In light of all this, it's curious that our most familiar big-game animal has largely been left on the sidelines. Except for the "Whitetail Slam" idea put forth a decade ago by bowhunting personality Tom Miranda and endorsed by my friend Dr. James C. Kroll ("Dr. Deer"), there's little talk of slams involving this species. Tom's concept focused on multi-state/province regions correlated to native subspecies ranges, encouraging hunters to appreciate the diversity of various deer locations, not just a buck's antler score or body weight.

Any hunting slam is simply a personal milestone. Its parameters can be as individual as the person involved. In my case, it was based purely on geography, but in a way somewhat different from Miranda's slam. Mine included respectable whitetail bucks in connected states from the Pacific Ocean all the way to the Atlantic: literally a slam of transcontinental proportions.

ONE OCEAN TO THE OTHER

A whitetail range map reveals many possible routes to achieve this unofficial slam. Most U.S. states and Canadian provinces allow whitetail hunting, and even quite a few states in Mexico do. Yet as we delve into the details, we find obstacles extending beyond the sheer number of hunts required to tag bucks from coast to coast.

First and foremost, the Pacific end of the chain is largely unfamiliar, even to most whitetail nomads. At best, Alaska has only a handful of these deer. California

has none. So within the U.S., that leaves Washington and Oregon as the only viable options.

From there, unless you loop northward to pick up a buck in British Columbia (guide required for Americans), the itinerary must include Idaho; it's the only whitetail state linking the Pacific Northwest to those eastward. From there, your options expand to Montana and Wyoming. By the time you have the Great Plains in sight, there are even more options on your way to the East Coast.

I realize the Gulf of Mexico is technically part of the Atlantic, so yes, you could turn south instead of east and slightly shorten your route to saltwater. Alternately, by including the Coues whitetail, you could include a kill in the Mexican state of Sonora as part of a more southerly march to the Gulf. You might even more quickly go coast to coast by taking "jungle" whitetails in Central America, but doing so takes scaling a tall wall of logistics and legalities.

Due to the size of Canada's provinces, a coast-to-coast slam traversing the southern part of that country is certainly doable. It would take only five

bucks: one each from British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec. Since Hudson Bay is technically part of the Atlantic, kills in British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba would shorten the quest.

Completing this transcontinental slam might sound hard to you, or it might sound easy. I found it to be both. It took me a long time to achieve, but that's partly because I didn't originally set out to do it. On a hunt-by-hunt basis, no superhuman effort or skill was required. It was just whitetail hunting, though in wide-ranging habitats and conditions. The common denominator was that in each instance, I was pursuing free-ranging bucks. Beyond that, no two hunts were quite the same.

PACIFIC NORTHWEST

Washington and Oregon remain obscure parts of the whitetail world. These deer aren't found everywhere, and most of those taken are shot by residents. Blacktails and mule deer are far more popular and common targets. However, nonresidents can tap into some unique whitetail opportu-

nities in both states. I say that as one of the few hunters who live in neither state but have taken whitetails in both.

My Oregon buck, an 8-pointer of the once-endangered Columbian subspecies, I shot in early October 2006 on an afternoon hunt over a water hole in the Umpqua River valley. I was rifle hunting with Western Oregon Outfitters. Columbians aren't big in body or

A whitetail range map reveals many possible routes to achieve a coast-to-coast slam. Certainly, it's possible to do in Canada if you hunt your way across the provinces, moving east from British Columbia to Quebec, or vice versa. However, if you're determined to start in the U.S., either Washington or Oregon is where you'll want to begin. The author arrowed this fine post-rut buck in Washington in December 2011. Photos courtesy of Gordon Whittington





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BACKTRACKING

antler, but their sheer rarity makes each one a trophy. My deer is the smallest whitetail I've ever had mounted but also among my most prized.

Had I not scored in Oregon, my December 2011 kill in southeastern Washington would have checked the Pacific box. I arrowed that post-rut 10-pointer from a tree stand at the base of an ice-shrouded mountain while hunting with Wild Country Guide Service.

Although I tagged these bucks on guided hunts, there's some DIY opportunity in the Pacific Northwest. It's probably easier to experience on the Washington side, given that archery tags are sold over the counter and there are decent numbers of animals on mountainous public land in the eastern end of the state.

Oregon's Columbian whitetails are a tough draw, making a landowner tag via an outfitter your best bet there. However, fair numbers of mountain whitetails (Northwest subspecies) inhabit public forestlands in Oregon's northeastern corner.

IDAHO

Even back in the early years of NAW, cofounder Dick Idol was espousing Idaho as a sleeper whitetail hotspot. Eventually, I had to see for myself.

Following a deerless DIY trip to the heavily forested Panhandle in 1992, two years later I tried hunting a cattle ranch (by permission) in the Clearwater River valley. The property had a ridgetop alfalfa field adjacent to rugged, timbered slopes. While I wasn't yet using trail cameras for hunting, fresh sign and a

few distant visuals confirmed that deer were using the field.

The situation looked favorable, but the downside was timing: late October. Although rifle season was in, the rut wasn't. With the weather still warm, daytime buck movement was slow. After a few days of stand-hunting, rattling and glassing with no luck, I decided to ease through the timber next to the alfalfa.

Sure enough, I hadn't gone far before a nice 9-pointer stood from his bed 75 yards through the timber and stared at me. I raised my 7mm Rem. Mag. and tumbled him. Dragging that deer through a maze of jagged blow-downs gave me new appreciation for what dark-timber elk hunters face.

Northern and Central Idaho have plenty of public land with whitetails, and thousands of nonresident permits are sold each year. Wolves and lions have recently hurt deer numbers, but hunters still get some fine bucks. The fact mine lived within only a couple miles of where the Lewis & Clark expedition once camped on the Clearwater only added to that DIY experience.

WYOMING

I first hunted Wyoming in 2008 with Trophies Plus Outfitters, and it was the quickest and easiest of all hunts in my slam. On the first morning guide Skip Peterson took me to a secluded grain field, and within an hour after sunup a long-browed 8-pointer was wearing my tag. This November rut hunt occurred on a ranch just south of the Montana border in northeastern Wyoming.

Idaho remains a sleeper state for great whitetail hunting. On his whitetail tour across the U.S., the author stopped there in 1994 to hunt a cattle ranch (by permission) in the Clearwater River valley. The property had a ridgetop alfalfa field adjacent to rugged, timbered slopes. It was there he took this nice 9-pointer. Photos courtesy of Gordon Whittington



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I've had other memorable whitetail expeditions in that corner of the Cowboy State, including a November 2014 rifle hunt that featured -21 degrees F temperatures, and a September 2016 crossbow hunt that was much milder. What both those hunts near Devils Tower had in common was great scenery and beautiful whitetails. No wonder nonresidents tags have become harder to draw, especially for gun season.

SOUTH DAKOTA

For generations, most westbound big-game hunters treated South Dakota simply as a rest stop. They'd pull off the highway just long enough to fuel up and grab a bite, then resume heading toward the glamorous species and spectacular scenery of the Rockies.

Eventually, though, a few of us whitetail nomads began to wonder if South Dakota's prairies, fields and creeks might be home to something way bigger than pheasants. Sure enough, they were — and NAW was among the first to point out the potential.

In November 2007, I hunted near Midland with what was then a pretty new operation: Two Rivers Outfitters. Despite insanely high winds that set off a cross-country tumbleweed stampede, I shot a nice 5x5 as he was sniffing around a doe in a creek-bottom thicket. When NAW TV aired that hunt the following summer, Two Rivers was flooded with calls from viewers wanting to sample South Dakota for themselves.

On that first hunt, I saw two bucks bigger than the one I shot. Upon my return a year later, I tagged one bigger still. That 7x8 was looking for a doe along the Bad River but found a Hornady .280 Rem. round instead. It was another example of just how deceptively good wide-open whitetail habitat can be.

COMING NEXT MONTH

On this trek we've now made it halfway across the continent. Still ahead lie what for many of you are more familiar whitetail territories: the Corn Belt, the Ohio River valley and the steep ridges of Appalachia. I hope you'll join me for Part 2, in which I'll push on toward the completion of a memorable achievement. **NAW**

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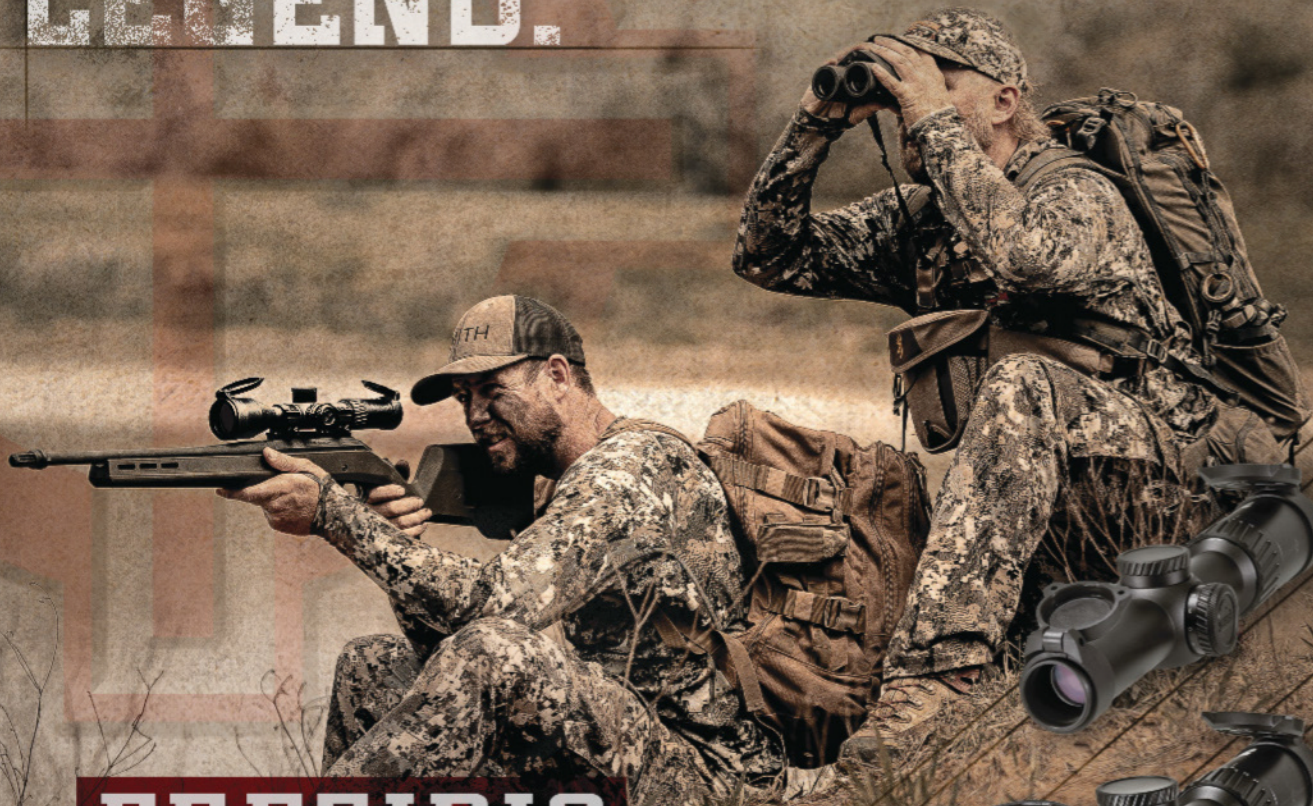
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BY JACE BAUSERMAN

OCTOBER IS HERE, and that means hunting season is in full swing! By now you've likely spent some time on-stand, and you probably aren't looking to add to your whitetail kit. However, in the event you lose something or discover a last-minute hole in your deer gear that you need to fill, we've got you covered.

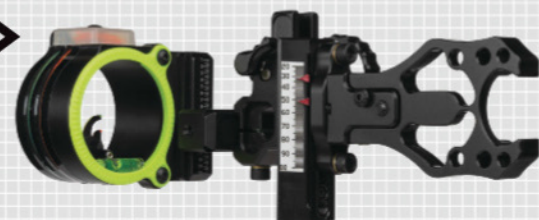
MYSTERY RANCH

■ Many hunters roam public land in search of whitetails, and this crowd wants to be maneuverable, light and stealthy. Enter Mystery Ranch's Treehouse 9. A minimalist hip pack coming in four different sizes, this 3.5-pound, 545-cubic-inch pack sports a magnetic rip-zip flap for quick and easy access. Two side pockets with elastic pull cords secure water bottles and other gear, and the Treehouse 9 comes with lashing straps on the bottom and shoulder strap attachment points on the top of the body panel, allowing for dual carry modes. (mysteryranch.com)



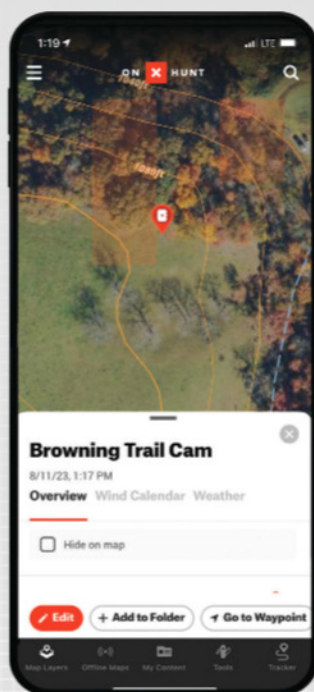
BLACK GOLD

■ Black Gold's Mountain Lite Dual Trac is an excellent sight option, a two-pin vertical sight designed to keep bow weight down while boosting maneuverability. The ML base is compact and uber-light. The .019-inch Pro Pins are fitted with a narrower pin throat that ends in a perfectly rounded pinhead, creating less target blackout. The Dial of Death feature allows archers to instantly dial to pre-determined yardages with a dual indicator system for short and long yardage reference. The Mountain Lite Dual Trac comes with 54 sight tapes, and the PhotoChromatic shell perfectly adapts pin brightness to any lighting condition. (blackgoldsights.com)



ONX HUNT

■ The onX Hunt app continues to evolve and help hunters boost their success. New for 2023, Trail Cam Integration is a feature that allows users to pinpoint trail cameras on their maps and directly import each camera's imagery. With this feature, hunters can store trail cam images in one place. OnX has also made plans to partner with industry-leading trail camera manufacturers to allow certain cell cams to automatically send imagery to the onX Hunt App. New features like Leaf-Off Imagery and Terrain X also sweeten the deal. (onxmaps.com)



BROWNING

■ Launched in 2022, Browning's OVIX pattern continues to dominate the woods. Intentionally placed brown, gray and green hues do an exceptional job of breaking up the hunter's outline at any distance. Browning offers an array of OVIX-covered garments, like the popular Packable Puffer Jacket. Thanks to color analysis, strategic shading and shape manipulation, these apparel items create a consistent pattern of concealment and optical movement. The color pallet utilizes high contrast to break-up figures during close encounters. At further distances, the shapes blend to create a natural mirage rather than a dark blob. (browning.com)

LACROSSE

■ Deer hunters hear the Lacrosse name and instantly think of waterproof, over-the-calf rubber boots that promise warmth, durability and odor control. Yes, Lacrosse does make some great rubber boots. Still, the boot maker's new URSA MS is making waves this season. Five years in development with 30,000 miles covered, these all-terrain hunting boots are lightweight, durable, fitted with a Vibram outsole and Gore-Tex lined. The Tech Tuff PU-Infused Leather combined with a double-stitched, cemented rubber rand make these kicks bulletproof. The URSA MS is the perfect mid-season whitetail boot for all terrain. (lacrossefootwear.com)



BOWTECH

■ For 2023, Bowtech broke the carbon mold by adding flowing lines and giving the all-new Carbon One a sleek, no-boxy appearance. The grip appears long and flat-backed, and Bowtech notes that the strategically engineered carbon riser combined with the Orbit Dampeners eliminate post-shot hand tingle. The DeadLock Cam System is nothing new, and why would it be? The DeadLock System has proven effective and gives the shooter a no-bow-press-needed tune. The Carbon One weighs 4.5 pounds, measures 30 inches between the axles, and hits a top speed of 335 fps. The brace height is 6.63 inches, and the bow is drawn-length adjustable in half-inch increments between 25.5 and 30.5 inches. (bowtecharchery.com)



RAMCAT

■ Ramcat's 100-grain Diamondback broadhead is a hard-hitting fixed-blade. Ramcat based the Diamondback on their patented Airfoil system found on the ferrule. The high-quality design means field point accuracy and penetration that leads the broadhead market. For an extremely fair price, you can get a three-pack of the Ramcat Diamondbacks. (ramcatbroadheads.com)



HODGDON

■ If your smoke pole is your venison getter, consider Hodgdon White Hots 50/50. A .50 caliber 50-grain pellet, White Hots make for rapid reloading in charges that slip down the barrel and pack without the need for measurers or funnels. White Hots are super-clean burning, so cleaning between shots isn't required. White Hots can exceed speeds of 2,600 fps and create incredible contact energy. (hodgdonreloading.com)



KUIU

■ When it comes to warmth, a top-end puffy is hard to beat, and KUIU's Super Down LT Hooded Jacket is a win. This insulated mid-layer hooded jacket blends Quixdown insulation with a 100 percent windproof face fabric. All this comes in a jacket weighing 9.4 ounces. The fabric is a dull, matte finish, and the jacket is available in Verde, Valo, Vias, and Gunmetal color options. (kuiu.com)



LOWDOWN

■ The LowDown Trail Cam Viewer is a touch-screen trail cam viewer that allows you to look over many images quickly and efficiently. Fitted with a 9-inch HD color screen, images pop, and LowDown's SnapShot feature allows you to save freeze-frame videos and convert those frames into saved images. The LowDown Trail Cam Viewer will go anywhere — the woods, the truck, the recliner — and when you're on the move, use the included auto adapter to keep your viewer charged and ready to go. This is a must-have tool if you live where cell cams aren't legal or simply prefer a quality digital trail cam. (lowdownviewer.com)



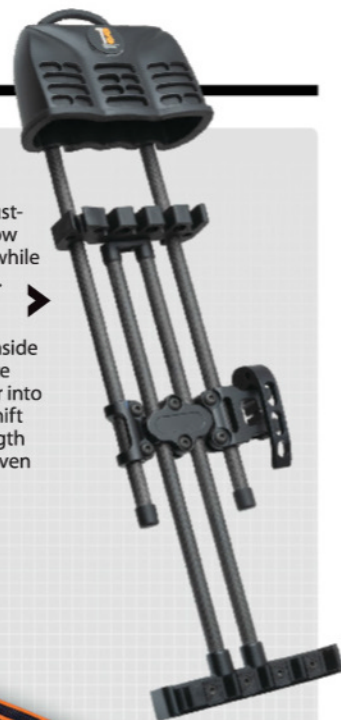
HUNT MONKEY

■ October often calls for a tweener-type glove — something not too heavy or light. We like Hunt Monkey's Ridge Runner Lightweight Glove. A four-way stretch material form-fitting glove, the Ridge Runner sports a brushed interior finish to create a superior warmth-to-strength ratio. An extended cuff boosts comfort, and the synthetic leather palm and non-slip fingers increase grip and function. (huntmonkeygloves.com)



TIGHTSPOT

■ The Shift Lock is an uber-adjustable quiver that maximizes arrow security and reduces noise, all while moving in its full-extend mode. However, when you climb in a less-than-roomy tree stand or spend the day grinding it out inside a ground blind, you'll appreciate the ability to shorten the quiver into a super-compact model. The Shift Lock has 9 inches of overall length adjustment and showcases proven TightSpot innovations. (tightspotquiver.com)



HAVALON

■ Havalon's replaceable blade knives are ideal for the deer hunter seeking a quick and convenient way to have sharper blades; and their Baracuta-Blaze knife delivers on that desire. This cutter measures 10 3/8 inches in overall length, providing you with the ability to dress, cape and debone game adequately with one knife. Weighing just 3 ounces, the Baracuta-Blaze is one of the lightest and sharpest options on the market. (havalon.com)



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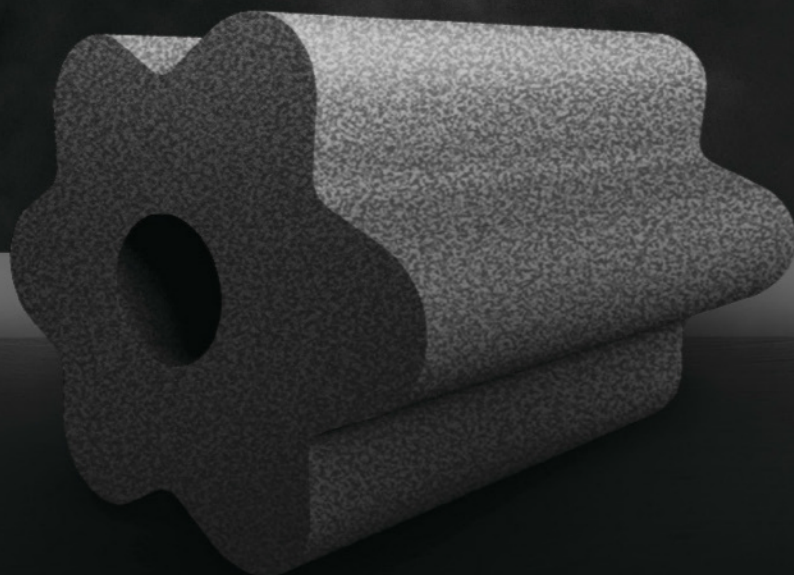
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WHAT'S NEW

BROWNING TRAIL CAMERAS

■ Browning's Dark Ops HD MAX Plus is arguably one of the best standard trail cameras on the market. It features the Dark Ops series' famed imperceptible IR flash, which prevents that wise, old buck you're hunting from seeing your camera. The Dark Ops HD MAX Plus' performance is impressive, too. With adjustable reaction speeds and the ability to capture 20MP photos and 1600x900p HD+ video, you'll know exactly what game is frequenting your best spots. (browningtrailcameras.com)



BUCKSTIK

■ This all-in-one licking branch, rubbing post and mock scrape system is a game-changer. This new system places the three main glands deer use to communicate in one location. The preorbital gland is utilized at the top of the leaf and vine assembly, the forehead gland solution is placed on the forehead strip, and the interdigital gland goes on the system's base. Requiring no tools to set up, you'll be inventorying deer in no time with BuckStik. (buckstik.com)



OZONICS

■ Perfect for your hunting rig, Ozonics' Micro3 safely produces ozone molecules that attack odors and deodorize your vehicle's interior. Plug the Micro3 into your 12V auxiliary power outlet or auto cigarette lighter, and the produced ozone will transform and destroy odor, bacteria, viruses and other pathogens. (ozonics hunting.com)



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BUTLER CREEK

■ Offered in various colors, Butler Creek's FeatherLight Slings are a must-add to your favorite deer gun. Made of durable, lightweight foam, the all-new FeatherLight's are lighter than Butler Creek's Quick Carry Padded Sling. Cutouts reduce trapped heat and provide a hold-to-the-shoulder grip, and the large thumb loop further secures the sling on the shoulder when navigating rough terrain. The FeatherLight is adjustable from 22 to 36 inches. (butlercreek.com)



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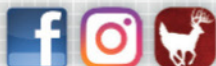
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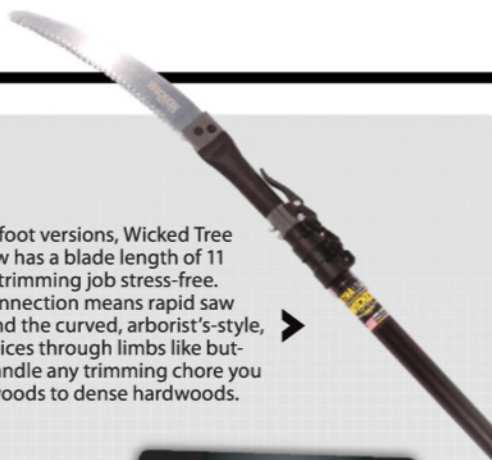
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WICKED TREE GEAR

■ Available in 10- and 14-foot versions, Wicked Tree Gear's Ultra Light Pole Saw has a blade length of 11 inches and will make any trimming job stress-free. The Wicked Ultra-Lock connection means rapid saw removal when needed, and the curved, arborist's-style, high carbon steel blade slices through limbs like butter. This saw is ready to handle any trimming chore you can dream up, from softwoods to dense hardwoods. (feradyne.com)



WILDLIFE RESEARCH CENTER

■ New-for-2023, Wildlife Research Center introduces their Active-Branch mock scrape kit. With quality licking branches not always being in the locations where you'd like to establish them, Active-Branch solves that problem. With Golden Scent, the Magnum Scent Dropper, a mounting strap and the branch holder all included, this kit will have your mock scrapes established in no time. (wildlife.com)



PROVIDER SEASONING

■ The best thing about being a deer hunter is fresh hamburgers and steaks are only a grilling session away. Make your venison even better with Drop Tine Rub. With savory notes of tomato and celery paired with bite-the-tongue Worcestershire, this rub is a win for any big-game meal. (theproviderlife.com)



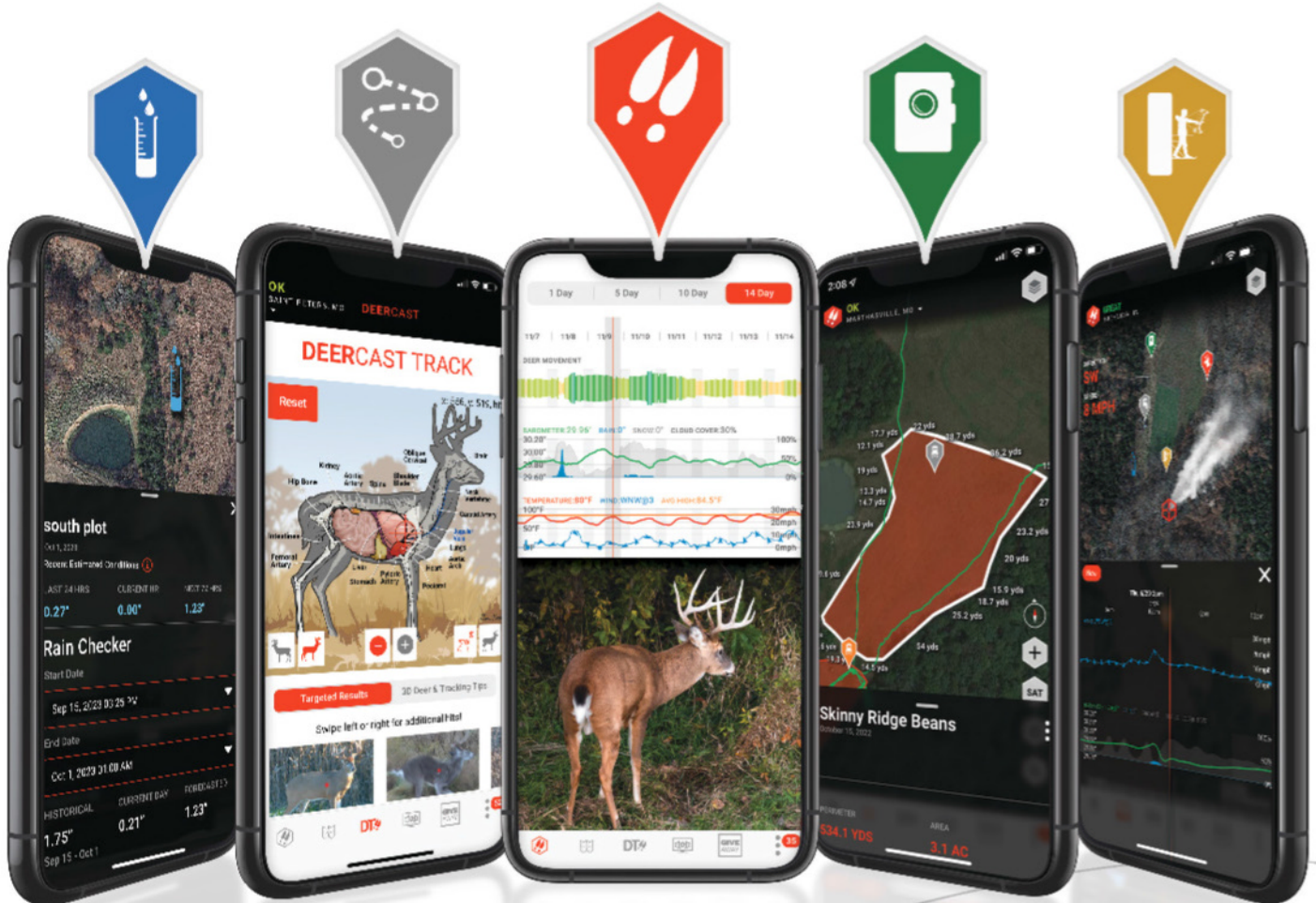
MOULTRIE

■ What beats one great trail camera at an even better price? Two! Moultrie's Micro-32i Kit comes as a two-pack with batteries included. These low-profile cameras take excellent high-resolution photos, and one set of batteries can handle up to 13,000 photos. The invisible flash adds to this compact camera kit's appeal, and they become Moultrie Mobile compatible when connected to a modem. (moultriefeeders.com)



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NAW HALL of FAME

1

On Nov. 7, 2022, Dominick Reale shot this massive Minnesota non-typical. He downed the giant with his Bergara .300 Win. Mag.

2

Mason Smith scored on this big Oklahoma buck with his crossbow. Unbelievably, this buck actually destroyed Mason's trail camera by rubbing the tree that it was on.

3

In Queen Anne County, Maryland, Andrea Fisher took this fine 8-point with a crossbow. This buck is Andrea's first-ever deer with a crossbow.

4

While scouting for waterfowl, Sean Thompson located this Iowa non-typical. Sean bagged the 207-incher on just his third sit for the buck.

5

With two hours of daylight left, Jon Goldsberry made a last-minute decision on a very windy November evening. He killed this awesome buck just 15 minutes after he sat down.

HAVE YOU SHOT A TROPHY BUCK?

Please submit a clear photo and full details of the hunt to: North American Whitetail, 2 News Plaza, 3rd Floor, Peoria, IL 61614 or email submission to: whitetail@outdoorsg.com. Photos cannot be returned.



ON  HUNT

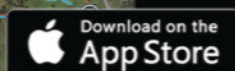
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THE LAST HUNT

It was Oct. 6, 1991, and after five long days of waiting, I eagerly grabbed my Darton compound and slid into my blotchy camo hunting suit. The first blaze maple leaves took flight in our front yard, and even more excitement filled the autumn air as I paused with my dad to freeze the moment with a click from the polaroid my mother held.

Taken on Oct. 6, 1991, the author and his father are shown here just prior to the author's first-ever hunt. He had to wait until he turned 12 years old to finally get his turn behind the bow. Photo courtesy of Adam Lewis

It was my 12th birthday, and one of the firsts that come as a milestone in a boy's journey to manhood. This wasn't my first trip to the place we called "The Woods," however. I'd been there a few times before, tagging along to help dad scout or dump out some bait. But as I hopped into the mud brown S10 and watched my dad drive the short trek to the square 40 acres he had hunted all through the 80s, this time was different. This was my first hunt.

Some decent bucks had been pulled from there over the years, and to my young eyes they were monsters and came with stories full of mystery. Now, after years of anxiously staring out our front window for my father's return and bolting to the door to see if he'd gotten anything, I would get my chance.

I could release my own arrow and tell my own tale to uncles and cousins instead of just listening with wonder. My first hunt, and the whole first season for that matter, didn't end with a hero's story. That came the next year, in that same 40's brushy corner just across the old wire fence where I piled up a fat, December button buck. Over the decades to follow, memories made in that place piled up like leaves on the forest floor, and although my hunting would take me to many other parcels and states, something always called me back to where I started.

On Nov. 15, 2022, it called once again. But in the predawn black as I swung my legs down from my brown Silverado and planted my feet on that old dirt, something felt different. I uncased the same Remington

20 gauge pump that had barked dozens of opening days in that timber, and I slipped around the rusty gate to go down the worn lane like I had hundreds of times before. But something stopped me.

Reluctantly walking back, I looked again, hoping it had somehow disappeared. My headlamp reflected off something that didn't belong with the old familiar markers of that place. There it was, however, spelled out as clear as could be in black and white: "SOLD." The reality smacked hard, but I couldn't avoid it any longer. This was my last hunt in The Woods.

Daylight snuck in as it usually does that morning, almost unnoticed. As I watched light permeate the forest one last time, the first few shots of opening day pierced the crisp, November air. *It was good to be here*, I thought, and I attempted to memorize the calm aliveness of that place.

My senses seemed heightened, maybe due to the awareness of the day's mortality, but still seemed inadequate to record the vastness of it. All I could do was sit and be fully present, taking in as much as possible. If my last moments in these woods yielded only the chickadee chirps and the sound of fox squirrel chatter, that would be enough. Old hunts flooded my mind one after another. Some good days in The Woods played out once again, and I quickly saw a boy become a man, and another man grow old among the oaks, beech and prickly ash. Having a deer to show would be quite an end to this story, but snapping back from my daydreaming, I worried: *Had my early intrusion ruined my last hunt?*

Just before 8:00 a.m., I got my answer. To my right, emerging from the prickly ash by the cow pond food plot came a lone deer. It walked with purpose and a familiar swagger. Raising the scope revealed just what its walk had given away. *Forky buck, but not a shooter*, I thought. I continued to watch, but as he angled away several more times appeared; he had four clearly visible on his left antler. His blocky physique revealed he was definitely not a 1 1/2-year-old as I had initially assumed. And suddenly



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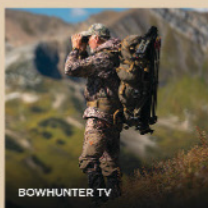
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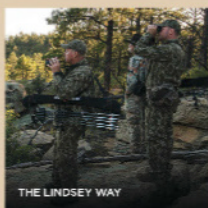
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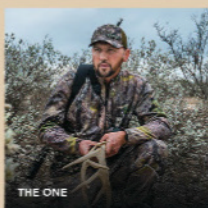
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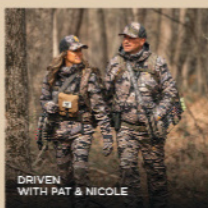
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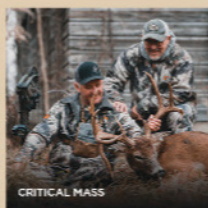
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DRURY'S THIRTEEN



CRITICAL MASS

I realized this may be my last chance at a buck on the property.

My heart began to pound, and those old hunts still lingering in my mind seemed to welcome him. With some thick brush between us, and the buck slipping away, I found a hole in the brush and let out a grunt. The buck snapped to attention, and just as quickly the 20 barked. His mule-kick signaled the slug had ripped through his ribcage, and I watched in anticipation as he bolted parallel to me for several bounds and then stood

Scanning the understory, I caught a flicker of movement. A large, fully mature doe walked alone and straight toward me. I've seen this textbook rut scene unfold many times through the years, so I immediately looked beyond her to where she then turned her gaze. We both waited, but not long. White tines suddenly materialized through the maze of branches, bobbing through the open timber. He looked like a tall 8-point, and as I strained through the glass for a better look, something on the ground stole his attention and he

ash by the pond, he stopped and stood. Once again, behind trees I couldn't tell of my hit, or even take a follow-up shot if needed. Staring alert for what seemed too long, I watched and waited for the slug to finish its work. Finally, the buck succumbed and joined the first among the rusty hues of dead autumn leaves. I looked at my watch. It was 8:45 a.m., and it was over.

My dad made the short drive from home, through the lane and all the way back to the pond where the field met the woods. He met me with a



The author poses with his father after his last hunt in the cherished place they simply called "The Woods." The author took these two bucks before 8:45 a.m. Photo courtesy of Adam Lewis

alert — unaware and trying to gather what had just happened.

A younger, more impulsive me would have fired again, but The Woods was a good school through the years and taught me when to be patient. After a few seconds there was a staggering flop to the ground, a few kicks, and then calm silence.

I couldn't really ask for more, but at 8:40 that morning I began hearing crunching to the east toward shredded rubs I'd found earlier in the fall.

froze motionless behind a clump maple.

What has him so preoccupied for so long, I wondered, until it dawned on me: the dead buck. With his investigation finished, the buck continued into the open. It was right then I knew this was it, the last buck in the crosshairs had arrived. Clicking the safety off, and just as he sidestepped some thin silver maples at 50 yards, my shotgun blast cracked through the calm of opening morning a final time.

Bounding toward the thick prickly

“AS WE SHUT AND LOCKED THE RUSTY GATE FOR THE FINAL TIME, I FELT A MIX OF EMOTIONS SWELL UP, AND HAPPINESS WAS ONE OF THEM. I WAS HAPPY I HAD KNOWN THIS WAS THE LAST HUNT.”

bit of surprise, as my hasty texts hadn't revealed it was actually two bucks down, not just the first. This was probably one of the best hunts anyone ever had in The Woods, and the second buck was one of the nicest, too. Bases crammed with tree shavings and a long, hooked brow tine made the 9-point a sure match for the shredded trees in the southeast corner. Dad agreed.

Gut jobs aren't something I normally memorialize, but as snow drifted down through the gray-barked landscape surrounding us, the little, often-overlooked parts of the story all mattered now. A few pictures, a few heaves up and over the tailgate, and a prayer of thanksgiving, all turned to memories as the towering oaks solemnly watched our procession out of The Woods. Through the worn lane, and toward the gravel road.

Sometimes life doesn't allow us to realize when they happen, and ultimately it's only through the lens of time that we see them for what they were. But “lasts” happen, and sometimes we are blessed to know when they do. As we shut and locked the rusty gate for the final time, I felt a mix of emotions swell up, and happiness was one of them.

I was happy I had known this was the last hunt. **NAW**



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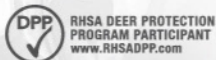
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