

THE **WHITETAIL** ANNUAL

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BOWHUNTING®

The Modern Bowhunting Magazine

Nov/Dec 2023

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By **CHRISTIAN BERG**

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LIVING ON THE EDGE

BACK WHEN I was a kid, there wasn't much I enjoyed more than a good monster truck show. I can still remember the TV commercials they'd run during Saturday morning cartoons to hype the events.

On the screen would be a video montage of cars being smashed under the giant truck tires as the packed crowd screamed its approval. It was more than enough to make a young boy's heart race, and the announcer would urge you to purchase tickets by declaring, "We'll sell you the whole seat, but you'll only need *the edge!*"

Today, some four decades later, I can't say monster trucks hold the same appeal. However, memories of that childlike enthusiasm and excitement return every time I think about my anticipation of the whitetail rut. *This* is the time of year bowhunters live for, and no matter how many Novembers you spend in the whitetail woods, there is just something magical about the rut that reduces grown adults to giddy schoolchildren. It's like Christmas Eve, your birthday and the last day of school, all rolled up into one — only better, because while those are all one-day events, under the right weather conditions excellent rut hunting can be enjoyed for several weeks!

You'll find much to stoke your enthusiasm for the rut — and plenty of advice for making the most of your time afield — inside this 2023 *Whitetail Annual*, starting with *Tremendous Trophies* (p. 26), Associate Editor Mark Demko's collection of great big-buck stories from the famed whitetail factories of Illinois, Iowa, Kansas and Ohio.

Those who specialize in DIY, public-land bowhunting won't want to miss



Rut hunting is unpredictable. You can be mindlessly munching a sandwich one moment and standing over an incredible trophy the next!

Third Time's a Charm (p. 48), recounting how author Darron McDougal used e-scouting and a November cold front to stumble into a bruiser buck on one of Kansas' Walk-In Hunting Areas.

And for everyone else who loves the rut, Field Editor Bill Winke has you covered with *Bringing Order to Chaos* (p. 32), a collection of his top 10 tips for rut-hunting success. Despite the unpredictability of buck movement during the rut, Winke's advice will up your odds of punching your tag during this holiest of hunting months.

Speaking of Winke, one of the topics he discusses is the importance of hunting all day during the best days of the season. That's great advice and something that has paid off several times for me over the years, as it's common to catch mature bucks on the move during the midday hours of 11 a.m.-2 p.m. as they cover ground in search of estrous does. When you do pull an all-day sit, make sure to pack plenty of snacks. They not only help pass the time but seem to have an uncanny knack for attracting deer. More than once I've pulled out a sandwich and started munching only to quickly shove it into my pocket and frantically grab my bow as a cruising buck appeared out of nowhere.

That's the magic of the rut; anything can happen. Your treestand may have a whole seat, but just like those old monster truck shows, I'm willing to bet you'll only need the edge! **B**

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ALL NEW FRIDAYS 9^{PET}

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By **JASON SNAVELY**

WHITETAILS



Most bowhunters take a keen interest in the timing of the rut, as whitetail breeding activity produces the most exciting hunting action of the year!

TIMING THE RUT

Local Knowledge Is a Big Bowhunting Advantage

WITH FOOTBALL and hunting seasons upon us and the whitetail rut just around the corner, this is a great time to kick off a series of columns on “the seasons of the whitetail,” highlighting many of the amazing things deer do throughout the year. Of course, we’ll start by discussing the impressive behavioral changes taking place right now around your favorite deer stands. As our favorite time to bowhunt draws near, let’s talk about the primary environmental factor that drives a buck’s burning need to breed!

The Fourth Quarter

While a calendar is generally considered to begin in January and end in December, the whitetail calendar never ends. Rather, it’s a never-ending, intertwined cycle — what took place in preceding months has culminated in the present, which will in turn have a significant impact (for good or ill)

on a deer’s health and fitness several months down the road.

Of course, we need a starting point for our discussion of the annual whitetail calendar, and there’s arguably no better place to start than the fourth quarter. Just as the fourth quarter often decides the outcome of a football game, the events that take place in

the whitetail woods during October, November and December are arguably the most critical of the annual cycle. With some variation (based on latitude, climate and local habitat conditions), these months generally find whitetails heavily focused on breeding activities.

Photoperiod

In nature, species are either considered short-day breeders or long-day breeders, based on when their reproductive process triggers. Whitetails are a classic example of short-day breeders. Their breeding is triggered by the shorter days of late summer/fall. As the days grow shorter, the level of melatonin in a deer’s system increases. This hormone is produced as a result of a complex communication system among the eyes, brain, glands and ultimately the reproductive system. Once melatonin levels hit a critical concentration, due to the same

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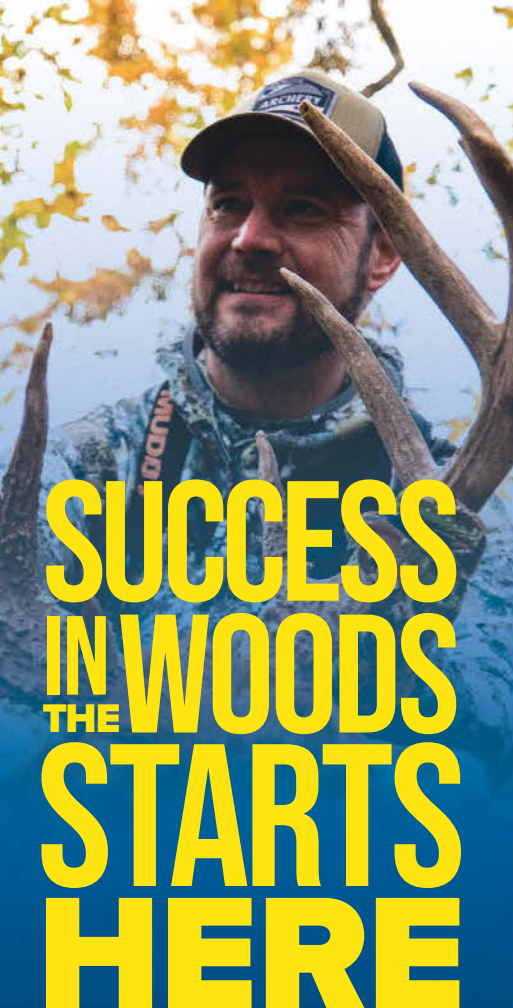


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WHITETAILS

increase in darkness that drives many of us crazy in the winter, an even more complex series of hormonal events trigger in the animal. These are the physical changes that lead to the rut behaviors bowhunters anticipate so eagerly.

The ratio of daylight to darkness in a 24-hour period, known as *photo-period*, is the major environmental cue that drives well-timed breeding and reproduction. While region-specific factors such as habitat quality, buck age structure and buck-to-doe ratio can affect precisely when a doe is bred during this broader window, it is the changing ratio of daylight to darkness that dictates the broader rut window. This precise and well-timed breeding season results in fawns hitting the ground 200 days later, just as the arrival of spring is delivering warmth and a plethora of new plant growth that will serve as both food and cover for all the new deer on the landscape.

Many hunters unintentionally and narrowly think of “the rut” as a period of time when bucks are running around seeking willing does to breed. While it very well may appear like this to bowhunters, the reproductive physiology of the does should never be ignored. In fact, I think paying closer attention to this timing where you hunt can lead to more successful hunts. The same complex physiological process described above initiates the reproductive cycle in both bucks and does, with slightly different hormonal roles.

High Energy Costs

Although I only touched on the basics, and left out the detailed roles of gonadotropin-releasing hormone and the pituitary, perhaps now you can see why it's much easier for outdoor writers to talk about timing your rut-hunting vacation days by the moon or a prediction made by someone who has absolutely zero knowledge of your local deer herd and habitat conditions, or the complex physiological processes that surround the rut.

If I was given double the space for my column, I would also cover the extremely high nutritive and medicinal needs, via plants, that occurs this time of the year. As any experienced hunter knows, the rut is very intense and ca-

lorically expensive for whitetails. Just imagine restricting your food intake for three months while ramping up your physical activity until you lose 30 pounds and then entering a fighting competition. This is a taxing time for whitetails.

At the same time, whitetails must prepare for a long winter ahead that comes with a nutritional bottleneck and challenging weather. As a deer manager, ensuring whitetails enter the fall in peak condition and have adequate post-rut nutrition are goals that rank at the top of my list. Again, the whitetail calendar has no start or stop date; rather, it is a complex, interconnected, interrelated web of adaptations and preparations that ensure the continuation of the species.

If you're looking for a rut-cation timing tip from this biologist, I'd encourage you to keep detailed notes on when you see newborn fawns hit the ground in the spring. Simply back-date 200 days for gestation and you will come up with a precise estimate of when that doe was bred. Many does are bred within a couple days from year to year, so trends are very clear.

Science has also shown that peak estrus timing can be passed on from mother to daughter. While bucks generally disperse from their birth location to set up shop somewhere else, does remain close and establish their fawn-rearing range in the near periphery of momma. During hunting season, groups of mothers and daughters combine into a hierarchical network, and many of these does will likely enter peak estrus at similar times. A fine-tuned habitat-management plan also ensures does are in good condition and able to express their genetics; in this case, when they reach peak estrus.

A rather intense breeding period, with competition for receptive does, can occur during this time, and if you're taking notes in April, you'll punch more tags in the fall. My family is no longer surprised when I grab my smartphone in April when we find newborn fawns and ask my device, “What was the date 200 days ago?” On my farm, the answer is always sometime during the last two or three days of October. Therefore, while you may find me snacking on my favorite candy bar, you won't find me trick-or-treating with the kids anymore! **B**

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BOWHUNTING WISDOM

By **BILL WINKE**



Field Editor Bill Winke shot this buck on Oct. 31, 2022. This buck, and several others Winke has taken in late October, have caused him to wonder whether late October is even better than November for targeting specific bucks.

BUCKS GONE WILD!

Be in the Woods When the Magic Happens

TO BE MOST successful hunting whitetails, you need to save your best stands for the best days of the season; I mentioned that as one of the tips in the feature article I wrote for this issue. Of course, that begs the obvious question: which days are the best? To answer that for myself, I've relied on my own personal observations from 35 years of buck activity, as well as what I have learned from a many other very successful bowhunters.

The very best hunters love to help those who are learning and openly asking questions. So, all I had to do was ask the right questions and keep my ears open. I've concluded that, year-in and year-out, the single best day of the entire season north of the Mason-Dixon line will fall within a three- or four-day window, with Nov. 7 right in the middle. Here's why.

Peak Rut Myth

The term "peak of the rut" biologists use can be misleading if you don't dig deeper to find out what they are really referring to. In their verbiage, this term means the date when the highest number of does are in estrous. In most states in the northern two-thirds of the United States and all of Canada, that date is roughly Nov. 15.

I have read a few studies done by state game agencies, and one that sticks out to me was a study done by the state of Missouri in which they back-tested fetuses to determine the date of conception. They did this over a three-year period. During that time, the date was Nov. 15 regardless of temperature or moon phase. In my mind, that is a very reliable outcome and very telling when it comes to choosing dates to hunt each fall.

Here is where the misconception comes in. The peak of the estrous is not the best time to hunt mature bucks. I will get into that topic next.

Peak Buck Movement

The peak of mature buck activity is different from the "peak of the rut." Buck activity and intensity build during the second half of October until it reaches a peak as the first few does in the area come into estrous and just

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BOWHUNTING WISDOM

before widespread breeding begins. In other words, the highest activity occurs when only a small percentage of the does are receptive, but all the bucks are after them. This occurs about a week before the peak of breeding. So, subtract a week from Nov. 15 and you arrive at my favorite window, Nov. 7, plus or minus two days.

Buck activity actually drops off considerably after that four- or five-day window, as the majority of does are in estrus at the same time. It is then easy for a buck to find a hot doe, so he doesn't have to cruise around the entire area in search of a mate. From that point until most of the does are bred, buck activity remains hit-and-miss. If you happen to have a hot doe near your stand, the hunting can still be really good. Otherwise, it can be pretty dead.

Call in sick if you have to, but you need to be in your best stands from Nov. 5-10. That will give you the best possible chance of catching that magical day when the bucks go wildest.

What About October?

I have started to really like the last four days of October if a cold front is coming through. In fact, given those conditions, I would be very tempted to take Oct. 28-31 over the November period. I am not 100 percent sure I am comfortable saying that, but I sure am leaning in that direction, based on hunts my friends and I have enjoyed in the past few years. I am starting to pay way more attention to late October.

During the past three seasons, I have killed my target bucks on Oct. 29, Nov. 12 and Oct. 31. And the one I got on Nov. 12 passed my stand at less than 10 yards on Oct. 28, but I failed to hear him approaching on the wet leaves until it was too late, and he smelled me. So, I had close-range encounters with my three best bucks over the past three seasons during just a four-day period. That is something that will grab your attention.

Also, several friends enjoyed great buck hunting during that same three-year, four-day window in late October. I wrote a feature about this last year, asking whether October had become the new November. In that feature, I concluded that it had not. November is still the best time to shoot any good buck. Bucks as a whole are definitely



Winke shot this great buck on Nov. 12, 2021, after messing up a prime opportunity on the same deer on Oct. 28. Both encounters illustrate the value in spending as much time as possible in your very best stands from late October through mid-November.

covering more ground in early November than they are in late October.

Still, my experience, and that of my friends, has shown that if you are after one specific buck, late October might be better, because that buck is still in his normal fall range, close to the core area where you likely found him through trail-camera scouting.

It is tough to sit on stand from dawn until dark for more than a couple of days in a row, but during the right times you need to carry your lunch and tough it out, because you'd be crazy to leave the woods when the bucks are going their wildest! **B**

Timing the Southern Rut

Trying to generalize rut timing for the entire Deep South is like trying to make pieces from six different puzzles fit together to make one image. From Texas to Florida, there are six different recognized breeding periods. Rut dates are obviously widely varied and pinning them down accurately requires local knowledge.

The best way to determine the best dates to be on stand south of 36 degrees latitude (central Tennessee) is to consult with a regional game department biologist. Find out when peak breeding occurs in the area you plan to hunt. If weather cooperates, the best days of the season are most likely to fall roughly a week prior to the peak breeding date.

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By **RANDY ULMER**

BETTER BOWHUNTING



Good follow-through is the continuation of the forces you are exerting on the bow at full draw until the arrow completely departs the bow.

PART 1

FOLLOW-THROUGH

Pay Attention to This Crucial Aspect of the Shooting Process

AS IN ANY SPORT, good follow-through is important in archery. Starting with this column, and continuing with my upcoming columns, I will explain what good follow-through is, how to achieve it and what your follow-through tells you about the form and any shooting problems you may have.

Good follow-through is merely the continuation of the forces you were exerting at full draw until the arrow leaves the bow and hits the target. The early part of the follow-through is more important than the latter parts of the follow-through, because the arrow is still being influenced by the bow until it completely clears the arrow rest. Therefore, any changes or movement you create in the bow at the time of the release will negatively affect the arrow's flight.

Think of dividing your body on the centerline. You have a release arm side

and a bow arm side. Follow-through involves your release arm and release hand, as well as the back muscles on your release arm side of your body. Follow-through on the bow arm half of your body involves the bow shoulder, arm and hand.

The honest truth is that if you have good shooting form, your follow-through will come automatically — you will not even have to think about it. With the vast majority of archers, good follow-through demonstrates they experienced a surprise release. If, in fact, the release is a complete sur-

prise, the body will have no time to react before the arrow is gone. If, however, your release is not a surprise and the left side of your body knows what the right side of your body is doing, the bow arm side of your body is likely to react at the exact moment you pull the trigger in anticipation of the shot.

Good Follow-Through

Many people think a great follow-through is evidenced by the bow arm remaining in the exact position it was when the release occurred, and the release hand staying in the anchor position. This is the very *opposite* of good follow-through! A good portion of what holds the bow up is the force of the release arm holding the bow back. If nothing changes from the time the release is fired, and no additional muscles are called into action, then the bow arm should fall away naturally. At the same time, the instant the release fires, the forces pulling the string away

AUTHOR'S PHOTO

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BETTER BOWHUNTING

of the forces holding the bow back are gone. So, if no additional muscles are incorporated, the release hand should fly back and down, almost reaching the shoulder.

This so-called “perfect” follow-through, with nothing in the archer’s body moving upon the release, can only occur if the release is not a surprise. The archer must activate small and large muscles on both sides of his body at the exact moment of the shot to get this type of follow-through. That

can only occur if the archer is consciously commanding the shot.

If you have this “false” follow-through and are skeptical about what I am telling you, try this experiment: Come to full draw and aim at a target as you normally would. Have a friend lay his finger on your release aid trigger. When he fires the shot, it will be a surprise. Your bow will fall down and away and your release hand will fly back. You cannot react quickly enough to have that perfect, false follow-through.

The best method for you to discover what a good follow-through really feels

like is to use a hinge or back-tension release aid. If configured and used properly, these release aids will produce a surprise release. You can then sense what good follow-through consists of. I would encourage you to do this at very close range with your eyes closed. Focus on the feeling you have upon the release and also pay attention to where your bow hand and release hand end up.

Do not use a hinge release aid with a click installed. Many back-tension releases can be configured to provide a “click” right before they fire. So, people can cheat the system by rotating the release until it clicks and then firing it. When used in this manner, the surprise release aid in essence becomes just another trigger release that can be fired at will.

Command Release Issues

An archer who commands the shot, or, in other words, punches or jerks the trigger, will have a very difficult time performing a perfect follow-through. Having someone with a punching problem or target panic work on their follow-through is most often a complete waste of time. They may be able to develop what looks like an authentic, perfect follow-through. However, their other issues will make working on their follow-through a moot point as well as a waste of time, because those intrinsic problems are much more serious than a poor follow-through.

There are a few — and I mean *extremely* few — archers who can use a command release for a long period of time without developing some fairly serious issues. In my opinion, the odds of you being able to do this successfully for very long are so infinitesimally small it is not worth trying. I’ve competed with a few people who consciously hammer the trigger. When they are on and shooting smoothly, it is quite impressive to watch. However, as often as not when things fall apart for them, which they often do, the results are ugly and their scores miserable. It seems to me that they are much more likely to fall apart when under intense pressure — when the shot is very important to them, such as a shoot-off in a tournament or a shot at a big buck. It is simply not worth the risk to shoot this way.

In the next column, we will discuss what your follow-through tells you about your shooting form and how to improve it. **B**

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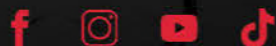
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By **BRAD FENSON**

CROSSBOWS

As the weather turns colder, it's important to practice in your winter clothing.



ADAPT TO CHANGE

Preparing for Every Weather and Hunting Situation is Vital

A BACKPACK, quiver full of bolts and an extra jacket were tucked into the corner of the blind, and my chair was carefully positioned to provide a view out of the corner windows. Scouting and trail cameras had provided the intel for me to set up early and expect a nice buck with five even points on each antler to travel down the game trail 20 yards to the west.

Unfortunately, the chair creaked as though in agony, even though I was sitting carefully. It was like someone pulling their fingernails across a chalkboard. How could I have overlooked the potential noise of the chair or anything else required for hunting early season whitetails?

As I was still fighting with the chair and moving gear, I caught a glimpse of brown fur out the window. It was my buck. The slight movement caught the deer's attention, and I quickly leveled my crossbow and found it in the scope. As the buck turned to flee, a bolt

sailed down the rail, catching the deer in the flank and traveling towards the far shoulder. The entire hunt lasted 10 minutes, and my mind whirled with what to do next. Everything happened so fast there was no time to process anything or even know beyond a doubt that my bolt hit where I thought it did.

After waiting 20 minutes, the blood trail led me over a ridge to the buck, which had only traveled 50 yards. What a relief! I consider harvesting that buck to be dumb luck; proper attention to detail was lacking. Having

the deer present any shot opportunity is rare when looking at a mature buck at 20 yards, especially when it's on high alert. There's no doubt the entire experience was a calamity that taught me a serious lesson in being prepared long before a hunt starts.

Stands and Blinds

One of the biggest mistakes crossbow hunters can make is assuming their gear and equipment is exactly how they left it the last time it was used. A treestand, and treestand safety, is the perfect example. The safety and inspection process should include checking the stand, securing it and confirming there have been no changes so it can hold your weight, allow you to climb safely and sit without generating noise. If there is a problem, fix it!

The same goes for ground blinds. The biggest reason we set blinds early is to allow the animals to get used to these foreign objects. Does it then not seem illogical to go in on the hunt day and adjust the structure, vegetation or shooting lanes? The goal is to sneak into the blind undetected, which means it needs to look and smell the same as it has for weeks.

Gloves and Jacket Layers

As the whitetail season progresses, deer will alter some routines to match changing food sources and travel routes. The weather and temperature changes also force hunters to head afield with different clothing. One thing to remember is that if you have never shot your crossbow wearing gloves, you should do it long before you go out hunting. Engaging the trigger feels different with gloves on, and ensuring a consistent trigger pull is critical to maintaining accuracy.

Adjusting for weather changes also means treating new clothing to remain scent-free. I start with using Scent Killer Gold detergent and dryer sheets on my laundry. Next, I head to the range and shoot my crossbow with

AUTHOR'S PHOTO

the new clothes on. Adding bulk also means it can be more challenging to raise the buttstock of your bow to your shoulder without getting caught up or making adjustments, so it's important to pay attention to the small details.

Length of Pull

The length of pull will change as you add multiple or thick layers of clothing. In the stand or blind, this may require extra movement to push the bow away from your chest and pull it into the shoulder. Forward motion prevents the bow from getting caught in clothing and forcing a shot that's uncomfortable. Consistent seating of the butt into the shoulder ensures your practice will maintain accuracy.

Many modern crossbows have adjustments for the length of pull, and removing a spacer on the butt may make all the difference in the world. However, don't remove the spacer on the day of your hunt. Do it beforehand and ensure you understand the routine for adding or subtracting the spacers. Knowing your equipment means making adjustments quickly and knowing what to expect. The bottom line is, don't settle for close. Make the

adjustments that allow you to shoulder and hold your crossbow level and steady no matter what you are wearing. Of course, recoil shoulder pads and straps can also benefit crossbow hunters looking for smooth shouldering of their bow. They help reduce the bulk of clothing and allow for smooth and consistent seating of the butt in the same place every time.

Eyewear and Optics

One exercise cold-weather crossbow hunters should practice is exhaling when engaging the trigger. Practice blowing air down and away from the crossbow so you do not accidentally fog up your glasses or scope. It may sound easy, but it is a common mistake and problem when you have a big buck in front of you and seconds count. Practicing exhaling to ensure your breath does not meet the glass is something that should be done all year, not just when it's cold out.

If you have problems with fogging optics, try some anti-fog glass cleaners to ensure you do not fog your view. These compounds are used on aircraft windows to prevent fogging and can be an asset to hunters with

glasses or anyone with optics on their crossbow.

It's also a good idea to carry a microfiber cloth in your hunting jacket to clean optics and glasses in the field. The microfiber allows chemical-free cleaning that will not scratch or damage glass coatings.

Cold Weather Hacks

Insect repellent spray or a Thera-cell Portable Mosquito Repeller can be advantageous in the early season. However, you may also want to consider taking your butane-powered repeller when it's cold. The units do not get extremely hot, but they generate enough heat to keep fingers warm and ensure dexterity when shooting.

When it gets extremely cold, hunt on the ground and stay out of treestands. Having the ability to move and wiggle your extremities in the concealment of a blind will help keep you in the field longer and stay more comfortable.

Remember, anticipating and preparing for change is the best way to deal with it — it's important to practice different scenarios to build the confidence to hunt and succeed at any time. **B**



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By JON E. SILKS

CROSSBOW TEST



The Wicked Ridge Rampage XS crossbow with telescoping tactical stock has a price tag that's sure to catch the attention of many hunters.

WICKED RIDGE RAMPAGE XS

Super Affordability.
Surprising Accuracy.

WICKED RIDGE CROSSBOWS are made right here in the USA by none other than a preeminent member of the crossbow industry — TenPoint Crossbow Technologies.

That fact alone should stir thoughts of innovation and quality. Wicked Ridge is a specialized line that maximizes the bang for the buck, bringing in features and technologies the company has proven effective and reliable.

A tactical stock, full complement of safety features, WRX split limbs, 5S Cams and an injection-molded uni-body that houses the flight rail, pistol grip, stock receiver and trigger guard are just the beginning of what we will

cover on the Rampage, which boasts a retail price under \$550.

Custom Tactical

Wicked Ridge offers two models of the Rampage XS — one with an installed ACUdraw crank cocking device and one with a tactical stock, which is the subject of this test. The AR-style, tactical stock features a push-button activated telescoping length adjustment that spans 2.5 inches across six positions. A skeletal structure reduces weight, while the raised cheek piece and ribbed butt plate add shooter comfort, control and performance.

Uni-Body Core

Wicked Ridge wraps several components into a single unit made from high-strength, lightweight, glass-filled polypropylene. It includes a contoured pistol grip with narrow throat, an oversized trigger guard to allow for gloved fingers and the entire flight rail, complete with underside Picatinny rail. The flight rail is slotted in the front to allow cables to cross over,

THE SPECS

Manufacturer: Wicked Ridge Crossbows, 330-628-9245; wickedridgecrossbows.com

Model: Rampage XS (Tactical Stock)

Safety Features: Safety wings, pass-through foregrip, Dry-Fire-Inhibitor, auto-engaging trigger safety, bolt-retention spring

Cam System: Dual 5S Cams

Riser: Forward draw, cast aluminum

Overall Length: 31.5–34 inches; telescoping butt stock

Axle-to-Axle Width: 15 inches (cocked), 19 inches (at rest)

Advertised Weight: 5.8-pounds (crossbow only)

String: DF97, 36.125 inches

Cables(x2): DF97, 15.75 inches

Limbs: WRX, Gordon Glass, split

Draw Weight: 175 pounds

Power Stroke: 13.5 inches

Stock/Forearm: Glass-filled polypropylene

Finish: Peak XT Camo

Advertised Speed: 390 fps with a 370-grain bolt

MSRP: \$549.99

Comments: A no-nonsense, get-it-done crossbow at an incredible price.

SPEED & ENERGY

while a chamfered slot on top is made to cradle the bolt and allow passage of the bottom vane. One end of the rail is structured to accept the bow riser and the other receives the tactical stock.

Safety, Safety, Safety

The Rampage XS has a series of safety features, starting with an auto-engaging trigger safety and Dry-Fire-Inhibitor (DFI) located in the aluminum trigger box that sits atop the rear of the flight rail. The T4 Trigger is advertised to produce a 3.5-pound pull. A Weaver scope rail and bolt-retention brush are attached to the trigger housing. A molded, pass-through foregrip and Zytel 80G Safety Wings are bolted to the Picatinny rail on the underside of the flight rail. Both work to keep the shooter's hands and fingers below the flight deck and out of harm's way.

Forward Draw Bow

The Rampage XS "bow" within the crossbow system is situated at the

	BOLT SPEED	KINETIC ENERGY
420-GRAIN BOLT	338.3 fps	106.8 ft./lbs.
500-GRAIN BOLT	313 fps	108.8 ft./lbs.
401.2-GRAIN MFR. BOLT	345.7 fps	106.5 ft./lbs.

BOWHUNTING Test Measurements:

Maximum Width: 19.13 inches cocked, 21.19 inches at rest

Overall Length: 33.94 inches, adjustable

Mass Weight: 6.02 pounds, crossbow only; 7.53 pounds, with all accessories

Average Trigger Pull: 4.12 pounds

Length of Pull: 13.19–15.63 inches, adjustable across six positions

Average Shot Noise: 113.5 dBA w/420-grain bolt; 112.7 dBA w/500-grain bolt

Maximum Shot Deviation at 35 Yards: .25-inch

end of the rail, away from the shooter, making it a forward-draw design. It is built on a compact, cast-aluminum riser that features a broadhead scoop (for clearance), two large, weight-reducing cutouts and a black anodized finish. Two screws attach the rubber coated, oversized foot stirrup to the bottom of the riser. A set of over-the-top limb pockets work to harness and align the split limbs to the riser. WRX split limbs produce a fixed, 175-pound draw weight, are made of Gordon Glass material and are matched into sets based on deflection values. 5S Cams are CNC machined from 6061-T6 aluminum, outfitted with DF97 string and cables and ride on axles, bearings and bushings.

What's in the box?

The Rampage XS Crossbow comes with a TenPoint Pro-View illuminated scope, rope cocking sled, three-bolt quiver and three 20-inch Match 400 carbon bolts with fieldpoints.

Range Notes

My first impression when handling the Rampage XS was just how light it is. Yes, it's a little front weighted with its forward-draw design, but the overall rig is so light it makes maneuvering a breeze. The next thing that struck me was how good the unibody looks with its Peak XT Camo.

In shooting the Rampage XS, I found the trigger a bit stiff and the shot noise high. However, accuracy was outstanding, as our amazing quarter-inch, three-shot group at 35 yards ranks among the tightest groups we have ever tested on a crossbow. Considering the price tag, you absolutely cannot go wrong with the Rampage XS! **E**



Despite a traditional, forward-draw design, the Rampage XS proved highly maneuverable thanks to its low overall weight.

TREME

B FEATURES

Iowa's Billy See only needed two outings to tag this 12-pointer last October, making good on his 30-yard shot at the animal.

JEFF VANDER HEIDEN PHOTO

By **MARK DEMKO**

TROPHY

NOVEMBER

THE SENSATIONAL STORIES BEHIND 4 OF LAST SEASON'S BIGGEST, BOW-KILLED BUCKS

1 THE HOMEBODY BUCK *Billy See – Iowa*

LIVING IN the whitetail-hunting mecca of Iowa, Billy See has been fortunate to harvest several big, mature bucks over the years. Last fall, however, the Cambridge resident put together a plan that resulted in downing his target deer in only two sits, and it was one of the largest bucks he's ever harvested.

In previous years, See had identified a specific buck that had a really nice rack structure but no real mass to go with it.

"I had given him the name Slim because he always had a good frame and good tine length, but he just wouldn't grow any mass," See said. "He was a slim-tined deer, so that's where he kind of got his name."

Although Slim had been fairly common on cameras in previous years, the deer had yet to show himself in 2022 by the time fall arrived.

"We hadn't seen him that season," See said. "I moved some cameras around, and all of a sudden he showed up and took me by surprise because I wasn't expecting him to spit [a] drop tine out."

"It took me and a buddy talking together on it to figure out who he actually was, and then once I figured out who he was, I just dove in to hunt him."

According to See, the deer, which had a 5 $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch drop tine on its right antler, was fairly easy to pattern since it was staying primarily on a 120-acre farm the family owned. In addition to appearing on the trail

IF

TREMENDOUS TROPHIES

cameras, it tore up the landscape pretty good, providing additional proof the buck was king of the local woods.

"He was pre-rutting pretty hard on my place with scrapes and rubs," See said. "He was always right there close to the bedding area on my cameras. I just waited for the right wind and snuck in there and struck when the time was right."

The first time See went out after the buck in late October ended up being a fairly quiet affair, but everything turned around on the second sit Oct. 30.

"I'd been combining corn that day — helping my dad out — and decided to quit a little bit early and go hop in the stand," See said.

According to See, the area he was hunting is a small, slim block of woods that adjoins a larger block of timber. The location, which overlooked a cut cornfield and CRP land, was a nearly ideal setup.

"It was kind of a transition set," See said. "He was either going to come out of one bedding area to me or come out of my bedding area heading to another [feeding area]. I was kind of right in the wheelhouse, so to speak."

About 20 minutes before dark, Slim made his appearance. And, as the deer passed about 30 yards from See's treestand, See drew back his Hoyt bow and let an arrow fly. The only problem was that the SlickTrick Assailant broadhead struck the deer slightly off where See hoped to hit it.

Sensing the hit was marginal, See decided to hold off on pursuing the buck and returned the next morning with friend Jeff Vander Heiden. The pair found the deer less than an hour later.

See said the buck — a mainframe 8-pointer with four additional, measurable points — was unofficially gross scored by him and two other friends at 167%. With only two sits in the stand, it was the quickest he had ever taken a target buck, and it ended up being the fourth-largest deer he'd ever killed.

"I was just elated. I never thought I'd shoot a drop-tine deer — I know they are rare," See said. "I was in complete disbelief. I didn't know what to think. I was beyond excited. It was him or bust last season, and I was in complete disbelief that it actually came together."

"I'm just grateful for family farms, and I'm very blessed to have the opportunity to hunt the private ground that I do."

2 CHRISTMAS COMES EARLY Kyle Ficek — Illinois

Thanksgiving week traditionally marks the start of the holiday season for most people. But for Kyle Ficek of Illinois, the festivities got started much earlier last year, as the biggest buck he'd ever seen — complete with Christmas lights adorning its antlers — cruised past his stand on the first of the month.

Although he'd archery hunted a bit as a youngster, Ficek only started bowhunting in earnest in 2014 — some 20 years later — after his cousin, Ben Brock, encouraged him to try it again.

"I lived about half a mile from a little 20-acre parcel. My cousin had access to hunt it and he said, 'You got to get back into it. I've got a great spot. It's a half-mile from your house."



PHOTO BY BO SISARICA

Kyle Ficek poses with the 16-point buck he harvested last November in McHenry County, Ill.

"I'm not hunting it. I've got other spots I'm paying attention to," Ficek said.

"I've hunted the area religiously for about seven years. There have been some really nice bucks that have gone through there. It's tucked between a neighborhood, a swamp and cornfield. It's a perfect little parcel."

In 2019-2020, the couple who owned the house and land passed away. So, the McHenry County property was put up for sale in 2021 and Ficek took a year off from hunting it. Then, in 2022, he secured hunting permission from the new owner, who was renovating the home. However, Ficek was going through a divorce at that time, so he really wasn't able to hunt or do much scouting until the latter part of October.

"Come the second to last week of October, what has historically been a scrape line just exploded," Ficek recalled. "And I saw whatever was in there was just demolishing this particular area. So, I knew I had a good spot."

After hunting only two days in October, Ficek hit the woods on Nov. 1, a day he tries to never miss being in the stand. For him, it's a day that has typically brought with it some serious buck movement.

"I know everybody's got their superstitious days, but on Nov. 1, I've harvested some decent bucks in prior seasons," he said. "So, it's kind of my lucky day."

Although Ficek was just happy to be in the stand considering the challenging year he'd had, the morning passed uneventfully, with no deer sightings. By 8 a.m., the contractors had started working on the house, people were taking their trash out nearby and the area was noisily coming life, giving him the feeling that he probably wouldn't see much in the way of deer activity.

"I got up to adjust my position at like 9 a.m., and as I sat

up, my treestand cushion fell to the ground and made a thud," he recalled. "I'm like, 'You know what? This is over.' So, I texted my cousin, 'It's like dead here, so I'm going to start packing up.'"

"I kid you not, I sit down and all of a sudden, a doe and fawn come from the east, right toward my stand, just blazing through the scrape line area. They just come running past me and I'm like, 'This is kind of cool.' Then all of a sudden, he emerges — head low at this point — just chasing the doe and her fawn."

The buck, traveling the main deer trail through the woods, passed just to the right of Ficek's tree, and Ficek was able to stand and draw back his Prime Logic CT3.

"He comes out from behind a bush and I grunt at him," Ficek said. "He stops, he looks right at me and I drill him at 20 yards. Then he takes off."

After waiting a bit, Ficek began searching for the deer, but with a sparse blood trail he decided to come back later with help. That evening, he returned with a friend, but the pair lost the blood trail and were unable to locate the deer, so they backed out until the next morning.

"The trail the deer had used splits off in three directions," Ficek said. "For whatever reason, that night I went to bed and had a dream that he'd gone to the right. So, we reconvened on the morning of November 2nd. I had two buddies with me.

"We went out and followed the trail where it branched out and I said, 'I had a dream; I'm going to go to the right,' and he was probably about 60 yards down [the trail]."

Ficek's deer, which sported seven points on its right side and nine on the left, ended up scoring 178 $\frac{7}{8}$ gross and 168 $\frac{1}{2}$ net Pope and Young. What made the deer stand out, however, was the Christmas lights that somehow got wrapped around the buck's left antler.

"My one buddy named him Blitzen," Ficek said. "He's like, 'You need to call him Blitzen.' I'm like, 'You know what, that's it!'"

For Ficek, it ended up that the buck of a lifetime was a deer he'd never even seen before. With everything going on in his life, he hadn't had time to put in food plots or even place out his trail cameras. However, two hunters on an adjacent property were aware of the buck and one of them, Matt Clausen, sent him a couple trail-cam shots from the night before after he learned that Ficek had taken the deer.

"They knew about him, [but] I did not know about him," Ficek said. "As Matt said, 'We knew somebody was going to get him eventually. We would have liked to have taken him, but because of the year you've had with your divorce, I'm glad it went to you.'"

3 BACK-PORCH BRUISER Craig Woods — Kansas

We've all heard the phrase, "Necessity is the mother of invention." A perfect example of this is the innovative strategy Craig Woods of Kansas needed to give himself a shot at a gigantic buck while only having access to half an acre of land.

A resident of Olpe, Kan., Woods learned about the existence of a Lyon County monster from a co-worker, Lori Dailey. Apparently, the animal was visiting the property of Dailey's mother, Davee Dailey, fairly consistently.

After hearing about the buck, Woods showed Lori some of the deer he had on his trail cameras — bucks that would likely score in the 140s and 150s — and Dailey thought this deer might be even larger.

"She posted a video of the deer in velvet, and I'm like, 'That's a 200-inch deer,'" Woods said. "So, I messaged her, asking her if I could hunt that deer, and she kind of just blew it off. She said, 'Isn't he beautiful?' So, I didn't think anything of it."

However, only a few days later, Woods got the surprise of his life as he was practicing in his yard for the upcoming archery season. After taking a break from shooting, he went into the house and saw his wife, Kylee, on the phone. Thinking perhaps she was talking with her mother, Woods then went back outside.

"She came out and said, 'How, are you doing?' I said, 'I'm doing good.' And she's like, 'You ARE doing good. That was Lori Dailey on the phone, and she's going to let us hunt that deer.'"

After the initial shock wore off, Woods realized he'd need a plan to help him overcome a couple of obstacles. The first challenge he faced was that he only had access to Davee's half-acre of land abutting a creek area where the deer would typically emerge. Without permission to access that land, he could really only hang a stand on the very edge of the woods, not an ideal setup to pursue the deer. Second, he needed to position the stand so that other people wouldn't easily spot it from the road.

"I had a treestand put up barely in the timber where you couldn't see it from the road," Woods said, "but I heard [a hunter previously] got busted by the deer and I didn't want to take that risk, because they said he never saw that buck again after he got busted."

Instead of hunting from the stand, Woods decided his best chance at success, given his limited access, was to

PHOTO COURTESY OF CRAIG WOODS



Craig Woods of Kansas took this massive, non-typical buck last October, with the 20-pointer scoring 192 $\frac{7}{8}$ gross and 179 $\frac{1}{2}$ net Pope and Young.

TREMENDOUS TROPHIES

hunt the deer from Davee's porch. But, before doing so, he checked with the local game warden to make sure he wasn't violating any laws. The warden confirmed it was OK, as long as he had the landowner's permission.

On Oct. 19, the night the big buck came out, Woods was actually accompanied on the porch by Kylee and Davee.

"There were does out there, and then a small buck came in," Woods recalled. "He was hanging back, probably 20 or 30 yards. I'd studied pictures of the [big] deer...and he was always with that little buck...About 20 or 30 minutes later, that big buck walked up out of that creek and all I saw was horns. And I'm like, 'Oh, Lord, it's happening.'"

Only a minute or two later, Woods was able to make a 17-yard shot on the deer. Although he couldn't see the buck after the hit, since his vision was blocked by a large tree, Kylee and Davee's reactions told him all he needed to know.

"Kylee was like, 'He went down.' And then Davee was like, 'He's down,'" Woods said. "I grabbed Davee and picked her up. She's like a little, bitty lady. I picked her up off the ground and told her, 'I love you,' and she's like, 'I love you too.'"

Woods' buck, which had 20 measurable points, ended up grossing 192 $\frac{1}{8}$, with a 179 $\frac{1}{8}$ net score, in the Pope and Young scoring system. The deer's rack boasted impressive character, with a 15 $\frac{1}{8}$ -inside spread and G3 tines that were both well over 10 inches.

From Woods' perspective, he was and is well aware that some people might question how he went about pursuing the buck from a porch. That said, he knew he'd need to be creative if he was going to have a chance at what would surely be his deer of a lifetime.

"I knew I'd catch a bunch of grief for it, and I have," he said. "But at the same time, it was completely legal. And anytime somebody says something about it, I'm like 'I had permission on half an acre. What would you have done in that situation?' Would you have passed that up if you had to shoot off a porch. No, [and] he's on my wall now."

4 NEW YEAR'S DEER Damain Riffle – Ohio

There's no doubt the vast majority of bowhunters would put the bow away if they were still deerless by the time the holidays arrived. But for one Ohio hunter, Christmas 2022 was the time when his bowhunting really got started.

Damian Riffle of New Franklin lost his mom in April, so he focused much of his hunting efforts last season on getting his dad a shot at the 150-class buck that was visiting his food plots regularly. Then, when he shifted to his own hunting, he couldn't find a deer that interested him, even though he had cameras in seven counties.

"I really wasn't overly excited with what I was seeing," Riffle said. "Pretty much every mature deer throughout the season that I would get photos of was sub-140, broken, missing half its [rack] or missing tines. There was just nothing I was overly enthused to go after."

As the year's end drew near, Riffle's good friend Dave Kopp, whom Riffle had helped take a nice 10-pointer earlier in the season, told him about a small tract of land to which he had access. The property, which was in a suburban area, occasionally harbored a good buck later in the



After going the vast majority of Ohio's archery deer season without identifying a buck he wanted to target, a friend turned Damian Riffle onto a small parcel known for holding some big bucks in the late season. The result was this 11-pointer Riffle harvested on Jan. 22, 2023.

season. Hence, Kopp put out a couple trail cameras right before Christmas, and when he pulled the SD cards Jan. 1, he discovered a large-racked buck was indeed showing up. He then called Riffle, who proceeded to gather his trail cameras up and head to the Stark County property to set them up to start gathering as much intel as possible.

"There was one swampy thicket on the north end of the property," Riffle said, "and I knew my only chance to kill that deer would be getting him to bed in that chunk of woods. because if he wasn't there, the next bigger chunk of woods that would probably hold a mature deer was probably about three-quarters of a mile to the north and about a half-mile to the south. So, my strategy was trying to figure out when he was in that block of timber, and if he bedded in there, try to go in and hunt him that evening."

After two uneventful sits, Riffle kept his eye on a front that was set to come through in later January, bringing with it cold temperatures and snow. Corresponding with the arrival of the front, the buck started showing up on camera Friday night through Sunday morning, Jan. 20-22, the first time it had appeared in any type of regular pattern. Even more notable, one of the Sunday morning photos was from a camera adjacent to the swamp, showing the deer heading into the wetland area.

"I was 90 percent confident he'd bedded down in that thick, swamp area in that parcel," Riffle said. "I had very high hopes."

The only challenge was that the day brought winds from the east, and Riffle didn't have any treestands set up for that scenario. As a result, he ended up borrowing a climbing stand from a neighbor.

On Sunday afternoon, Riffle drove to the property, gathered his gear, hiked in and found a tree that would hopefully

allow him to climb high enough to avoid being detected by any deer that passed by. Around 5:15 p.m., he saw a 4-pointer emerge from the swamp and walk toward his location.

"I was watching him, and I look back toward the swamp and I see a second body back there, coming out of the exact same spot," Riffle said. "[That deer was] probably about 160 yards or so from me."

Through his rangefinder, Riffle could see the buck's rack, so he knew it was the one he was after since it was the only mature buck using the timber. As the buck started walking closer, Riffle went to get into position for a potential shot. Unbeknownst to him, however, his boots had frozen, via the compacted snow, to a foam mat the neighbor had secured to the climbing stand. Hence, Riffle was forced to free both feet without alerting the 4-pointer, which was now in bow range.

"I got my feet to where I thought they were free, [but] I went to move my foot and my heel was still frozen to the mat," Riffle recalled. "When I picked my foot up, that mat peeled up and it pulled off of my foot and slapped down. That little buck snapped his head up and looked right at me."

Although Riffle remained motionless, the buck eventually spooked and ran, but it stopped when it saw the larger buck.

"He kind of nervously walks up to the big one and I'm like, 'Oh, man, please don't let this screw me up,'" Riffle said. "Once they kind of got to one another, they greeted one another and started grooming one another, and the big one continued walking in and the small one started walking in behind him."

When the big buck finally offered a shot, Riffle took the

opportunity, drawing back his Mathews V3 and letting the arrow fly. At the hit, the deer turned, ran into a barbed wire fence and then bolted into the cut cornfield before slowing to a walk and disappearing over a rise. Riffle called Kopp, who soon joined him, and the pair began to trail the deer. However, as they neared the end of the property they decided to halt the search until morning as they didn't want to risk pushing the deer — if it was still alive — onto the neighboring property where they didn't have access.

That night, Riffle called Mike Yoder of the Ohio-based Drone Deer Recovery and told him about the buck. Yoder was finishing up a hog hunt in North Carolina but said he'd leave later that night to return and help with the recovery. The next morning, the group gathered to search for the deer, and shortly after the thermal drone took flight, the buck was found.

According to Riffle, the 11-pointer — a mainframe 10 with a double G3 on its left side — green-scored 170½ gross. Riffle said he was thrilled to find the buck, especially considering the sleepless night he'd just endured.

"Obviously, it's a stressful night when you shoot a big deer and don't know [what happened to it]," he said. "You start questioning it...But, then, I'm like, 'I know better than that.'"

"There was good blood. I got a pass-through. I'm just playing this all back in my head, and you get stressed out. Literally, Mike found that deer in just minutes. He took off with the drone, and if that drone was in the air five minutes, I'd be surprised. The deer was essentially right where I thought it would be, but it was great to confirm he was dead and hadn't been pushed off the property." **B**

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BRINGING ORDER TO

CHAOS

BY BILL WINKE



10 TIME-TESTED TIPS FOR RUT-HUNTING SUCCESS

The rut is chaos. Trying too hard to make sense of it all will confuse you and may even make you a less effective bowhunter. Luck will always play a role in your success, but when you play the odds and focus on the factors that are predictable, luck will find you a whole lot sooner.

These are common-sense strategies for hunting the rut. Don't overthink it. The bucks have a very basic goal — they are looking for hot does. As long as you keep finding ways to get in front of them, while keeping all the deer from knowing that you are hunting, you will have a great season. Here are 10 tips to help you find success this season.

#1: Funnels Make It Simple

If you have limited time to scout, keep this very simple and just focus on funnels. They are easy to find and productive during all phases of the rut.

When bucks are traveling, they like to use the shortest route between Point A and Point B and will pick the path of least resistance if it keeps them hidden. Anytime you can find a place where the bucks go around a terrain obstacle you have a funnel. Another good choice is a narrow area of cover between two larger areas. These are the two most common funnels, and you will find them everywhere once you start looking.



Bucks' obsession with does makes their movement during the rut highly unpredictable, but the advice in this article will boost your odds of getting a good one within bow range this fall.

GEORGE BARNETT PHOTO

You don't need to know much about the deer in the area; you just need an eye for spotting bottlenecks, and you can even do that using just a hunting app, without even setting foot on the property.

Terrain-related funnels include such features as saddles, steep bluffs, ditch crossings and river crossings, to name just a few. Cover-related funnels can include brushy fence lines, narrow fingers of cover and the inside corners of open fields that extend into thick timber. Any narrow strip of cover can be a bottleneck if it lies between where a buck is and where he wants to be (Point A and Point B are usually areas where does concentrate).



You can locate both terrain-related and cover-related bottlenecks and funnels by studying aerial photos and topo maps.

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#2: Save Your Best Spots for the Best Times

It takes discipline to hold back and hunt “secondary” stands until the time is right to go big, but to be most effective, that’s what you need to do. Save your best areas until the odds of the buck you are after being on the move are highest.

Just as you only get one chance to make a first impression on other people, you only get one chance to hunt a spot where the deer are moving naturally. Every time you hunt that area after the first go, it will be just a bit worse than it was the last time.

This is because we educate deer even if we don’t realize we are doing it. It is super hard to keep deer from knowing you are hunting them. That is why you must go to extremes.

If you hunt your best spots too soon, you run the risk of educating the deer that live there with little hope they are even moving in daylight. That’s an all-risk, no-reward proposition. No thanks! You want to at least match risk and reward, and to do that you need to be patient and save your best spots until late October.



Although it can be hard to do, saving your best hunting spots for the best times is a must, since it’s likely you’ll educate a few deer each time to hunt the area.

#3: Aggressive Calling a Last Resort

I have called in about half the bucks I have shot over the years, yet I never call blindly. I only call to bucks I have seen and want to shoot. This keeps me from educating deer by calling too much and having them catch me in the stand.

When a good buck is passing out of range, a few simple grunts can make a huge difference. You can watch the buck and raise the volume until he has heard the call. Then you can hit him with one more grunt so he has something to home-in on. Then go silent. It is a super simple approach, but it has worked really well for me.

Occasionally, it takes more coaxing, so don’t be afraid to throw in the snort-wheeze. I used to think the snort-wheeze call was a novelty until I started using it. Now, I go to the snort-wheeze every time a buck seems interested in the grunt but won’t commit. I also use it whenever the wind is blowing hard enough that I don’t think the buck has heard my grunts. You can perform the snort-wheeze with just your mouth. Do a web search and you will see plenty of examples.

When a buck ignores the grunt, or just doesn’t hear it, the higher pitched snort-wheeze may turn him. Again, like

the grunt, the snort-wheeze works a lot better when you can see the deer and can react to his body language.

I don’t pretend to be the world’s expert on calling deer. I don’t even carry rattling antlers, but I have had tremendous success grunting and snort-wheezing them into bow range for many years.



The author recommends only calling to bucks you have seen and want to shoot to keep deer in the area from becoming call shy.

#4: Bedding Areas in the Morning

By late October, the bucks have begun looking for the first hot doe in their range. They will focus on doe feeding areas and doe bedding areas. Hunt the feeding areas in the evenings, for sure, but really lock in on those bedding areas in the mornings. The bucks will come in shortly after daybreak looking for the does.

If you don’t already know where to find a few doe bedding areas from experience and winter scouting, you are going to have to guess at their location. Here are some basic tips. Does like to bed on elevated sites such as ridges and points. If high ground is not available, you can usually find them bedding on the downwind edge of heavy cover.

You have to be able to consistently fool the local does or they’ll move off and take your bucks with them. So, don’t over-hunt any doe bedding area. When the does start to show signs of avoiding your stand, it’s time to give it a break.

You can further keep your impact low by hunting bottle-necks between two doe bedding areas. There likely won’t be deer nearby when you sneak in and out of these stands, so it is much easier to hunt these travel routes undetected, keeping the local deer from realizing you are hunting them for as long as possible. That is key to seeing daylight movement.



Field Editor Bill Winke shot this buck the morning of Nov. 22, 2010. The buck was chasing a doe on the fringe of a known doe bedding area when Winke grunted it into bow range.

#5: Hunt Small Food Plots

As mentioned in the last section, in the evenings, the does concentrate near feeding areas. This pattern continues through the first week of November. Shortly after that, however, the does stop coming out in the open to avoid constant harassment from every buck in the area.



Small food plots are very productive. Winke shot this buck in a one-acre plot on Nov. 10, 2016, as it was following an obviously hot doe. These are great evening stands, but deer also use these small openings before bedding down nearby in the mornings.

Until that happens, however, small plots are key locations — mostly for evening hunts, but they can also be good in the mornings.

Many of my best early-November stands are on the edges of what I call Poor Man's Plots — small plots I constructed with limited equipment. These small, secluded spots are killer locations, because they lie close to bedding areas and that makes the deer feel secure. Deer can step in, look around, grab a bite to eat and be back in the cover without feeling exposed to danger.

If you can make a couple of these (even as small as a quarter acre) in your hunting area, you will have done the number one thing to make your hunting area better.

#6: Scrape Lines Early

You can catch bucks on scrapes during the last two weeks of October and the first few days of November, but after that you may spend a lot of time out of position if you continue to focus on scrapes.

You are not hunting the scrapes as much as you are hunting the travel routes the bucks were using when they made the scrapes. That is why you are looking for scrapes back in the timber, near trails. The scrapes just tell you which travel routes to focus on.

Though bucks are not on strict feeding patterns during late October, they are still roaming within their home ranges and using feeding areas regularly — they grab a few bites, check on a few does and then keep moving. So, the simplest scrape lines to find are those leading toward feeding areas. You can just work backwards along the trail 50 to 100 yards from the feeding area and set up.



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Scrapes are most effective during the last part of October and very early in November. Beyond that time, bucks are moving more randomly looking for does, and their scrape lines tend to dry up.

#7: When to Hunt All Day

If you are serious about shooting a nice buck this season, you should hunt all day during the first two weeks of November. We all know that — yet not many actually do it. Hunting all day for two weeks is such a burnout. When it ends, you might just be glad the season is over.

Instead, narrow your focus down to what normal human patience can tolerate. Consider keeping your all-day hunts within the window of November 5-9.



Winke shot this buck on Nov. 10, 2011. He took only a short break for lunch and was back on stand shortly after midday. The buck came through on the heels of a doe early in the afternoon. It pays to hunt as many hours as possible during the peak movement days.

#8: Don't Skip Mornings

Not everyone is going to pull off all-day sits, but everyone should make an effort to hunt both morning and evening during the prime week of Nov. 3-10. You can take short midday breaks to move to new stands, but the more time you spend in the tree during these key days, the better.

Many bowhunters skip morning hunts, because it is hard to get out of bed and head out in the dark and cold.

But mornings are definitely worth the sacrifice. If I had to choose between only hunting mornings and only hunting evenings for the rest of my life, I'd pick the mornings.

That's my conclusion after 35 years of hunting every day of the rut. It is a simple numbers game. Bucks tend to be active longer during daylight in the mornings than the evenings. That just ups our odds of having one come within bow range. Plus, I love the places you get to hunt in the mornings — deep in the woods — compared to near the food sources in the evenings.

Generally, if you're hunting the right places, you can count on about two hours of daylight movement in the evenings and about four hours of daylight movement in the mornings. Additionally, bucks seem a little less alert in the mornings.



It can be tough to get yourself out of a warm bed and head out into the dark cold of morning, but morning hunts are slightly more effective than evening hunts, in the author's experience, and they shouldn't be overlooked.

#9: The Easiest Rut Stand

Ditch funnels are the easiest of all rut stands to find and one of the very best to hunt. Anytime you find a draw between two adjacent ridgeline points, you have the makings for an erosion ditch at the bottom. In typical rolling, hilly deer country, these ditches are common. Find



In hilly terrain, deep erosion ditches offer perhaps the easiest rut-hunting location. Find a well-used deer crossing near the head (upper end) of the ditch and set up your stand.

a heavy crossing near the upper end of the ditch (where it starts) and place your stand. In some cases, if the ditch is particularly deep or steep, the best crossing may be the upper end of the ditch where deer go completely around it. I have seen many of these over the years. All are good rut candidates.

These ditches often lie between two bedding ridges used by does. Bucks cruising between them will come through the ditch crossings regularly. They are simple to find and simple to hunt — and very effective.

#10: Trail Cameras Before the Rut

This final tip is just my opinion on how to use trail cameras. There are lots of ways to do this, so I will issue the disclaimer right up front.

Unless you are using cellular cameras, you can make a mistake by relying too heavily on the photos you get during the rut. Bucks move around more during this time than at any other time of the season.

Even though their core area may still be the center of their movement pattern, they may spend a day or two away from this core from time to time. Likewise, a different buck can show up and disappear quickly. If you are basing your stand selection decisions on trail-cam photos, you may always be one step behind.

I don't use cellular cameras; I just don't really want to. Maybe I will change my mind someday, but I only want to know where the buck's core area is just prior to the rut starting. Then I will hunt him based on that information alone. That method is satisfying to me. It is fun to be surprised when they show up, so I don't want too much cur-



Winke uses trail cameras to find the core areas of the bucks he plans to hunt. But once he starts hunting, he stops checking his cameras and focuses on finding the best places to intercept those bucks within those areas.

rent information when I am seriously rut hunting. But I sure do love my cameras prior to that time.

I use the cameras mostly just to find a buck's core area, which narrows down the hunting area and helps me make the best use of my time. Then I can focus only on those parts of the property where the buck is living, even if he is only there part time. It is a fun and effective way to hunt. **E**



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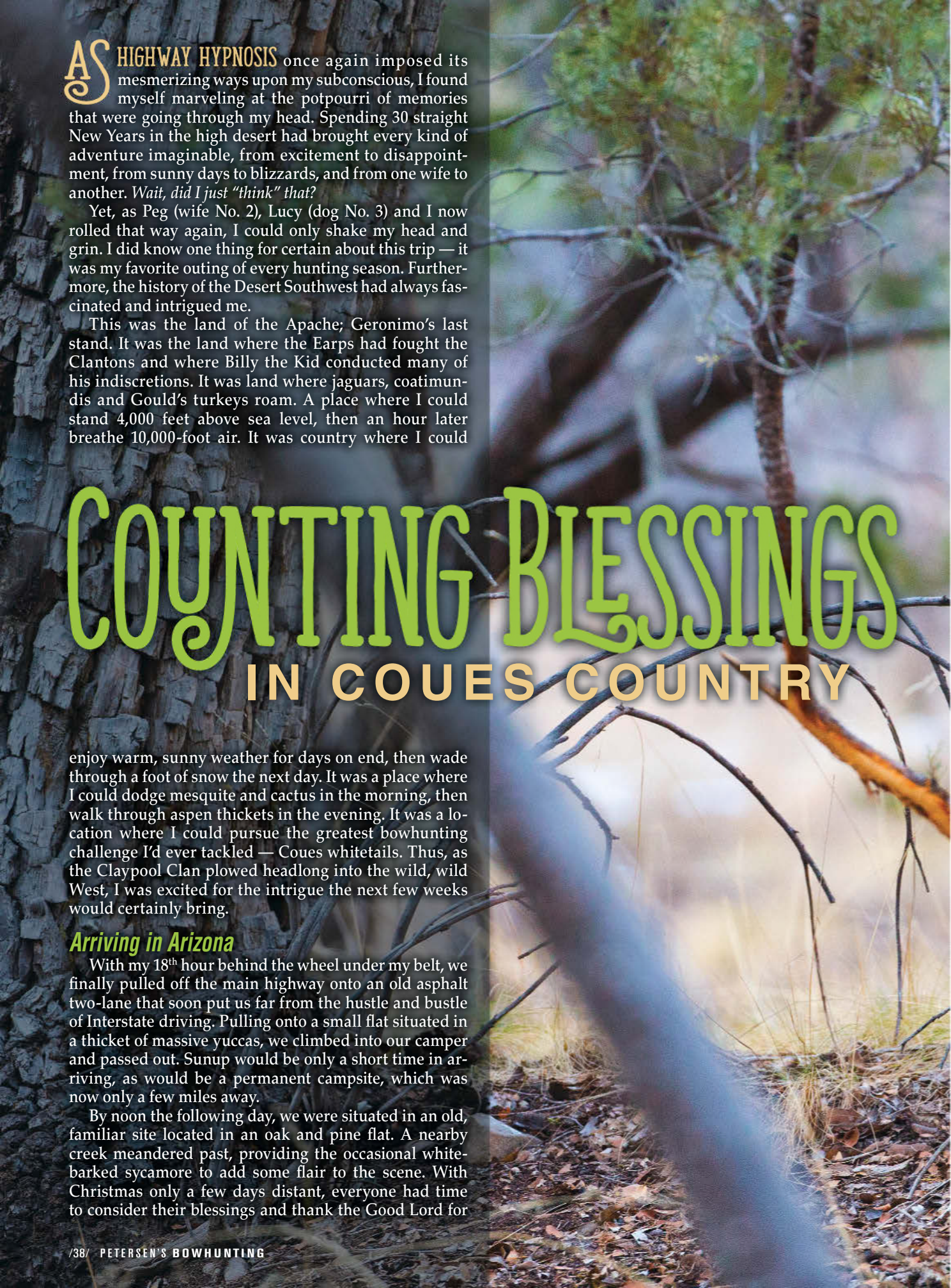
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AS HIGHWAY HYPNOSIS once again imposed its mesmerizing ways upon my subconscious, I found myself marveling at the potpourri of memories that were going through my head. Spending 30 straight New Years in the high desert had brought every kind of adventure imaginable, from excitement to disappointment, from sunny days to blizzards, and from one wife to another. *Wait, did I just “think” that?*

Yet, as Peg (wife No. 2), Lucy (dog No. 3) and I now rolled that way again, I could only shake my head and grin. I did know one thing for certain about this trip — it was my favorite outing of every hunting season. Furthermore, the history of the Desert Southwest had always fascinated and intrigued me.

This was the land of the Apache; Geronimo's last stand. It was the land where the Earps had fought the Clantons and where Billy the Kid conducted many of his indiscretions. It was land where jaguars, coatimundis and Gould's turkeys roam. A place where I could stand 4,000 feet above sea level, then an hour later breathe 10,000-foot air. It was country where I could

COUNTING BLESSINGS

IN COUES COUNTRY

enjoy warm, sunny weather for days on end, then wade through a foot of snow the next day. It was a place where I could dodge mesquite and cactus in the morning, then walk through aspen thickets in the evening. It was a location where I could pursue the greatest bowhunting challenge I'd ever tackled — Coues whitetails. Thus, as the Claypool Clan plowed headlong into the wild, wild West, I was excited for the intrigue the next few weeks would certainly bring.

Arriving in Arizona

With my 18th hour behind the wheel under my belt, we finally pulled off the main highway onto an old asphalt two-lane that soon put us far from the hustle and bustle of Interstate driving. Pulling onto a small flat situated in a thicket of massive yuccas, we climbed into our camper and passed out. Sunup would be only a short time in arriving, as would be a permanent campsite, which was now only a few miles away.

By noon the following day, we were situated in an old, familiar site located in an oak and pine flat. A nearby creek meandered past, providing the occasional white-barked sycamore to add some flair to the scene. With Christmas only a few days distant, everyone had time to consider their blessings and thank the Good Lord for

BIG BUCK
Encounters
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Excursion
BY EDDIE CLAYPOOL

safety, health and hope. Tucked away in a fold of the foothills of this massive mountain range, Peg, Lucy and I were enjoying the finer things of life: campfires, cheeseburgers, chili dogs and solitude.

As the days before the season opener slid past, I could be found making daily scouting trips into trackless country. Over the years, I'd developed a few dependable hunting locations where stable populations of Coues deer could be regularly found. The trick each year lay in finding the small hotspots within these larger areas. It seemed that the deer floated around large home ranges each year, establishing core areas in different locations annually. Such being the case, scouting on foot was required each trip in order to locate the widely scattered pockets of deer.

After a few days of burning boot leather, I had finally narrowed down my choice of treestand locations to three different spots. Erecting my hides, I felt confident that some good hunts lay dead ahead.

An Inauspicious Start

At the start of the season on Jan. 1, I settled in for an all-day vigil in one of my remote hides. And, as the morning slowly passed, a couple of does made their way past my perch. Then, about 10:30 a.m., a decent 9-pointer ambled past. As it stopped to work a distant scrape, I watched the buck display typical whitetail rutting behavior; it was clear the main breeding season was beginning in earnest.

Grabbing a few nibbles of nutrition around midday, I was unprepared for the large set of antlers that appeared on the scene. *Oh, what a buck!* The big guy was the largest-antlered Coues buck I'd ever had within bow range, and I was caught completely unprepared.

In a matter of seconds, the encounter was over. I watched as the bruiser cruised into the distance, none the worse for wear. Unable to even make an attempt for a shot opportunity, I'd simply sat and watched the trophy of a lifetime walk out of my life. I was stunned. Had that really just hap-

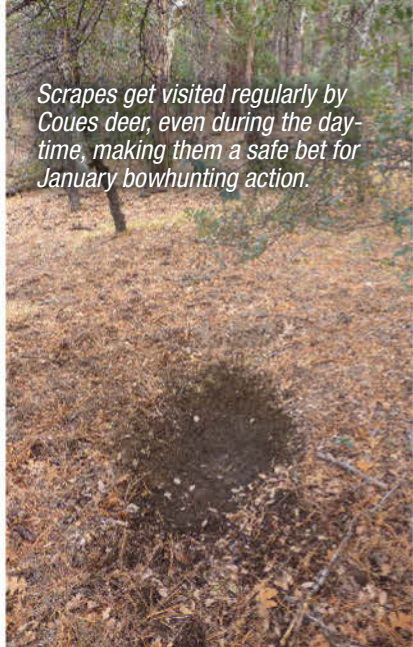


Coues deer display all the same behavioral characteristics of other whitetails, allowing you to apply many of your same deer-hunting tactics while pursuing them, especially during the rut.



Coues whitetails of the Southwest reside in areas from the high desert all the way up to 10,000 feet in elevation, providing a wide range of habitat to hunt and explore.

Scrapes get visited regularly by *Coues* deer, even during the daytime, making them a safe bet for January bowhunting action.



pened? Did I really blow it *that* badly? Yep, and yep.

I sat in stunned silence for awhile, replaying the previous event over and over again in my head. I knew what I'd just lost: the chance at a buck the likes of which I'd been waiting for for 30 years. At one point, he'd been within 25 yards, and such a realization was hard to take. Chastising myself brutally, I found myself in an angry

pity party. With time, however, I managed to pull my outlook out of the gutter and begin to focus on better thoughts. Maybe I would encounter him again? Not likely.

When I got back to camp that evening, Peg and Lucy were willing earpieces for my animated story. Shaking their heads, they provided me with a vent for my frustration. When I finally calmed down a little, Peg interjected with, "At least you finally got close to a whopper; you got to see one up close and personal."

Slamming my mouth shut, I chewed upon that outlook. In truth, I'd better just be thankful for the experience, since few would ever have such an opportunity. Hitting the sack, I was now ready to move forward, with a much better outlook. Thank God for a good woman!

The next few days skittered past with numerous encounters involving does and small- to medium-sized bucks. The big one never graced me with his presence again. I was enjoying great times afield and at camp. The weather was good, the rut was in full swing and Peg and Lucy were of good spirits. What more could a man, or a

bowhunter, ask for? As far as I was concerned, these days could simply go on forever.

A Second Chance

By the start of the second week of the season, yours truly was getting antsy for another mature buck encounter. That being the case, I decided to try another spot I'd prepared earlier and gave my "big buck" spot a rest. As I slid into the treestand at this new location, I had a very good feeling about the hunt. There was a new skiff of snow on the ground and the area was littered with fresh tracks.

As the morning progressed, however, nothing but the moving of shadows and the occasional swaying of a pine limb greeted my eyes. By early afternoon I was in a slight stupor and my attention span was shot. Daydreaming, and almost dozing, I was shocked to full attention at the sight of a mature buck ghosting past my hide.

Caught with my pants down *again*, I was forced to wait until the buck was headed away before I could jump into action. And, by the time I got to my feet, grabbed my bow and came to full draw, the bruiser was walking over

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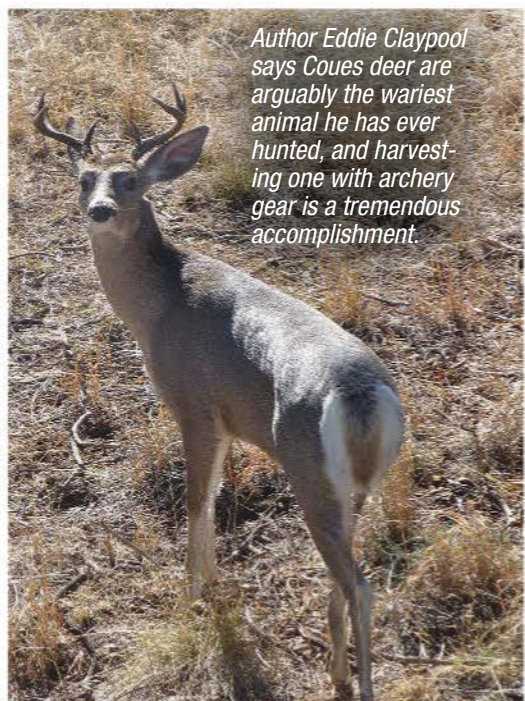
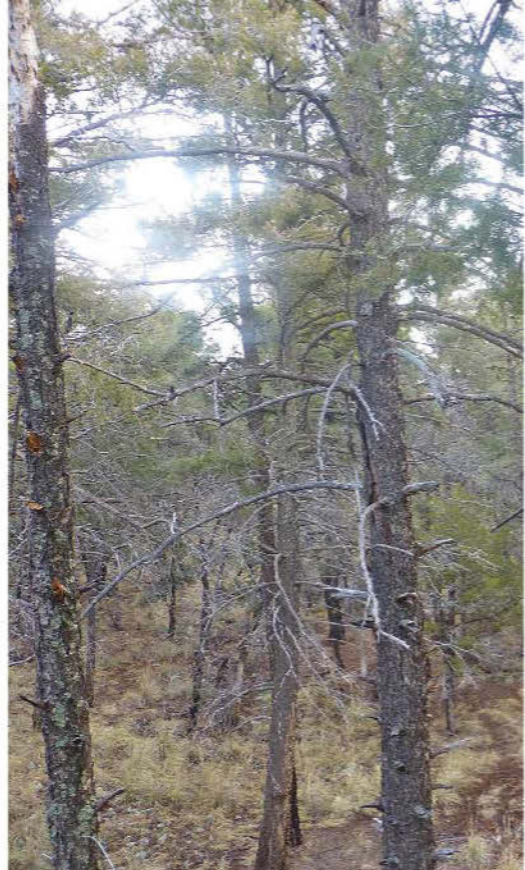
COUNTING BLESSINGS IN COUES COUNTRY

the hill, most likely never to be seen again. I stood in stunned silence. Did I just do that? Again? Yep, and yep.

The remainder of the evening passed at a snail's pace as I chastised myself for blowing *another* opportunity at *another* huge buck. Chances like these were years in coming, and I'd just had two such offerings in the last week. I couldn't believe it. And, to have had two such animals within bow range, without ever loosing an arrow, well that was just about more

than I could bear. Could it get any more frustrating than that?

For the next few days, I hunted with no hopes or expectations. I knew I'd had a lifetime of big-buck encounters already, so I had no more dreams or aspirations. Thus, for the next few days, as the rut continued to play out, I sat stoically, stubbornly, watching the parade. I wasn't about to reward myself with a "nice" buck after the great muffs of the recent past. Working to get myself out of the dol-



Author Eddie Claypool says Coues deer are arguably the wariest animal he has ever hunted, and harvesting one with archery gear is a tremendous accomplishment.

drums, I played a lot of head games. But I was hurt, and I knew it.

One Last Try

By Jan. 20, the rut was tapering down, leaving me with little hope for another big buck encounter. Thus, I decided to do a little still-hunting and scouting in a previously unexplored area. Grabbing my bow, I drove to the foothills and headed out into the mes-

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If you do opt to hunt from treestands or ground blinds, be prepared to have plenty of patience since the action can be slow at times.

quite flats of the desert. Maybe I could run across a big mule deer.

As I wandered aimlessly through the desolate and brushy habitat of the high desert, it quickly became clear to me again why I spent all my time in the oaks, pines and grassy meadows high above. This "stuff" down here stank!

Heading back uphill, I soon began to meander through some sycamores and oaks that cloaked the lower slopes of the massive mountain range. Ah, trees. This was much better!

Slowly meandering along, I was suddenly shocked to attention by a horizontal line nearby. Coming to a stop, I focused on the shape that was barely evident through the dense mesquite, cactus and ocotillo. As my brain engaged, I realized that I was looking at a whitetail doe. Glancing behind her, a huge buck materialized. It was standing statue-like, peering intently at me. Instantly freaked out, I was in shock. Unable to form a good plan of attack, I nocked an arrow and looked for an opening to the buck, but there were none. Expecting the situation to blow up at any second, I frantically looked for a way to fit an arrow

through the brush. The buck was only about 25 yards away. Sliding forward a couple of steps, I spotted a tiny opening. Putting my top pin on deer hair, I punched the release.

A few minutes later, as I stood over shattered pieces of a carbon arrow, I was speechless. Evidently, the arrow had clipped brush, kicked sideways and broken into three pieces as it attempted to go through the mesquite thicket. In a stupor, I was a mess. I headed back toward my truck, completely whipped.

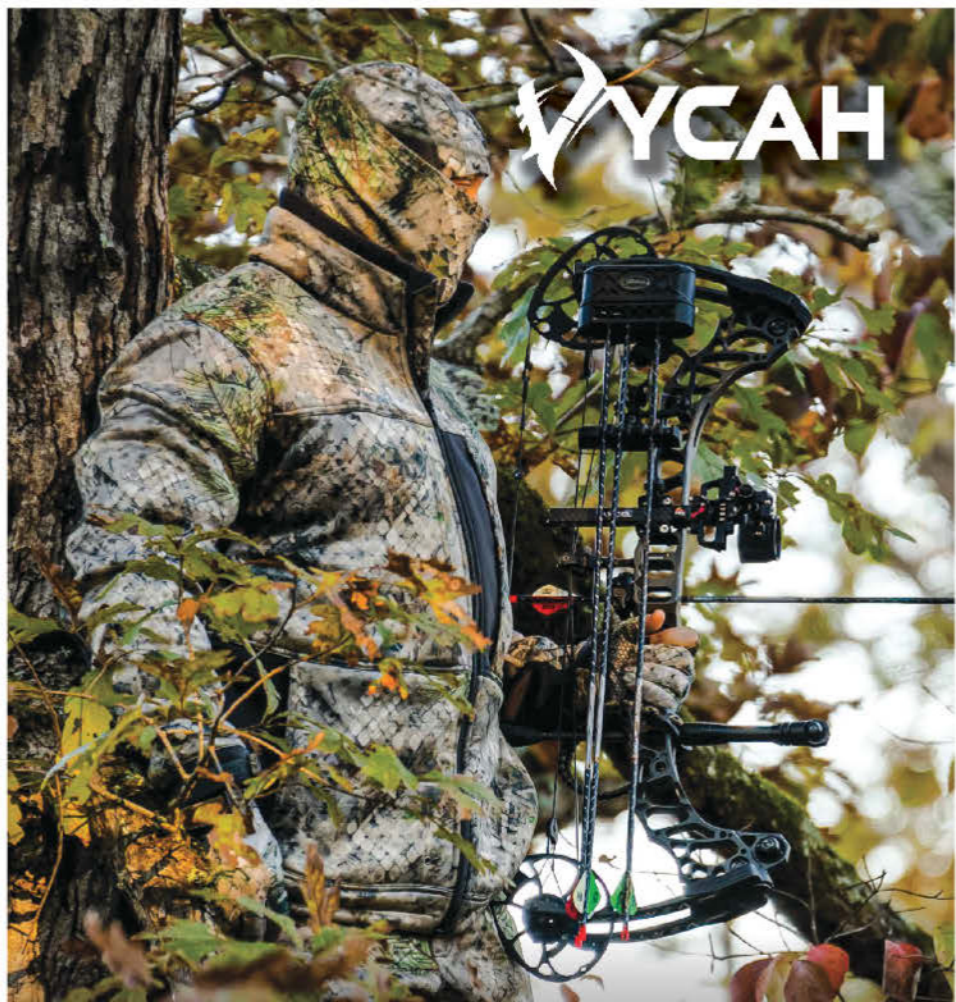
As I relayed my misfortune to Peg

back at camp, I noticed a smile on her face. Not understanding what she found so amusing about my escapade, I asked for an explanation.

"Wow, what a hunt," she said. "You've had three different, huge bucks close to you in the last two weeks. Think about that."

A I melted into a chair, my mouth remained shut. There was some food for thought. Well, Blondie had done it again — she'd put me in my place. She was right; never question your wife's judgement. Look who she married!

WOW, what a hunt! 



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A photograph of a deer with large antlers in a snowy forest. The deer is looking directly at the camera, standing in a snowy field with bare trees in the background. The antlers are large and covered in velvet. The deer's coat is brown and thick. The background is a soft-focus winter scene with snow on the ground and trees.

SCOUT MORE. *HUNT LESS.*

Tread Lightly to Score a Late-Season Buck

By Clint Casper



By now, a mature buck's survival skills have been honed to a razor's edge by several months of hunting pressure. Success in the late season is often the result of hunting smarter rather than hunting harder.

MARK RAYCROFT PHOTO.

Well, here we are in the waning weeks of the season, with buck tags still burning holes inside our favorite hunting pants! We had an early season plan of attack, but that fell through. As the rut came and went, we found ourselves scratching our heads, as we always just seemed one step behind. And now, as the snow flies and cold winter winds whip across the landscape, we are in the fourth quarter, with barely any time left on the clock!

Sure, you could hang up the bow, wash and dry the camo and call it a year. But if you are anything like me, quitting is not an option. Sure, all the bucks still standing have been hunted for months and have had their survival senses sharpened to a razor's edge. As a result, we must now change up our tactics, tread carefully and adopt a "less is more" approach to putting a hard-earned buck on the scoreboard before the clock runs out!

The Positives

Maintaining a positive attitude is a key ingredient for bowhunting success. So, let's start by discussing some of the positive aspects of still being "on the hunt" this late in the game.

Well, you can start by giving yourself a pat on the back for your persistence. If you're still hunting at this point, that means you haven't given up or settled for a lesser buck, just because taking the shot represented an easier path. Kudos to you for sticking it out!

The next positive is that you now have most of the playing field to yourself. Most other bowhunters have tagged out or given up by this point. Although it's true there are now fewer bucks on the landscape than there were back in the fall, you have very little competition in pursuing them, even on public land. In fact, you may even be able to score permission to some previously unattainable private ground during this time frame, because lots of other hunters have called it quits. Don't ever give up on the old-fashioned methods such as knocking on doors or writing letters to landowners asking for permission. Someone may just admire your dedication — or feel sorry for you — and tell you to go ahead and hunt!

Yet another positive in the late season is that you know bucks must rely on the best food sources in their core area to survive. Research shows that a buck will lose 20-30 percent of its body weight over the course of rut. With cold temperatures now the norm and food supplies limited, this means those bucks will be following a very strict routine traveling between bedding areas and feeding areas morning and evenings and conserving as much energy as possible for the remainder of the day. I've always said that "patterns kill big bucks," and at no time of the year is that truer than when targeting bucks on high-quality, late-season food sources.

While locating the best remaining food sources in your hunting area is obviously critical, you also need to pinpoint a buck's most likely bedding area. Because of the cold, snow and lack of vegetation in the late season, this is not typically a very complicated process. South-facing slopes, which receive the most sunlight and therefore reach the highest temperatures each day, are the ticket at this time. Bedding on a south-facing slope helps a buck maintain its body temperature and also offers an opportunity to perhaps take advantage of any grass or other vegetation that may grow during short periods of unseasonably warm weather.

SCOUT MORE. HUNT LESS.

The Negatives

Well, I hate to be a negative Nancy, but hunting the late season isn't all rainbows and unicorns. Probably the biggest challenge is that by this point in the season, the bucks have seen it all! They've been called at, blown out of beds and food sources, winded multiple hunters and perhaps even dodged a few bullets. In short, they know the game that is being played, and the fact they are still playing it proves they are among the smartest and most skilled athletes on the field.

Another challenge is food. Yes, a good, reliable food source at this point in the season will draw deer *from miles around*. But if **YOU** don't have access to hunt it, that is going to make your job a heck of a lot harder. And while seeing lots of deer is always fun, the fact that every great late-season food source is going to attract tons of deer means there will be many, many eyes, ears and noses to beat every single time you hunt.

You can face a similar challenge when it comes to bedding areas. If

you don't have south-facing slopes on your hunting property, there may not be many deer bedding there. If you don't have feeding or bedding areas to hunt, you better hope you at least have a travel corridor the deer use to get between the two. And regardless of where you hunt in the late season, you need an absolute bulletproof entry and exit strategy so you can get in and get out without deer seeing, hearing or smelling you.

As we already discussed, the buck you are hoping to tag is on high alert. A creak of a treestand and he's gone! An ounce of human scent in the timber and he knows what's going on! Bump him from his bed now and he may completely vacate the area! All in all, you will probably get only one crack at a good buck during the late season, so you better make it count. Your attention to detail needs to be higher than ever, so a smart bowhunter will cross every "t" and dot every "i" before heading into the field. The late season is very tricky and doesn't leave much room for error. However, it can pay off



big if you put together a good plan and execute it properly.

Less Is Best

So, now that we've established the positives and negatives to late-season bowhunting, we can put together a road map for success. This is where "less is best" comes into play. Some may think our best bet is to just hunt and hunt and hunt and grind it out until we stumble into an opportunity. Well, that may work during the rut, but in the late season the odds of success are very slim. The key now is picking our spots.

So, how do we find our buck and attack without alerting him? This is where old-school scouting and high-tech scouting come into play. Digital scouting and cell cameras can be a huge help during this time of the year, because these are very low-impact methods to gather information. Still, my best tactic at this time is driving back roads in the morning and evening and glassing fields to quickly figure out where the hot food sources are. Visual confirmation is my starting point, as experience has shown that a hot food source will attract the majority of the deer in the entire area. It could be a standing cornfield, late-dropping acorns on an oak ridge or a fall food plot. Regardless, we need to find this spot and pay attention to the details!

Using the onX Hunt app on my phone, I can easily scan the surrounding cover and identify likely bedding



Use your scouting intel to choose the best place to ambush a late-season buck. Remember, you probably won't get a second chance, so make your move count!



areas that these deer are using, all without ever stepping foot in the area. Now, it is time to deploy our cameras and let them do the dirty work! From here, we can put together the finer details we need before we go hunt.

Putting It All Together

I like to set up at least two cameras, pointed in different directions, on the food source I've identified. I want the cameras to catch deer coming and going so I can gauge their direction of travel and pinpoint the exact areas where the deer are bedding.

Once you identify a target buck, either via glassing or trail camera, the wind direction becomes vitally important. You should be keeping a log of the local wind direction each day and cross-reference it with the comings and goings of that buck. You'll quickly realize the buck has a preferred wind direction for traveling from his bedding area to the feeding area. This helps you figure out where he's likely bedding and where you may be able to ambush him on his nightly stroll to dinner!

I also like to match my late-season buck sightings with moon phase and weather conditions. For example, he may only show up on certain moon phases or right before cold fronts. Remember, you may only get one chance once you start hunting, so the more you can figure out ahead of time, the better.

Now that you've got confirmed sightings in person and on camera, you can put the pattern together and set the trap! In conjunction with his preferred wind direction, weather forecasts and pictures that we've received, we can now hang stands and get ready to hunt. The philosophy here

Scouting, both in person and digitally, is critical when hunting the late season, because you really have to choose your hunting times and locations carefully in order to be effective.

is to only hunt when the iron should be hot, by utilizing the high percentage days based on the patterns we've discovered. By limiting our hunts, we are limiting the chances of the buck and other deer patterning us before we get an opportunity.

A few years ago, I hunted a buck I called the "Big 6," and he showed me a

very distinct pattern in January. On a west wind and during the coldest days, he would show himself in daylight. If I was not hunting on those nights, my cameras told me that my chance of killing this buck were basically zero. Luckily, I got a major cold front with a west wind during the end of January and capitalized. By scouting more and hunting less, I had a plan in place and was ready to act when conditions were right. The formula resulted in a great late-season buck for me, and it can work for you too. Give it a try this winter, and good luck! **E**

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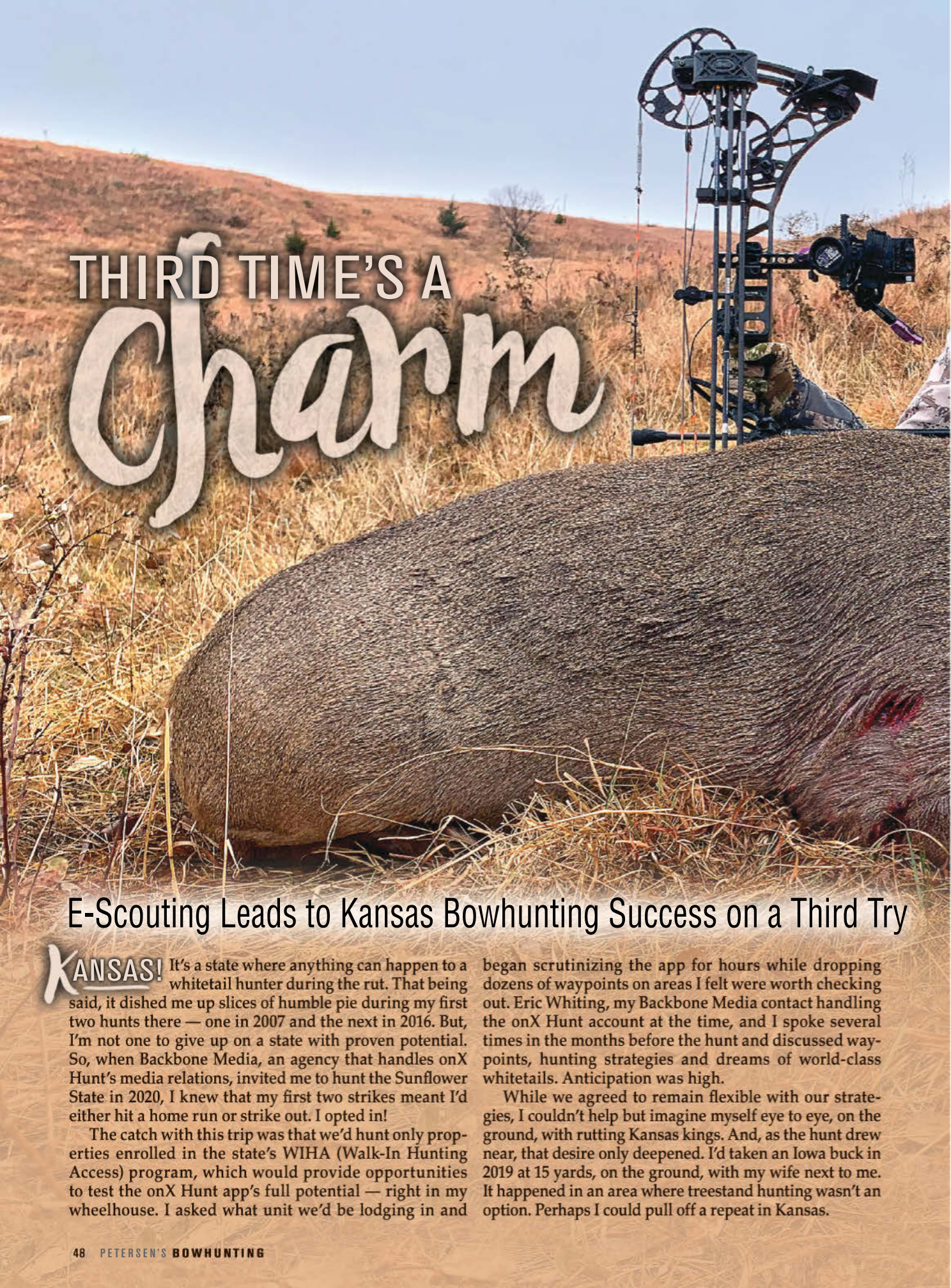


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THIRD TIME'S A *Charm*

E-Scouting Leads to Kansas Bowhunting Success on a Third Try

KANSAS! It's a state where anything can happen to a whitetail hunter during the rut. That being said, it dished me up slices of humble pie during my first two hunts there — one in 2007 and the next in 2016. But, I'm not one to give up on a state with proven potential. So, when Backbone Media, an agency that handles onX Hunt's media relations, invited me to hunt the Sunflower State in 2020, I knew that my first two strikes meant I'd either hit a home run or strike out. I opted in!

The catch with this trip was that we'd hunt only properties enrolled in the state's WIHA (Walk-In Hunting Access) program, which would provide opportunities to test the onX Hunt app's full potential — right in my wheelhouse. I asked what unit we'd be lodging in and

began scrutinizing the app for hours while dropping dozens of waypoints on areas I felt were worth checking out. Eric Whiting, my Backbone Media contact handling the onX Hunt account at the time, and I spoke several times in the months before the hunt and discussed waypoints, hunting strategies and dreams of world-class whitetails. Anticipation was high.

While we agreed to remain flexible with our strategies, I couldn't help but imagine myself eye to eye, on the ground, with rutting Kansas kings. And, as the hunt drew near, that desire only deepened. I'd taken an Iowa buck in 2019 at 15 yards, on the ground, with my wife next to me. It happened in an area where treestand hunting wasn't an option. Perhaps I could pull off a repeat in Kansas.



McDougal hit the ground running on the first day, hiking and checking pockets of cover all morning before arrowing this big-bodied buck around noon.

PHOTO BY BRODIE SWISHER

By DARREN MCDUGAL

Heading for Kansas

Our Sunflower State hunt was scheduled for Nov. 8-13, and I was hunting on public land in South Dakota through the evening of Nov. 7. Daytime rut action was slowed by unseasonably warm temperatures reaching 86 degrees, although I'd seen some good bucks moving, including one monster. The best was yet to come, I felt.

I pointed the truck south toward Kansas and broke the border a couple hours before dark. As I drove by some of my waypoints, I started glassing. About 80 yards off of the publicly accessible land at one waypoint, I watched a beautiful, 150-class buck chase a doe along a shelter belt. Obviously, it excited me for the next several days' prospects.

Whiting also did some driving around, as did Brodie Swisher, a fellow outdoor writer/editor who was joining us. Whiting hadn't seen much and focused on settling into the Airbnb and preparing dinner. Swisher had turned up some interesting properties littered with scrapes and rubs. He also found some treestands, meaning that he'd have some competition. I arrived at the Airbnb just after dusk and found them huddled around a cookstove.

Discussing Strategies

After dinner, Whiting, Swisher and I discussed plans around a TV monitor with onX Hunt HDMI'd in via laptop. We agreed that we'd hunt within 15 miles of the

THIRD TIME'S A CHARM

Airbnb the first morning. If we didn't like what we saw, we'd branch out farther for the afternoon hunt.

That first morning, I stuck with my intention to hunt from the ground and not get hung up on sitting in tree-stands. So, I was the last to leave the Airbnb, and I reached my first glassing point right at dawn.

The Hunt Begins

Bingo! I was glassing for only 5 minutes when a squirrelly doe, clearly in estrus, appeared in my binocular lenses. I kept tabs on her while scanning for trailing bucks. A 2½-year-old buck suddenly appeared. I held tight in the truck, my lips slurping hot coffee from my YETI travel mug. Then, another buck entered the scene. He, too, was a youngster. And, after waiting to see if a giant would appear, my interest was waning, so I decided to drive toward the next glassing waypoint.

I saw little else from the truck and decided to head for some woolly country with deep draws and more cover. I attached my Ultimate Predator buck decoy to my Mathews VXR 28, walking into the wind and scanning left to right and right to left as I hiked. I found the area interesting, but the deer density appeared to be low, and I spotted an empty treestand where two draws came together. I decided to head for another draw and then looped back to the truck since I didn't see anything.

Now midmorning, I drove to the WIHA parcel that interested me the most. I reached it and was thrilled to see no one else was hunting it. I grabbed my bow and cut across a cut cornfield. When I reached a creek bottom, I almost gave up and headed back for the vehicle, but I finally found a somewhat dicey place to cross and lunged to the opposite bank. On that side was another cornfield that transitioned into prairies with hills, junipers and occasional tree pockets and thickets, all of which I'd marked on onX Hunt months earlier. I liked what I was seeing!

Hunting Whitetails Like Muleys

I referenced onX a few different times and crafted a game plan for checking each pocket of cover efficiently and relative to the wind direction which was south/southwest. I then headed for the first series of pockets and cuts. Each time I inched toward a new pocket, cut or thicket, I'd nock an arrow and tiptoe forward, using the downwind side to peek in. I treated every single pocket as if it held a buck, hoping to glimpse deer before they saw me.

I spent a couple of hours using this strategy and was blown away that I hadn't seen a single deer. I'd checked



Digital scouting via onX Hunt and glassing from roads helped author Darron McDougal develop a solid game plan for hunting Kansas' hills and prairies.

all the main pockets of cover in the area, but another big draw about 500 yards straight west beckoned. I'd have to swing way north to gain the downwind advantage, and my stomach was rumbling as I regretted not bringing water or snacks. I considered heading for the hydration and nutrition secured in my truck more than a mile away, but that draw burned holes through my mind so I proceeded.

A Ghost Emerges

After heading north for a bit, I cut west. That brought me to a draw that I hadn't dropped a waypoint on. It caught my attention, though it had sparse cover. I could plainly see it held nothing, so I pressed on.

Remember in my opener when I wrote that anything can happen in Kansas? Well, a doe suddenly flew onto the scene. She was running when I first saw her, but based on where she'd appeared, I knew that I hadn't spooked her. She ran down through the draw and up my hillside, then headed straight north. I saw her tail disappear about 400 yards away and I proceeded to analyze the situation.

On one hand, I felt that if she was being chased, the buck would've been right behind her. On the other hand, it was noon and no one else appeared to be hunting, which meant she couldn't have been spooked by another hunter. That thought prompted me to immediately hunker down and nock an arrow. Good thing I did!

Larger than life on the opposite hillside, maybe 150 yards



Kansas' Walk-In Hunting Access (WIHA) program provides bowhunters with access to private lands that are home to some big bucks.

away, a monster appeared minutes later on the skyline, his massive antler frame silhouetted against the grayish, overcast backdrop. I said aloud in a low tone, "Oh my gosh!" I nearly had to pinch myself, but his grunts confirmed reality. Honestly, I was intimidated, but I kept talking myself through it and stayed focused like never before.

I was in the open and couldn't move. The huge-bodied buck entered a small patch of brush and rubbed a tree with his massive antlers. While he was distracted, I scooted into position to shoot if he came my way after shredding the tree. A couple of minutes elapsed before he started moving toward me.

I instantly feared he'd take the same route the doe had and that he'd be out of range. Still, if I could keep eyes on him, I'd pursue all day long if that's what it would take to get him. He came closer than the doe had, but my rangefinder read 70 yards when he was broadside. I'm skilled with archery equipment, but I just knew that wasn't my shot — I felt sure that God would guide my steps to a better opportunity.

The buck angled uphill as the doe had, and when he disappeared behind a hump, I ran to the top of the hill, keeping my wind from hitting him and hoping to peek over the hill as he walked the sidehill on the doe's flight path. With wind covering my approach, I ran north until I was sure I'd passed by him, then carefully eased toward the edge of the draw. I instantly saw his big antlers coming through the grass heading broadside. I quickly ranged where he'd pop out into the open, and it was 40 yards. I went into shoot mode, hunkering deeper into the grass — it's the only cover I had — and waited for him to step out. But, he didn't.

Curiosity surged through my brain and as I slowly rose up, I saw movement in a ditch that jutted up and out of the main draw. He was less than 20 yards away! I immediately hooked my release into my loop and drew back. Then, he angled quartering away and came up out of the depression, turning broadside just across the ditch.

The buck ignored my first voice grunt, so I sent a louder one. He slammed on the brakes and looked right at me. I subconsciously said 22 yards, held my 20-yard pin high of center and sent my Easton arrow and Rage broadhead at the largest buck I've ever shot at.

My arrow struck the shoulder crease at mid-height, and even though a lot of the arrow was protruding, I knew it was a double-lunger and that my broadhead had stopped in the offside shoulder. The giant buck bolted downhill into the draw, flickering his tail the entire way — usually the sign of a lethal hit. About 120 yards away, he came to rest underneath an Osage orange tree. Seconds later, he was motionless.

I didn't holler, scream or shout like they do on TV. I knelt down, thanked God for the opportunity, took several moments to collect my thoughts and shot a brief iPhone video talking about the encounter. I imagined the number of years the buck had eluded hunters, predators and vehicles. I felt sorry, as I always do, for taking his life. But, this is God's design — man is above the animals and can manage them as he sees fit. And, I'm more than happy to play my role as a hunter and conservationist.

After texting my compadres about my success, I stood, ready to approach the buck, which had been lifeless for 20 minutes. Then, the winds of change hit my face. What had been a gentle and very warm south/southwest wind was now a brutal north/northwest wind. The temperature easily plummeted 10-15 degrees within a minute. It was then

that I pieced the puzzle together — the doe and buck had come from the last draw that I was on my way to check out. He'd bred her (that's why he was so far behind), and the coming weather put them on the move at noon.

Recovery and Pack Out

Upon reaching the downed buck, I realized he was everything I'd thought. His antlers grossed 151 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches, and his body and neck were impossibly huge. I didn't age him, but by his forehead, mass and body size, I estimate he was 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ years old or older.

I admired his antlers and stroked his hide, then called my wife and sent her a few photos. I then remembered the task at hand. I had nothing with me to skin or quarter the buck and meanwhile, Swisher and Whiting both blew up my phone with congratulatory messages and asked for an onX waypoint so they could meet me and help pack out the buck. I was so grateful they chose to leave their afternoon hunts to help me — they are the type of friends you want in your circle.

I alternated between walking and running toward the nearest road, which was miles from my truck, then texted my partners a waypoint to meet. Before long, Swisher scooped me up, drove me to my truck and we both headed back to where he'd just picked me up. There, we waited for Whiting as rain began peppering the windshield.

Whiting arrived and the rain reduced to a sprinkle as we struck off across the prairie to my onX waypoint named "monster buck." After a 1.5-mile hike, we reached the buck and it was high fives all around. We all took turns grabbing the antlers and admiring the incredible animal. After shooting lots of photos, we loaded up with meat and trekked back to our vehicles.

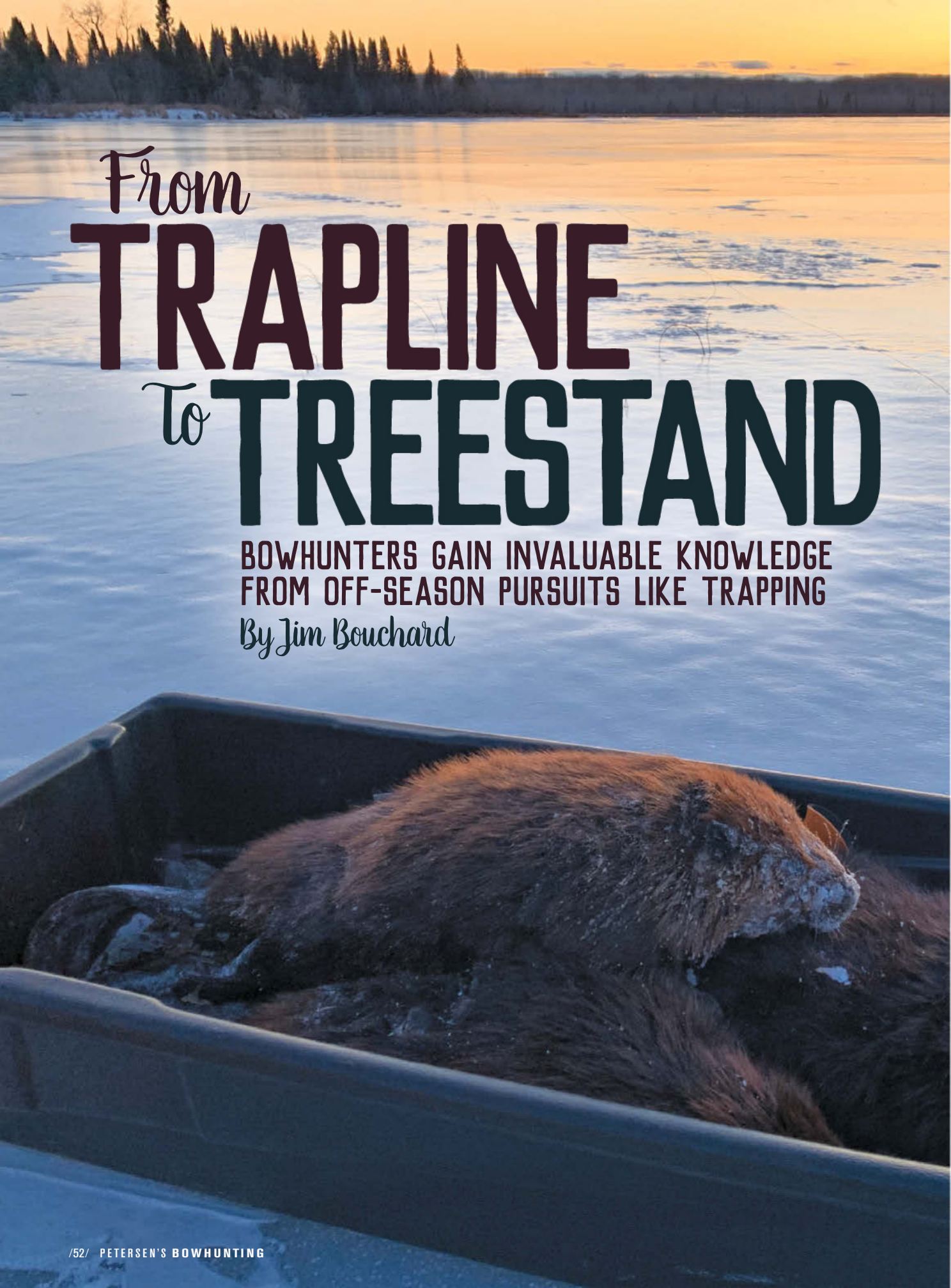
Reflections

Swisher and Whiting unfortunately didn't connect on bucks, but each saw numerous deer, and Whiting eyed a really solid buck one evening. Kansas certainly isn't a "gimme" in terms of arrowing monster whitetails. My first two hunts there, as I mentioned earlier, were duds. Fortunately, my third time hunting the Sunflower State was a charm with a successful hunt on day one. God guided my steps to the opportunity and onX Hunt was a vital tool in choosing locations to hunt months beforehand. **B**



Having friends to assist with field dressing and the 1.5-mile pack out makes the process much easier.

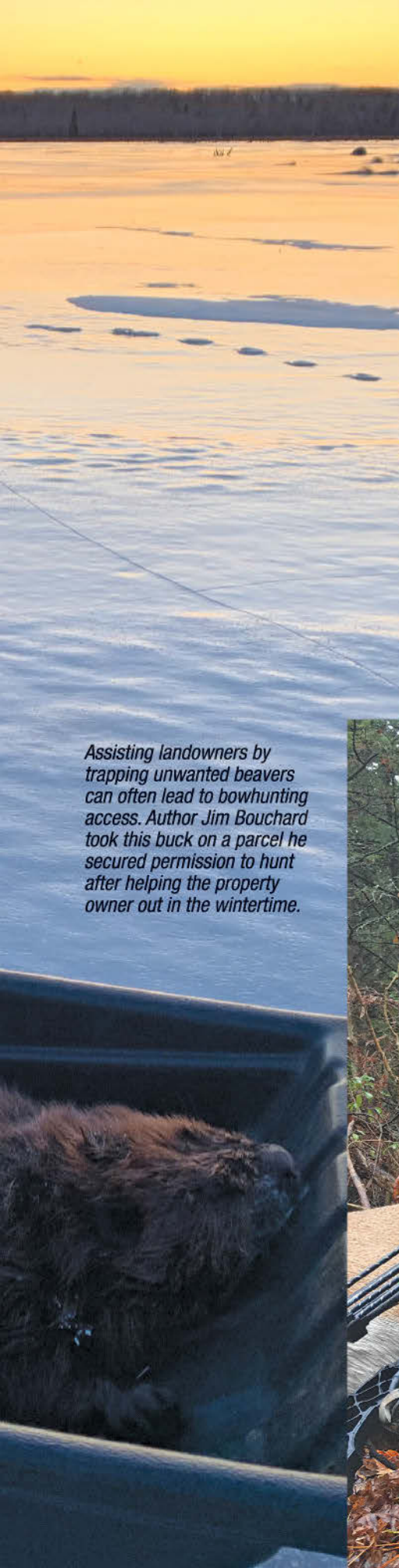
PHOTO BY ERIC WHITING

A photograph of a frozen lake at sunset. The sky is a warm orange and yellow, reflecting on the ice. In the foreground, a dark plastic trap contains a dead beaver with brown and grey fur. The background shows a line of evergreen trees under the sunset sky.

From TRAPLINE To TREESTAND

BOWHUNTERS GAIN INVALUABLE KNOWLEDGE
FROM OFF-SEASON PURSUITS LIKE TRAPPING

By Jim Bouchard



It would seem that a singular focus on any lifelong goal would be ideal to be a master at that chosen desire. We have all read about those who have dedicated their lives to a singular purpose and have become known by society as the best of the best. However, if you are trying to be the best bowhunter you can be, is it best to completely immerse yourself in all things archery, or would it be more advantageous to diversify one's approach?

It would seem counterintuitive to put archery or bowhunting on the back burner if you plan on being your best come fall of each year. However, I believe there are other routes that can be taken that will make you an even better bowhunter, and they involve outdoor activities, just of a different sort.

Advice from 'The Great One'

Wayne Gretzky, the greatest hockey player of all time, was once quoted as saying, "I played everything. I played lacrosse, baseball, hockey, soccer and track and field. I was a big believer that

you played hockey in the winter and when the season was over you hung up your skates and you played something else."

This is the same individual who has achieved numbers within his profession that, years later, still appear insurmountable. Gretzky wasn't putting away his athletic potential when he hung up the skates. He was diversifying his ability to perform in a multitude of ways, which, in turn, enriched his ability to think and react both physically and mentally when it came to his target sport.

I have always tried to spend as much time as I can in the woods. I don't care if it is chasing squirrels with a .22 in the big woods of Northern Michigan in September, or if it is chopping through ice in freezing January temperatures while setting 330 body grip traps for beavers. The constant state of outdoor thinking keeps me sharp, and over the years I have learned that there are countless overlaps in all of these challenges. When Gretzky was trying to hit a curveball

Assisting landowners by trapping unwanted beavers can often lead to bowhunting access. Author Jim Bouchard took this buck on a parcel he secured permission to hunt after helping the property owner out in the wintertime.



FROM TRAPLINE TO TREESTAND

in July, he wasn't hurting his talents when it came time to strap on the skates during hockey season. In fact, he was actually creating a more diversified set of skills and coordination that could overlap.

Where Trapping Comes In

One of the biggest challenges of bowhunting is the fact that there is a tremendous amount of failure and adversity to overcome. As bowhunters, we are signing up for a true test in resiliency when we try to get ultra-close to extremely adept survival artists. Even when we are successful at closing the distance, we have to pull off a shot in a truly mind-numbing moment.

In recent years, I have taken on trapping to keep me in the hunting frame of mind throughout the winter months, and I have noticed a variety of cross-overs that have assisted me when it has come time to grab the bow in the fall.

The first aspect that I have noticed is my ability to remain comfortable being uncomfortable. Chopping through the ice at 10:30 p.m., under a headlamp in a minus-20-degree windchill, and working on a trap that can easily break an arm requires some mental fortitude. Numb hands and a frozen face, along with burning legs as a result of post-holing through deep snow, are now a common occurrence for me. As a result, sitting in a treestand during an early November cold front no

longer has the bite it used to. Those days of working in frozen chest waders have helped to build up that "cold callous" for me. There is no doubt that many of the best bowhunters I know have a high degree of that toughness or grind factor that helps them endure when things get miserable.

Another big asset to trapping, which is 100 percent usable for bowhunting, is the tremendous amount of woodsmanship that comes with being an effective trapper. Every trapper I know has an unbelievable amount of knowledge of the woods. Not only is it necessary to be knowledgeable about the process of effective trapping, but it also entails hours and hours of outdoor experiences.

I, myself, have witnessed and learned about a multitude of animal behaviors while trapping. For one, I found some great locations to bowhunt near creeks, waterways and marshes while I pursued beaver, otter, muskrat and mink in the winter and spring. I have also learned to instinctively look for terrain features that are not only effective locations for traps but for treestands as well. The main focus of trapping is to locate an area in which a target animal resides and figure out the area with the highest probability of that animal traveling. Does that sound

familiar? Funnels, creek channels, marshes, river bends, etc., are always great locations for any hunter/trapper to set up.

I know great bowhunters always look for these areas; however, the continued focus of this practice through the winter months in a slightly different manner can fine-tune this ability to find killer spots. I personally have noticed that I spend much more time looking at the ground no matter when I am outdoors. All animals leave tracks and signs of activity. Identifying the difference between a species, size and gender of an animal can be understood by looking at specific types of sign. Is this a feeding location? Is this a shelter or bedding location? Is this a high-traffic area for the target animal? Every outdoorsman can benefit from this knowledge.

Opening Doors

As a side note, not only will trapping help you find locations to bowhunt in the fall, it may even lead to access to new hunting properties. I know many property owners who are dying to have somebody help them eliminate those eager beavers from blocking off their irrigation ditches, flooding their roads at camp or just plain destroying their poplar groves. Getting rid of those critters in a cost-effective, minimally invasive way may just be your ticket into



The woodsmanship, perseverance and attention to detail required to be a successful trapper are easily relatable to bowhunting.





Keeping your eyes on the ground and reading sign is a must in both the trapping and bowhunting worlds. The author came across these fresh bear tracks one late-fall day, likely from a pair out looking for a late-season meal.

that “promised land” farm. I personally have shot two of my best whitetails on a farm on which I pulled out a family group of extremely “efficient” beavers, saving the farmer another round of excavator rentals and filling my freezer at the same time. Having a unique set of skills can be a great door opener for future outdoor opportunities.

Successful trapping along with successful bowhunting also involves looking for an “edge.” Once an area is found, consider what else can be put into place to up the odds of success. Analyzing wind direction, observing weather patterns, strategic use of scents, practicing scent control, wearing camouflage, creating pinch points, etc., are all universally applicable details of many outdoor pursuits. Every squirrel occasionally finds a nut, however, the truly successful people that consistently get it done have a widely diversified playbook of tricks and tactics that help them. Just like the specifics of how and why you set a treestand up can be applied to the specifics of where and how you set a trigger on a foothold, attention to detail is the key. The minor details on how you tie a D-loop on your string are just as important as how you specifically wire up triggers on a body grip trap to eliminate the possibility of a faulty

trigger. Being familiar with your gear and other tools and tactics is always a necessity. Using that mindset in other practices will definitely further success down the road.

The Intangibles

The last and maybe most important beneficial aspect of diversifying pursuits in the off-season is the acceptance of failure and the fortitude that is developed along the way. I have spent hours upon hours in a treestand staring into the lifeless swamp, wondering why in the world I was subjecting

myself to such mental torture. I have also spent hours upon hours walking across ice and through snowy swamps to only find that my trap was sprung with nothing in it, or to see it just the way I’d left it. With both disciplines, a healthy portion of humble pie comes as a package deal. If one can’t handle disappointment, then neither of these ventures is a good fit. It is the pursuit and anticipation that make it great.

It takes hours of treestand time, months of target practice or miles of walking with frozen fingers and toes to truly appreciate the success when it

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FROM TRAPLINE TO TREESTAND

comes. Seeing that arrow fly perfectly into the vitals of a whitetail or seeing that fur in the trap is the culmination of many moments of trial and error. In the world of Instagram pictures and Facebook posts, it may seem like everyone out there is shooting giant bucks; however, this grossly misinterprets the number of people who are successful. It isn't nearly as sexy to send a picture of a non-punched tag or a misfired trap. From the outside looking in, it all seems easy. In the end,

though, nothing can replace the multitude of reps necessary to be successful when pursuing any animal.

Trapping is only one example of what can be done to better diversify any bowhunter's lifestyle. I would have to say that my time in the winter and spring has without a doubt made me a better bowhunter. The list of positives I have received as a result of the pursuit is endless. While most people are inside looking at maps and thinking about spring scouting, I am out in



Bouchard found this rub on the edge of a secluded marsh while setting beaver traps in January. Setting and checking traps is a great opportunity to scout for bow season, and most of the best trapping spots offer great whitetail hunting.

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the animals' environment continuously learning in real time.

If you have never tried trapping, I am sure there is somebody you have a connection with who could lead you in the right direction. Maybe trapping isn't the deal. Maybe chasing grouse behind a dog is more suited to your liking. It doesn't matter. I guarantee that whatever extracurricular outdoor adventure you choose, it will help you in your passion to be a better bowhunter. However, you don't have to take my word for it — there is a reason they call Gretzky "The Great One." **E**



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By **JON E. SILKS**

BOW TEST

HOYT Z1S

Really Fast. Really Quiet.
Really Comfortable.

SOME BOWHUNTERS JUST HAVE the need for speed, and Hoyt is ready to serve them with the new Z1S — a bow that offers a 350 fps speed rating in tandem with a host of high-tech features from tip to toe.

Highlights include Hoyt's S-Type Binary cam system, Hybrid EXT limbs, a full complement of vibration- and noise-dampening accessories and compatibility with the company's In-Line Accessory Mounting System.

Speed and Power

Hoyt introduces the all-new S-Type Binary Cams on the Z1S. These cams ride on steel axles paired with high-grade, sealed inner-race bearings for smooth operation and increased efficiency. The cams are built to offer a smooth shooting experience while producing IBO speeds up to 350 fps out of a bow with a 5.875-inch brace height.

Just like its predecessor, the HBX Cam, Hoyt's S-Type has an improved vibration profile, reduced weight and positions the string to create a better center shot and enhanced sight picture. Hoyt employs a pair of cam modules to cover the entire draw-length range of 25-30 inches, in half-inch increments. The modules also give you

Hoyt's new Z1S is a fast bow that holds extremely steady on target and is surprisingly quiet in the field, thanks to a host of high-tech features designed to eliminate shot noise and vibration.

THE SPECS

Manufacturer: Hoyt Archery, 801-363-2990; hoyt.com

Model: Z1S

Riser: Tec-Lite, reflex, machined aluminum

Grip: VitalPoint, molded elastomer

Limbs: Hybrid EXT, split

Draw Weights: 40, 50, 60, 65 and 70 pounds peak

Draw Lengths: 25-30 inches, in half-inch increments; modular

Cam System: S-Type Binary

Letoff: 80 or 85 percent, adjustable; 77.08 percent, as tested

String: Fuse Custom, BCY X99, 58.8 inches

Cables (x2): Fuse Custom, BCY X99, 37.15 inches

Brace Height: 5.875 inches

Axle-to-Axle Length: 33 inches

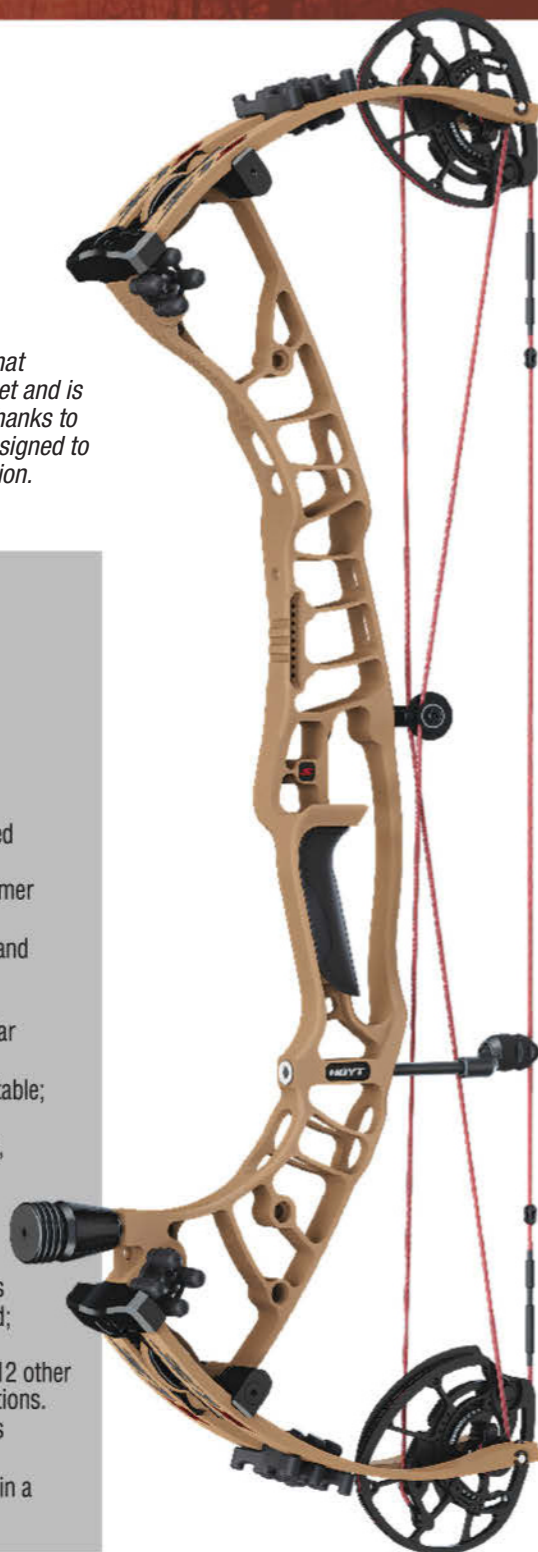
Weight: 4.7 pounds, advertised; 5.03 pounds, tested

Finish: Bourbon (shown) and 12 other camouflage and solid-color options.

Advertised IBO Speed: 350 fps

MSRP: \$1,399

Comments: Speed and stealth in a single package.



the ability to choose your preferred letoff at either 80 or 85 percent.

The multi-layered, Hybrid EXT split limbs on the Z1S have a wide stance that gives them excellent lateral and

torsional stability, while a limb lamination process allows for full contour through their Uniform Stress Distribution design. The four limb sections are matched based on deflection values

and available in peak draw weights of 40, 50, 60, 65 and 70 pounds. Like all Hoyt limbs, those found on the Z1S pass the company's minimum testing standards of 1,500 dry fires and one million draw cycles. A plastic end cap snaps onto each limb end and then snaps into the precision-machined limb pocket that employs rockers, positioners and spacers to capture and perfectly align the limbs to the riser at this critical interface.

Core Alignment

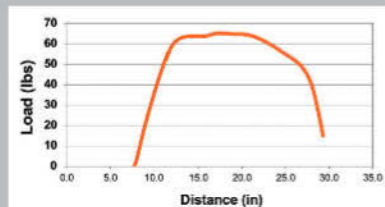
Hoyt's Tec-Lite Riser is the core of the Z1S, as it anchors and supports the overall bow. The forged, machined aluminum structure is configured with a reflex design to maximize power stroke and in turn, speed. It is built with many cutouts to reduce weight, while the flared structural chambers top and bottom and Hoyt's signature rear-looping strut builds stiffness and strength into the design.

In many ways, archery is all about alignment, and Hoyt focused efforts to center all aspects of Z1S, starting with the In-Line Accessory Mounting System. A built-in Picatinny rail on the forward-facing section of the riser, adjacent to the sight window, allows for the installation of compatible bow sights. This eliminates side weight and offers the proven lockdown power of a Picatinny system. Further, an integrated dovetail-mount on the rear of the riser, just above the arrow shelf, will accept the QAD Integrate rest, again eliminating side weight and providing a more secure attachment. Standard sight- and rest-mounting holes are also included. Finally, Hoyt's SL Sidebar attachment is low on the bow for improved effectiveness using a lighter and shorter sidebar. Top and bottom quiver attachments, two stabilizer-mounting inserts and Hoyt's inner-race bearing Roller Guard cable-

SPEED & ENERGY

	375-GRAIN ARROW	425-GRAIN ARROW
ARROW SPEED	305 fps	288 fps
KINETIC ENERGY	77.5 ft./lbs.	78.3 ft./lbs.
DYNAMIC EFFICIENCY	82.2%	83.1%
SHOT NOISE	90.7 dBA	89.7 dBA

DRAW-FORCE CURVE



EDITOR'S NOTE:

All of our Bow Tests are conducted using the same standardized procedures and professionally calibrated testing equipment. Bows are tested with a draw length of 29 inches and a draw weight of 65 pounds, unless otherwise noted.

containment system round out the riser package.

Quiet Comfort

Hoyt pulls out all the stops — well, actually, they put in all the stops — to combat noise and vibration on the Z1S. A set of Shock Pods are screwed directly into the limb bolt dowels and are designed to intercept and eliminate any vibration and noise traveling through that interface. Made to work seamlessly with Hoyt's Split Limb Technology, the Limb Shox limb dampeners have proven effective limb vibration killers, while the elastomer string-mounted Hole Shots expand and shrink during the shooting cycle to quickly dampen

vibration in the string. The In-Line Short Stop Stabilizer is positioned low on the bow, lowering the center of gravity, and in turn increasing its effectiveness. In fact, Hoyt says its included 2.25-inch stabilizer produces the same benefits as a more traditional 6-inch model in the typical mounting location. Further, a rubber-tipped String Stop dampens string oscillation quickly after the shot. Last, but not least, Hoyt brings comfort and effectiveness to the Z1S through the VitalPoint Grip. This molded grip is made from a soft elastomer called Versaflex that adds comfort and has a non-slip surface. A shallower angle encourages a neutral wrist position and focuses hand pressure in the center of your grip, rather than the bottom, to reduce torque.

At the Range

As you should expect from a bow that stores this much energy and generates such impressive arrow speed, the draw cycle on the Z1S is firm from the get-go, with a buildup right at the end before dropping into the valley. Still, there were no harsh transitions. It is also worth noting that because the Z1S is so fast, you also have the option to shoot a lower draw weight and achieve the same arrow speeds you'd get pulling higher poundage on a competing bow.

At the shot, I noted a quick kick and low-level vibration in my bow hand, but both were virtually eliminated simply by adding a stabilizer to the riser. Considering its speed, I was also impressed at how quiet the Z1S is; this is a stealthy hunting partner!

I found the VitalPoint grip to be both comfortable and effective at full draw, thanks to its flat back and low angle. Finally, the Z1S is a bow that does not fight you to stay on the bull's-eye. It is rock steady on target and makes aiming easy. **E**

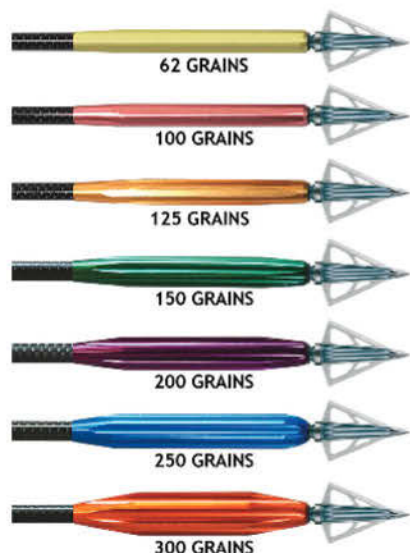
PRO-TRACKER ARCHERY BAD BOYS FOC ARROW SLEEVES:

CUSTOM FOC MADE EASY

SERIOUS BOWHUNTERS are seldom satisfied. Rather than resting on past success, they never stop learning or looking for ways to improve themselves and the equipment they carry afield.

One of the most popular ways bowhunters seek improved performance is by increasing the FOC of their hunting arrows. Boosting your FOC, or Front of Center balance point, can help your arrows stabilize more quickly and fly more accurately through the wind while also increasing momentum for deeper penetration on game.

Of course, to increase FOC, you must add weight to the front end of the arrow. Traditionally, that has meant heavyweight inserts, broadheads and fieldpoints. However, thanks to the Bad Boys FOC Arrow Sleeves from Pro-Tracker Archery, bowhunters can instantly customize FOC —



\$24.95 per 3 / Pro-Tracker Archery
208-356-0657; pro-tracker.com

without cutting shafts, gluing inserts or replacing your favorite broadheads. Available in seven models ranging in weight from 62-300 grains, the metal sleeves simply slide over the front end of your arrow shafts.

After experimenting with the Bad Boys on my own hunting arrows, I can honestly say I love the concept, because it truly allows archers to do it all with a single set of arrows. For example, if you build your “base arrows” to have a finished weight in the 350-400-grain range without the Bad Boys attached, you’ll have a relatively lightweight, flat-shooting setup perfect for target shooting, small game, turkeys and even antelope. From there, you can simply add the Bad Boys sleeve of your choice and increase arrow weight as desired — giving you the ability to hunt everything from squirrels to moose with the same arrows!

Bad Boys measure 4 inches long and are available in weights of 62, 100, 125, 150, 200, 250 and 300 grains. The front ends of the Bad Boys are held in place by screwing in your broadhead or fieldpoint, and the fit in the back can easily be customized using the included heat-shrink tubing (multiple layers if necessary) to take up any gap between the Bad Boys sleeves and smaller-diameter shafts.

FOC is expressed as a percentage, and although there is robust debate within the bowhunting community about what constitutes the ideal bowhunting FOC, Pro-Tracker defines high FOC as anything from 12-18 percent, with anything 19 percent or higher labeled as extreme FOC. As an

example, Pro-Tracker shows on its website how the addition of a 150-grain Bad Boys sleeve more than doubled a particular arrow’s FOC from 9.4 percent to 18.8 percent. Obviously, the impact of a given Bad Boys sleeve depends on the sleeve weight and arrow specs. Pro-Tracker offers an online FOC calculator to help you run different scenarios for your chosen arrow build.

As for accuracy, Pro-Tracker says — and I confirmed on the range — Bad Boys are designed to maintain your current arrow flight, with minimal changes to the vertical point of impact inside 30 yards. Obviously, as shot distance increases to 40 yards and beyond, the impact of the sleeve weight on flight trajectory will become more noticeable, requiring sight pin adjustments based on your bow speed.

In addition to optimizing arrow performance for a specific application, Pro-Tracker’s Bad Boys also offer an easy, inexpensive and fun way to experiment with a wide variety of arrow weights and FOC percentages without having to constantly build new arrows. Since the sleeves are interchangeable and can be added and removed in moments, it is easy to take your favorite arrow and tinker with it on the range until you discover the perfect combination that achieves the best, most consistent accuracy for you and your bow.

Bad Boys come in 3-packs and are available in either black (standard) or custom colors based on sleeve weight. Pro-Tracker also offers Bad Boys for crossbows in weights of 200, 250 and 300 grains. **B**

— Editor Christian Berg

**BUSHNELL
CELLUCORE 20 SOLAR:**

EFFICIENT, EASY-TO-USE CELL SCOUTER

AS SUMMER transitions into fall, I really get excited about the process of placing my trail cameras out on the various properties I bowhunt.

I have a variety of cameras in my arsenal, from basic “economy” models I’ve had for years to higher-end cell cams that generate high-quality images, offer numerous settings options and provide a variety of intel I can use as I prepare for the season.

This year I opted to run Bushnell’s CelluCORE 20 Solar at my house, where I just so happen to have a few acres of hunt-able land. And, from the time I took it out of the box, I could see there was a lot to appreciate about this solar-powered cell cam. First off, it was absolutely one of the easiest cellular trail cameras I have ever set up. There were no issues with activation, no trouble acquiring a signal and no problems with the camera taking photos or transmitting images to the app — all of which have happened in the past with other models. To get started, you simply download the Bushnell app, register for an account, install the batteries, scan your camera’s QR code and away you go. The app walks you through everything — it’s that simple!

Although the CelluCORE 20 Solar has been on the market for a couple of years, Bushnell just added dual SIM connectivity, which essentially means the camera will connect to the strongest cellular network in the area in which the camera is located.

Two things that really jump out to me about the camera are the comprehensive instruction manual that comes with it and the Camera Status Indicator Guide on the operating panel. The indicator guide easily explains, via red, yellow and green indica-

tor lights, whether you have a fully functioning camera, with good signal strength and battery life, or if there are any issues. You also see, or get notified about, any issues on the app, making both great resources when you’re first setting up the camera or transitioning to a new location.

As far as camera highlights, you have to start with the solar panel, which charges an included lithium-ion battery. The big benefit to solar power, of course, is that it greatly reduces the number of times you need to head afield to change batteries or check on the camera, keeping your scent and disturbance minimal in your hunting area. A huge plus of Bushnell’s solar panel is that it’s detachable. If you get enough rays in the location where you set the camera, you can leave the panel attached. If not, you can remove it, attach the included connector cable and mount the panel to another location — using a mounting bracket — to ensure the battery charges. As a backup, the camera is also powered by 12 AA batteries.

Other features of the CelluCORE 20 Solar include a trigger speed of less than one second, high-output LEDs and an 80-foot range for nighttime images. For those who like to capture as much intel as possible — like when trying to pattern a certain buck — the camera records data such as temperature, wind direction, moon phase, barometric pressure and more.

As far as capturing photos and video, the CelluCORE 20 Solar takes high-quality, 20MP images that are transmitted to



\$179.99 / Bushnell
800-423-3537; bushnell.com

the app and videos that are saved to an SD card. It also has a Hybrid Mode, allowing you to take both photo and video when deer, elk, turkeys and other game show up. Other settings allow for changing image resolution, number of photos per camera triggering and video resolution and length. Plus, the CelluCORE 20 Solar provides the ability to adjust the flash for your specific setup, offering short- and long-range photo options, as well as a fast-motion option. The fast-motion setting increases shutter speed for the sharpest, clearest images, while the long-range mode results in a slower shutter speed, providing maximum flash range but blurrier nighttime images. If your camera overlooks a food plot or other area where game tends to congregate, you also can set the triggering interval anywhere from 5 seconds to 60 minutes to avoid capturing numerous, duplicate images of the same subject or subjects.

In regard to data transmission plans, both AT&T and Verizon monthly plans are available, but the first 30 days after you activate the camera are free from Bushnell. The camera also comes with a two-year limited warranty.

If you’re looking for a cell camera that’s easy to set up, simple to operate and, most importantly, provides a wealth of invaluable photos and data right to your phone, with the added bonus of not having to change batteries throughout the season, the CelluCORE 20 Solar is an excellent option! **B**

— Associate Editor Mark Demko



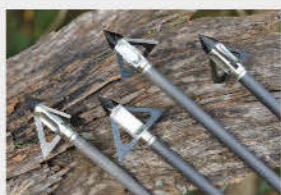
By **MARK DEMKO**

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THE TRADITION CONTINUES

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*Dead X Bowhunting;
deadxbowhunting.com*

Although Dead X founder John Stephen Smith passed away earlier this year, the family continues his tradition of producing lethal, high-quality broadheads, including the Slicer, Big Game 2, Big Game 3, and its latest addition, the Bloodflow. The Bloodflow is a 200-grain fixed blade available with a 1.25-inch or 1.5-inch cut in both right- and left-bevel. It's built on a solid steel ferrule, with .062-inch-thick, razor-sharp blades more than capable of dispatching deer, elk and other big game.



GAIN AN EDGE

\$89.99

TruFire; FeraDyne.com

The Edge FT release aid features an index-finger trigger that's located further up the barrel of the release, resulting in the ability to accommodate longer draws, enhanced comfort and increased accuracy. The new profile maximizes draw length by nearly one inch while allowing archers to still find their anchor point comfortably and easily. Release highlights include auto-closing trigger, customizable tension and travel adjustments, adjustable release length, leather buckle strap and TruFire's FoldBack design that lets you fold the release out of the way when not in use.

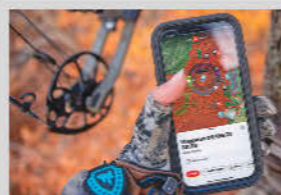


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UPPING THE SCOUTING GAME

\$99.99 ANNUALLY

onX Hunt; onxmaps.com/hunt

onX Hunt continues to roll out new features to help hunters get the most out of their scouting efforts. Among the recent additions are Optimal Wind, which allows you to set the best wind directions at your hunting spots and monitor from afar in real time; Tree Species Layers that let you see forest diversity; and regularly updated crop layers. If you live or hunt in Canada, onX has also expanded its coverage into the Great White North, with the ability to view hunting units, government lands and crop distribution.



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HARD-HITTING ASSASSIN

\$113 PER 3

*Vantage Point Archery;
vparchery.com*

The Omega Broadhead hits hard and keeps driving through your target for deadly results. Machined from S7 tool steel, this one-piece, single-bevel head serves up a 1½-inch cutting diameter while bringing the toughness of a double-bevel head. It also features LAYFLAT technology, making it easy to sharpen with a sharpening stone or sandpaper. The tanto tip cuts on contact, while the broadhead's wedge-shaped design keeps the wound channel open so the arrow can pass through easily. Currently available in 200-grain right- or left-bevel.



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Old Trapper; oldtrapper.com

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1) Paid/requested outside/county mail subscriptions stated on PS Form 3541	59,134	59,368
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e) Total Free Distribution	1,071	1,051
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a) Paid Electronic Copies	10,805	10,800
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Date 10/1/23. I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete. I understand that anyone who furnishes false or misleading information on this form or who omits material or information requested on the form may be subject to criminal sanctions (including fines and imprisonment) and/or civil sanctions (including civil penalties).

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By **EDDIE CLAYPOOL**

THE DIY GUY

A HAIR'S BREADTH

A good hunt goes horribly bad.

I'D ARRIVED in the Gila country of southwestern New Mexico a day earlier. The year was 1998, and I was strong, virile and passionate about bowhunting elk. There were big bulls in this country, and I intended to wrap my tag around a big set of antlers sometime within the next couple of weeks. Donning my backpack, heavy with a week's provisions, I began heading deep into wilderness country.

A few hours later, as I spread my one-man tent on a saddle of the Mogollon Rim, seemingly endless, roadless country spread out all around me. Grabbing some water from a nearby spring, a pot of soup was soon simmering, and my mind was wondering, *Where were the big guys at?* With the rut just starting, could I find the old, bachelor bulls as they began to roam in search of cows? Would they be on the ridges or in the deep canyons? I would start answering those questions tomorrow.

Awakening well before daylight, I slipped out of my tent and headed afield. Slowly making my way down the high, meandering ridge I was on, good moonlight made the trek pleasant. No more than a mile from my spike camp, a distant bugle reached my ears. Waiting for another sound, a second bugle soon followed from deep in a canyon. I winced at the location —



that was going to require a fair investment of sweat equity to explore. Never one to back down from a challenge, I headed steeply downhill as the sun broke the eastern horizon.

Making sure to hit the canyon bottom well below the bull, the thermals were now in my favor. Working my way toward the area where I'd last heard the bull, a small creek I paralleled chattered at my intrusion. Thinking that I was probably getting fairly close to where the bugle had come from, movement caught my eye. Glancing to my left, a large mule deer buck stood motionless, staring directly at me. The moment I saw the unexpected prize, my interest in elk faded. This velvet-antlered monster was clearly a trophy worthy of pursuit. And since I had a deer tag in my pocket, I instantly became a mule deer hunter. The buck was alerted to my presence but hadn't yet become overly concerned. I wondered whether the animal had ever seen a human in its lifetime.

For the next few moments, I slowly still-hunted a semi-circle around the meandering buck. Finally getting within 40 yards, I decided to try for a shot. Just as I drew my bow, a tremendous crashing commenced off to my right. Quickly looking that direction, I saw the massive antlers of a bull elk flashing through the timber; I'd bumped into my original quarry! Hur-

riedly looking back toward the muley buck, I spotted him quickly disappearing into the wilderness. Dang it, I'd just rained on my entire parade!

Deciding I'd go back to camp to regroup, I headed steeply uphill. Having lost about 2,000 vertical feet in my morning descent, it was now time to pay the price of admission. A massive thunderstorm came rolling across the Mogollon Rim; lightning flashed and rain poured. Having left camp without rainwear, I was drenched. With ice-cold water running down my back, I toiled uphill. Soon, I realized I'd gotten myself into a bad situation. I was running out of energy, fast.

For the next few hours, I toiled uphill toward my distant camp. My body was becoming hypothermic, and I had no food to stoke my furnace. By evening, I was entering a foggy, out-of-body experience. Slow of movement and mind, I was shutting down; I could only stagger uphill a few yards at a time. As the sun set, I knew I was going to die that night. Turning to the only hope I had left, I asked God to help me.

Later, in absolute blackness, I found myself crawling through the black timber, desperate for a way out of my situation. My hand felt a strange object, and I slowly realized it was one of the strings on my tent's rain-fly.

Crawling inside, I passed out. I had just dodged death by a hair's breadth. **E**

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LOOK WHO'S COMING TO OUTDOOR CHANNEL

Now celebrating its 20th Year as a national TV show, *BuckVentures* has found a new home — on Outdoor Channel. Hunting icon Jeff Danker, along with family and friends, will continue the show's well-earned legacy with an action-packed lineup of world-class, fair chase hunts.

THURSDAYS
7:30^{PM} ET


Outdoor

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A photograph of three hunters on horseback, viewed from behind, standing on a rocky ridge. The hunter in the foreground is on a white horse, the middle on a light-colored horse, and the third on a brown horse. They are all wearing camouflage gear and have bows mounted on their backs. The background shows a vast, hilly landscape under a clear sky.

MORE THAN A BOW.™



A close-up photograph of two Hoyt bows. The bow on the left is a Carbon RX-7, featuring a dark, textured frame. The bow on the right is a VTM, featuring a light-colored, possibly wood-grain or carbon-fiber, frame. Both bows are shown from the side, highlighting their complex pulley systems and limbs.

Either way, you're about to make the right choice.

When bowhunters ask, what bow should I choose? Carbon or aluminum? Our answer is simple: it's in your hands. Nothing will tell you more than shooting a Carbon RX-7 or VTM for yourself. Both flagship bows are smoother, quieter, and more dead in hand than any bows we've ever built. And they're even quieter with In-Line™ accessories. Either way, tags will be filled. Shoot both at your local Hoyt dealer and learn more at Hoyt.com.

CARBON RX-7

VTM

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