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GAME & FISH



WEST

The Regional Outdoor Guide

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NOVEMBER 2021

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MULEYS**

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**LATE-SEASON
BULLS**

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+ HEAD TO MONTANA FOR
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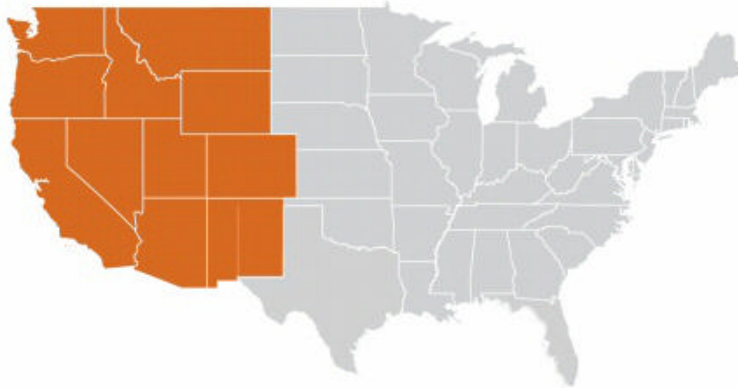
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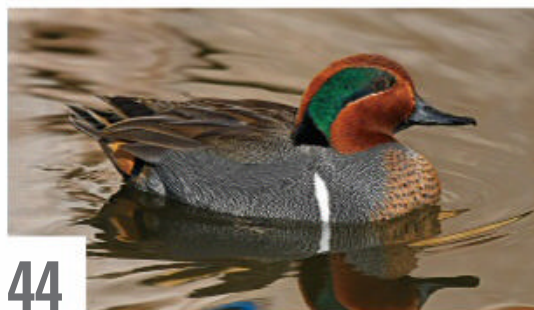
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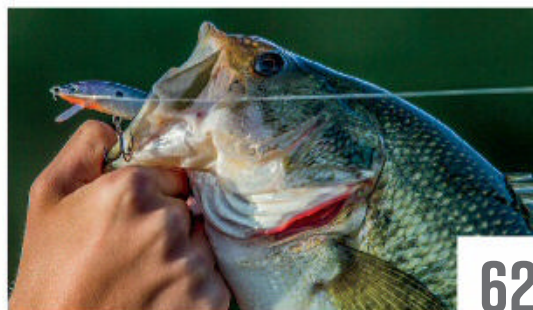
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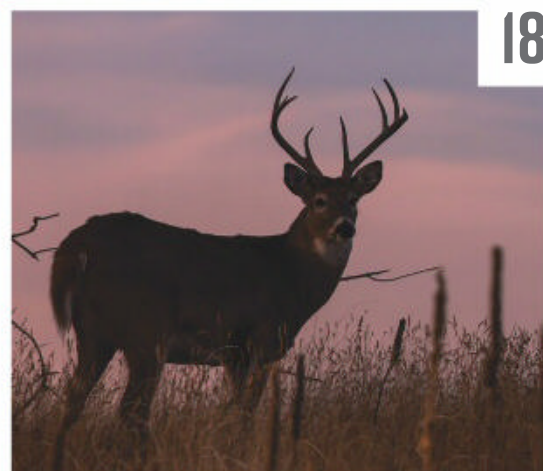
There are only 30 short days in November. Make the most of them by sticking to this plan.

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Our behavior in the field shows how we really feel about wildlife and other resources.

By Andrew McKean



DECADES OF DEPENDABILITY FOR THE ROAD AHEAD



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STRETCHING NOVEMBER

I was about halfway up the tree in my climber when I heard sticks breaking in the cedar thicket to my left. Light was a good 45 minutes away, so all I could do was pause my ascent and listen. A few more sharp cracks were followed by a series of hollow thumps. It was the first week of November, and it sure sounded like a buck was chasing a doe over there in those cedars.

The noise continued during the next half-hour as I finished the climb, pulled my flintlock into the stand and settled in. Then the woods went quiet, and there was no more cracking or thumping or rustling. As soon as legal shooting time arrived, I checked to be sure I could see the muzzleloader's sights, primed its pan and blew a few short grunts from the tube hanging around my neck.

Almost immediately sticks started breaking in the thicket again. It was obvious something was coming my way, and I had a pretty good idea what it was. Light yellow tines confirmed my prediction when the buck emerged from the cedars 25 yards away. The wide 8-pointer was on a stiff-legged march right to the tree in which I was perched.

I didn't like the straight-on, downward angle from the stand, so I nervously waited for the buck to turn—a movement he didn't make until he was mere steps from my tree. Now walking directly away, the buck still didn't present a shot I was comfortable taking with my flintlock. I watched his sauntering gait over the top of the gun's sights, hoping he would turn and give me a chance.

At about 35 yards he paused and shifted his body, almost like he was looking over his shoulder to make sure he hadn't missed something. It was enough to open up a good path to his vitals. The round ball entered near his last rib, passed through his lungs and continued into his lower neck. When I recovered him at the end of a 70-yard blood trail, I still couldn't believe how quickly the buck had responded to my grunts.

That's the rut—or more precisely, the pre-rut. With bucks cruising and chasing and fighting and grunting, it's hard to imagine a more exciting time to be in the woods.

If you put whitetails above all other game, November is your favorite month of the year. And as is true for most good times, it doesn't last. November is over too soon. Tony Hansen laments this in his "Bowhunting" column on page 18 and offers ways to squeeze every possible minute of hunting time out of this month. November is fun not only because action can come quick, but also because you can make that action happen. Calling and decoying are exciting tactics, and we're featuring a series of "Crash Course" videos from Mark Kayser on our website to give you tips on how to best use these strategies. See page 6 for a QR code that will take you directly to these videos.

Enjoy November while it's here. Find ways to stretch your hunting time, even if it's less than an hour. If you're in the woods, you're in the game.

Adam Heggenstaller
Editorial Director

GAME & FISH

The Regional Outdoor Guide

PUBLISHER

Michael F. X. Cassidy

EDITORIAL

EDITORIAL DIRECTOR

Adam Heggenstaller
Adam.Heggenstaller@outdoorsg.com

EDITOR

John Taranto
John.Taranto@outdoorsg.com

REGIONAL EDITORS

Dr. Todd A. Kuhn
Drew Warden

ONLINE CONTENT EDITOR

Scott Bernarde

ART DIRECTOR

Brian Judge

ASSISTANT ART DIRECTOR

Andrew Tuchscherer

PRODUCTION

PRODUCTION MANAGER

Melissa Williams
Melissa.Williams@outdoorsg.com

ADVERTISING

NATIONAL ENDEMIC AD SALES

VP, Endemic Sales

Michael Savino
Mike.Savino@outdoorsg.com

Jim McConville | (440) 791-7017
James.McConville@outdoorsg.com

WESTERN REGION

Hutch Looney
Hutch@HLooney.com

MARINE/FISHING ADVERTISING

Michael Cassidy | (407) 625-0992
Michael.Cassidy@outdoorsg.com

MIDWESTERN REGION

Mark Thiffault | (720) 630-9863
Mark.Thiffault@outdoorsg.com

NATIONAL AD SALES

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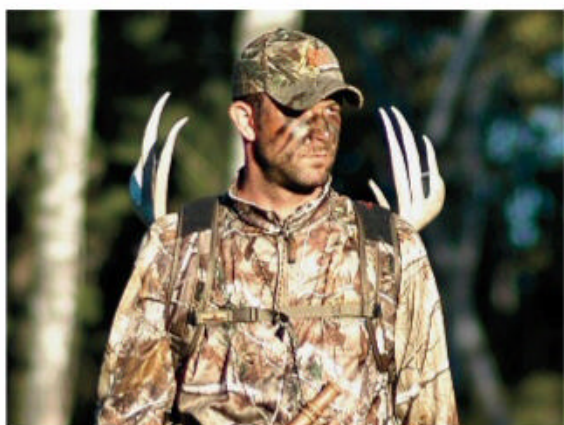
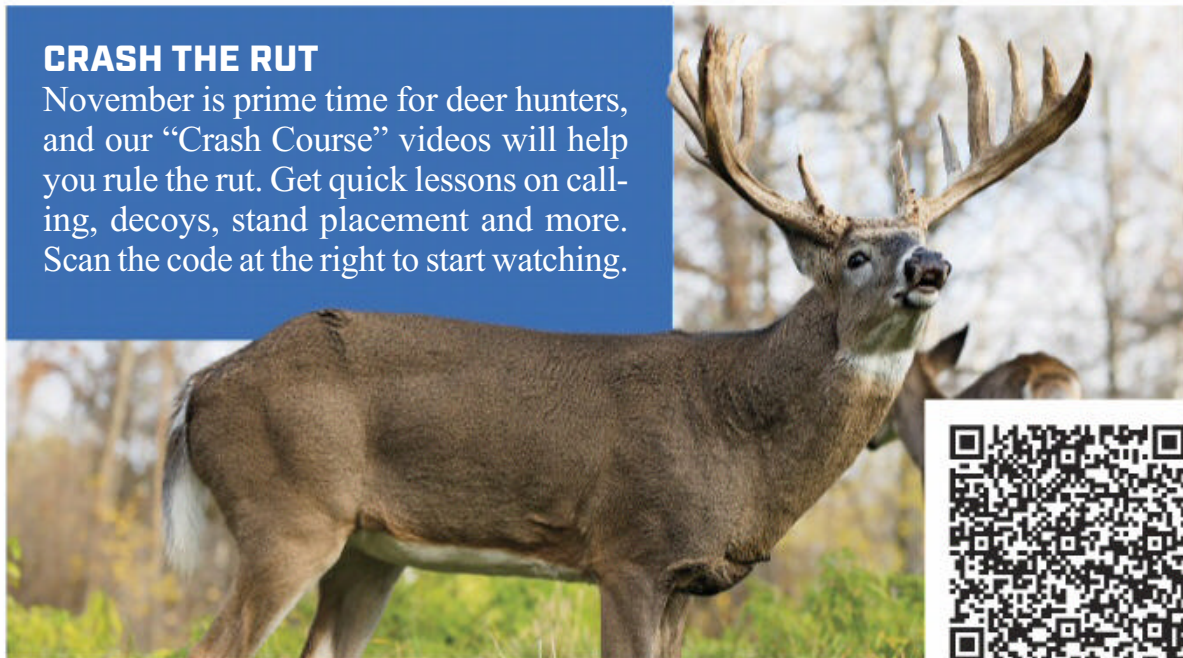
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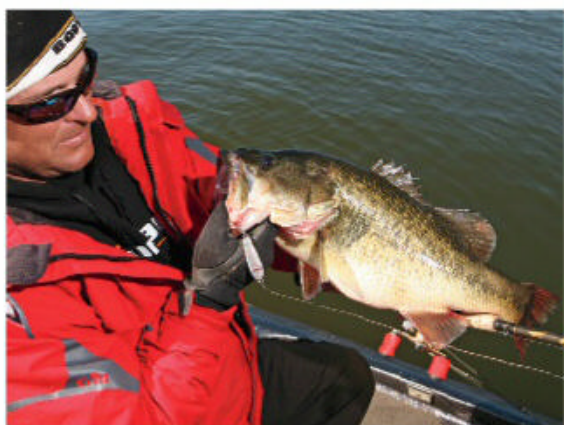
CRASH THE RUT

November is prime time for deer hunters, and our “Crash Course” videos will help you rule the rut. Get quick lessons on calling, decoys, stand placement and more. Scan the code at the right to start watching.



PACK IT RIGHT

There are essential items every hunter needs in the woods. Use this checklist, “10 Things to Keep in Your Deer Pack at All Times,” to make sure you’re set.



BRISK BASS

Bass are still biting, and our how-to articles explain ways to catch ’em as temps drop. Pull down to “Bass” under “Fishing” on our homepage for tips.



HUNTER-FRIENDLY FEATURES

Catch all 12 episodes of our “Beyond the Rifle” series, where Editorial Director Adam Hegginstaller takes an in-depth look at the Benelli Lupo’s innovations.



BEST DEER RIFLES

It’s never too early or too late to be thinking about a new gun. See some of the top options for hunters in “Best New Deer Rifles for 2021.”

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**CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER,
PUBLISHING & BRANDED MEDIA**
Mike Carney

EVP, GROUP PUBLISHER & OPERATIONS
Derek Sevcik

VP, CONSUMER MARKETING
Peter Watt

VP, MANUFACTURING
Deb Daniels

SENIOR DIRECTOR, PRODUCTION
Connie Mendoza

DIRECTOR, PUBLISHING TECHNOLOGY
Kyle Morgan

SENIOR CREATIVE DIRECTOR
Tim Neher

DIRECTOR, DIGITAL EDITORIAL
Jeff Phillips

For questions regarding digital editions,
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CONTRIBUTIONS: Contact Drew Warden at Drew.Warden@outdoorsg.com for writer’s guidelines. The Publisher assumes no responsibility for loss or damage to unsolicited material.

GAME & FISH MAGAZINE EDITORIAL OFFICE
6385 Flank Drive, Suite 800, Harrisburg, PA 17112
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NOVEMBER 2021													
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DECEMBER 2021													
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—	2:42	3:06	3:30	3:54	4:18	4:42	5:06	5:30	5:54	6:18	6:42	7:06	7:30

The moon's phases are listed as New, First Quarter (First Q), Full, and Last Quarter (Last Q). Times listed represent the peak activity times for game and fish each day.

Best Days	Good Days	Fair Days
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LOADED FOR DEER

**LEAD-CORE BULLETS
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POPULAR BIG GAME.**

By Richard Mann

Some years ago I participated in a cull hunt for whitetail deer on a large property in Texas. The other hunters and I were shooting Remington R-25 rifles chambered in .308 Win., and we were provided with 168-grain Barnes VOR-TX ammunition. This was more than enough gun for 70- to 170-pound deer, but the first day of shooting was disastrous. Most of the deer were hit well but ran 100-plus yards into thick brush that was polluted with rattlesnakes.

One hunter suggested the Barnes bullets were not expanding, but I knew that was not the case. Mono-metal bullets like those loaded in the VOR-TX ammo expand after passing through only a couple inches of ballistic gelatin.

We needed to make a change, and fortunately one hunter had a case of 168-grain Hornady Zombie Max ammo.

The Z-Max bullets used in this load were a conventional cup-and-core design with a lead core and polymer tip. I suggested we make the switch, and when we did, we started dropping deer instantly. The ones that ran after the shot made it only 15 to 30 yards. Both bullets killed deer, but the lead-core Z-Max bullets put them down faster.

The following year I was conducting bullet experiments at the Barnes facility and ran a test. Various bullets were fired into an 8-inch block of ballistic gelatin at a range of 100 yards, and the amount of energy deposited inside the block was calculated by measuring the bullet's velocity as it exited the offside of the block. On average, mono-metal bullets like the Barnes TSX dumped about 50 percent of their energy inside the gel block. Cup-and-core bullets dumped 70 percent or more of their energy.

The mono-metal bullets had about the same recovered diameter as the lead-core bullets, but they did not shed any weight. They penetrated about 40 percent deeper than lead-core bullets. In contrast, the lead-core bullets lost about 30 percent to 50 percent of their weight and created more impressive wound cavities due to the material transfer. That's why we were able to put deer down quicker on that cull hunt with the lead-core Zombie Max ammunition.

When you cull more than 100 deer in three days, and then back it up with empirical testing, you learn stuff. You can have either deep penetration or massive tissue damage, but not both. When deer hunters use high-velocity big-game cartridges with muzzle velocities below 3,000 fps—cartridges like the .243 Win. and .308 Win. or the 6.5 Creedmoor and 7mm-08 Rem.—they are

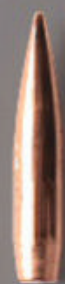


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better served with lead-core bullets that expand widely, dump lots of energy and create profound wound cavities through material transfer. Ammo manufacturers know this, too, and its why we now have an assortment of loads that have been ideally adapted for deer hunting.

Mono-metal or bonded bullets make sense for deer hunting if you're using a cartridge that produces an extremely high velocity, like the .300 Win. Mag., or a small-caliber cartridge like the .223 Rem. High impact velocities necessitate bullets that hold together, and small-diameter, lightweight bullets need to retain their weight to facilitate necessary penetration. (Of course, another reason to use mono-metal bullets for deer is if you're hunting in a state or area that mandates non-lead projectiles.) For most of the common deer-hunting cartridges, turn to the deer-specific, cup-and-core loads for the best performance.

Here's a look at four loads that have all been crafted to deliver in the deer woods. One is new, two have been with us for a few years, and another is likely older than you are. Regardless of their age, all these loads have one thing in common. They are designed to drop deer through the application of dynamic lead-core expansion, which results in significant amounts of intensive energy transfer.

NORMA WHITETAIL



Norma has a storied reputation when it comes to manufacturing precision ammunition, and the company's bonded Oryx bullet is a legendary worldwide big-game bullet. Now Norma offers a line of ammunition specifically intended for whitetail deer, and it utilizes a bullet of traditional construction with a lead core encased in a thin jacket. This allows the bullet to deliver maximum energy transfer. Inside 100 yards,

expect about 16 inches of penetration and double-diameter expansion with around 60 percent weight retention. This is ideal terminal performance to put deer down and keep them there.

WINCHESTER DEER SEASON XP



The Deer Season XP line from Winchester delivers terminal performance very similar to that of the Norma Whitetail line. But Winchester gets that performance a bit differently. The Extreme Point bullet has a large polymer tip to help initiate dramatic expansion and improve down-range flight characteristics. Behind that tip is an alloyed lead core surrounded by a tapered jacket. These bullets deliver massive wound cavities, extreme energy dump and moderate penetration, which is just what deer hunters need.

HORNADY AMERICAN WHITETAIL



These deer-specific loads use the InterLock bullet that made Hornady famous. The InterLock has a one-piece lead core that's locked into the tapered jacket via a raised, internal ring. Penetration is on the moderate side and wound cavities are large due to generous expansion. At

woods ranges, InterLock bullets will retain 65 percent to 70 percent of their weight and dump 70 percent to 75 percent of their energy during the first 8 inches of penetration, while pushing to about double that depth.

REMINGTON CORE-LOKT



The Remington Core-Lokt has been a go-to deer bullet for more than 80 years. It's often called "the deadliest mushroom in the woods" for a reason. The bullet's cup-and-core design has a soft lead core that expands wide, sheds material and transfers as much as 75 percent of its energy through only 8 inches of penetration. There's nothing new about the Core-Lokt and there doesn't need to be. While it may not sound as sexy as some of the more modern loads, it's been dropping deer for almost a century. 



Although these four loads are vastly different, the terminal performance their bullets deliver on deer is similar in that it's primarily driven by high energy transfer. Loads that anchor deer quickly include, from top to bottom: Norma Whitetail, Winchester Deer Season XP, Hornady American Whitetail and Remington Core-Lokt.



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STRAIGHT SPEED

As the name suggests, straight-pull bolt-action rifles require only a linear, back-and-forth motion to cycle the bolt. A straight-pull bolt need not be rotated to move lugs in and out of recesses during cycling. Pulling the handle straight backward removes the bolt from battery, and pushing it directly forward achieves lockup.

While straight-pull rifles need just two bolt movements to cycle a round, traditional turn-bolt actions need four. (Lift the bolt handle to rotate the lugs out of lock-up, pull the bolt fully to the rear to eject the spent cartridge, push the bolt forward until it stops to chamber a fresh round, and then lower the bolt handle to engage the lugs and achieve lock-up.) This makes straight-pull rifles, such as the Savage Impulse, faster to cycle. Plus, all the movement stays on one plane parallel to the bore.

Bearing Down

The key to the Impulse's straight-pull action is Savage's Hexlock bolt, which relies on six ball bearings encircling the bolt head, rather than square-shouldered lugs, for

lockup. When the Impulse's bolt handle is pushed fully forward and the bolt is closed, a plunger inside the bolt body forces the ball bearings outward. The bearings lock into a recess machined in the barrel extension.

When a round is fired and pressure against the bolt head increases, the bearings tighten to provide greater lockup strength for safety. Savage tested the Hexlock bolt with magnum and high-pressure cartridges, and it is capable of handling both. After the pressure subsides, pulling back on the bolt handle causes the interior plunger to recede and release the ball bearings from their recess, enabling the bolt to travel to the rear and eject the case.

Handling It

A series of cams inside the bolt body near the root of the bolt handle control the movement of the plunger. These cams are actuated by the back-and-forth movement of the handle, keeping all the motion needed to cycle the bolt in a straight line. The bolt handle does rotate, but its rotation is on a plane parallel to the receiver and the bore instead of roughly perpendicular to it, as with conventional turn-

bolt actions. The Impulse's rotary bolt handle works with the cam system to provide a mechanical advantage during cycling.

Because of this rotation, the bolt handle can be placed in five different positions that change its angle relative to the shooter. The bolt handle can also be moved to the left side of the gun in about a minute with no special tools required. Although Savage currently offers Impulse rifles with the ejection port on the right side only, left-handed shooters nonetheless get a rifle that they can set up to cycle with their dominant hand, without having to reach over the stock.

Fitting Changes

Savage combines the straight-pull action with a composite stock featuring the AccuFit system, which permits shooters to change both length of pull and comb height to fit individual builds. This is important because a gun that fits is easier to cycle efficiently and with less effort, which also contributes to speed. Follow-up shots can save the day, and the Savage Impulse's design makes those shots come quickly when they are needed. ■

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IT'S ABOUT TIME



When rut activity repeatedly occurs out of range, don't hesitate to carefully and quietly move a stand closer to the action.

HERE'S A PLAN FOR MAKING THE MOST OF EVERY DAY, HOUR AND MINUTE OF NOVEMBER.

By Tony Hansen

If I believed in genies, I know what one of my three wishes would be. I'd wish that November was the month that lasted the span of six. I wouldn't be too greedy. I'd want to keep April and May for turkeys, June, July and August for smallmouth fishing, and December for holidays. The rest, November.

There is, without exception, no month finer than that one when it comes to hunting whitetails. Sure, the end of the month can get a bit slow and bowhunters have to work their way around some orange from time to time, but those are small concessions to make for such a grand experience.

I love hunting in November, but I hate how fast the month seems to fly by. Take advantage of every single minute. But how? There's work to do, tasks to complete, kids to care for, family to appease. Let's have a conversation about time management and, more specifically, time maximization.

HUNT EVERY MINUTE YOU CAN ...

For much of deer season, your efforts should be focused on those magical hours just after sunrise and just before sunset. During November, however, when the rut hangs thick in the air, midday hunts can be highly effective. I have killed mature bucks during the middle of the day and have had plenty of other encounters that didn't result in a filled tag.

When November finally arrives, I'll be in the woods as many hours of daylight as I can. It's simple math, really. If you typically hunt about three hours in the morning and another three in the evening, you've stacked up six hours of hunting in a day. Now, if you're able to say put and in the woods during the midday, you'll easily add another four hours to the total. Your odds of tagging a good buck are higher when you log more hours in the areas they live. Even if the midday hours are less than ideal for deer activity, there is some during the rut. Those hours count.

This is a tactic that actually seems to be more productive as the month wanes. In my opinion, it's a matter of doe availability. In early November, there are more does ready to breed than later in the month. There are still plenty of bucks willing and able, but fewer does for them to pursue. This creates competition. Competition creates more frantic and frequent movement by bucks, which leads to more midday cruising than at any other time of the year.

... BUT DON'T MAKE IT A CHORE

I've just recommended that you hunt all day in November as often as you can. It's sound advice, but it's also advice I struggle to take.

If I'm not seeing deer on a semi-regular basis, I'm going to get bored and I'm going to struggle to stay in place. Thus I've become a master of the "almost all-day" sit. It looks something like this.

I'll be on stand, ready to go well before daylight. I'm hunting deer that

RYAN YODER



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are pretty wise to the ways of hunters. They tend to head toward bed early, even during the rut, and they'll often wait until very late morning to start sniffing around. They're used to hunters leaving around 10 or 10:30. I think those deer feel more secure as the clock approaches 11:30, and that's when they start cruising doe bedding areas. I want to be in the woods then so I typically stay until 12:30 or 1 o'clock.

Then, if action is slow and I'm starting to get fidgety, I hop out of my stand and head for my truck. I like to eat and so I make my midday meal one I look forward to. It might be a favorite sub from a local shop I've stashed in the cooler, or maybe I'll head to a drive-through if one is nearby.

As I eat, I'll listen to a podcast or, if the cell signal is strong enough, stream a favorite hunting video from YouTube. The point is to take a short break, try to fully relax and enjoy the experience.

I'll use the dashboard vent to dry gloves and socks, or throw on dry pairs. I'll often swap out my sweatshirt for a new one, maybe even change jackets. The goal is to do what it takes to feel renewed, because fresh energy and a shot of anticipation of what the coming hours might bring is all I need to power through the rest of the day.

Typically, I'll be back in the woods in 60 to 90 minutes. I'm still hunting longer than in September or October, but I'm doing so in a manner that I enjoy. If you can pull off a true all-dayer, do it. If you can't, do what it takes in order to spend as much time in the woods as possible.

PLAY THE SHORT GAME

If you live in an area that has adopted the annoyance of Daylight Savings Time you understand fully just how tough it can be to hunt after work once the clocks are rolled forward. Where it once was getting dark at 7:40, it's now lights out at 6:30.

For me, that used to mean an end to after-work outings. Not so much anymore. Now, if I can make it into a stand with more than, say, 30 minutes of legal shooting time left, I'm going. This is particularly true in November.

When the rut is on and bucks are moving, you can fill a tag in the blink of an eye. Take advantage of that. I have a couple of stands set for these super-short outings. My goal is to get from my place



Cruising bucks appear suddenly when the rut is on, and even a short hunt during the last 30 minutes of light can produce.

of work and into a treestand as quickly as I can. These stands are located where an easy entry is possible. They may not be the best locations on the property, but they're in areas that allow me to get set up quickly and have a reasonable chance of scoring. For these setups, I like to have good to excellent visibility in at least three directions. This allows me to call to bucks that might be out of range. With so little time to hunt, I'm aggressive. I'll call to bucks I see and often throw in blind calling as well.

It's true you run the risk of bumping deer when you have to arrive late. However, the odds of killing a buck are infinitely higher when you actually hunt than when you forfeit those last few minutes of daylight.

DON'T BE AFRAID TO MOVE

When you have limited time to spend on stand during the best month of the year, you can't afford to waste a single minute in a setup that has minimal odds of producing a shot. I'm not in the woods to watch deer. I'm there to hunt them. When I see deer, particularly bucks that are clearly cruising for hot does, pass by out of range, I do not hesitate to climb down and move my stand location.

I've hung hundreds, maybe thousands, of stands over the years. I can do it quickly and quietly, partly because I'm fussy about the stands and climbing sticks I use. I want quality pieces that hang easily, and I want them to be comfortable.

I've owned untold numbers of cheap stands over the years. They were a pain to set up, a pain to haul around and not worth the savings. Today, I use only cast-aluminum stands (think Novix, Lone Wolf, etc.) and sections of climbing sticks. With that combination, I can get up just about any tree in a hurry.

STAY READY

I used to have a ton of gear, and it was typically scattered around my house, office and barn. Then I decided to rebel against the notion of excess and severely purged my bowhunting gear down to just what fits in a single plastic tote. That tote is in my truck throughout the month of November along with my bow. No more searching around willy-nilly for a needed item. No more wasting time by driving home after work to grab gear.

I know exactly where everything is at all times. It takes me almost no time at all to grab the tote, throw on hunting clothes, pick up my bow and hit the woods. If I happen to get out of work a bit early, I'm ready to go because I have everything I need with me. The last thing I want to do is waste time. Planning ahead is nice, but when I get an unexpected opportunity to hunt in November, I want to take full advantage of it. By keeping everything I need to hunt in my truck, I'm able to minimize my time getting ready and maximize my time in the woods. 🏹

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HINDQUARTER HANDIWORK

PROCESSING **THE REAR LEGS OF A DEER** MAY SEEM DAUNTING, BUT THESE TIPS **MAKE PRIME CUTS COME EASY.**

By Drew Warden

Most hunters know how to remove choice cuts like the backstraps and tenderloins from deer. Fewer are as familiar with the legs, particularly the hindquarters. This is a shame, as the rear legs offer fantastic cuts fit for various cooking styles. They're also not as difficult to break down as many perceive.

First, if possible, hang the deer at least a day or two in cool temperatures to allow rigor mortis to subside. Also consider dry-aging before butchering. Done correctly in safe temperatures (33 to 40 degrees), it yields more tender and flavorful meat.

When it's time to start cutting, use an area that provides ample space for the

hindquarter and your tools. Consider a curved, semi-stiff boning knife and a straight, more flexible fillet knife for separating connective tissue and trimming. You also want a large cutting board, gloves, paper towels, a meat-storage container and plastic sheeting to cover the work surface and make cleanup easier.

There are two main ways to butcher a hindquarter: by removing the leg bone before separating the cuts or by taking individual cuts directly off the bone. Both are correct and often involve simply separating muscles along natural seams of connective tissue. I do better when removing the bone first, so I'll focus on that method.



SEAL THE DEAL

Should you use an external or a chamber vacuum sealer for meat storage?

The most common vacuum-sealing device is the external vacuum sealer. Place the open end of a sealer bag into a tray, clamp the lid down and suck air out of the bag. The other option is a chamber vacuum sealer. The entire bag goes inside the machine, and the sealer removes all air within the chamber—inside and outside the bag.

External vacuum sealers are inexpensive, and their design permits sealing larger cuts of meats. Chamber vacs excel at sealing liquids and other moist items. They're great for marinating meats or for sous vide applications. They require more money upfront and are less portable.



With adjustable seal time and vacuum settings, and an integrated bag roll holder and cutter, the **MEAT! Pro External Vacuum Sealer**, left, (\$179.99; meatyourmaker.com) ups any hunter's meat-preservation game. It's also equipped with a removable drip tray for easy cleanup. For the hunter who freezes lots of meat or seals liquids often, there's the **MEAT! Chamber Vacuum Sealer**, right (\$799.99). This one also has adjustable seal time and vacuum settings, as well as a manual seal time mode. If you want professional-quality sealing, this is the ticket.

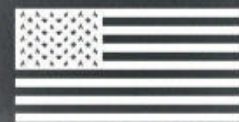


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THE PROCESS

Step 1

Remove any hair, dirt, blood-shot and excess fat on the skinned hindquarter. All can contaminate meat and negatively affect flavor. Removing fat also helps reveal lines of connective tissue you'll use to separate muscle groups.

Step 2

Remove the shank by slicing along the sinew lines between it and the round. Do this on both sides of the hindquarter with the tip of a boning knife. Cut the ligament opposite the shank. Then work the knife tip gently around the joint at the knee (not sawing at the bone) while using your offhand to move and apply pressure to the joint. Slowly, you'll separate the shank from the round without needing a saw. If intended for grinding or stews, remove the shank meat from the bone.

Step 3

Set the round down with the inside facing up. The femur's ball should be visible. Starting here, make a straight, shallow cut along the nearby seam down to the

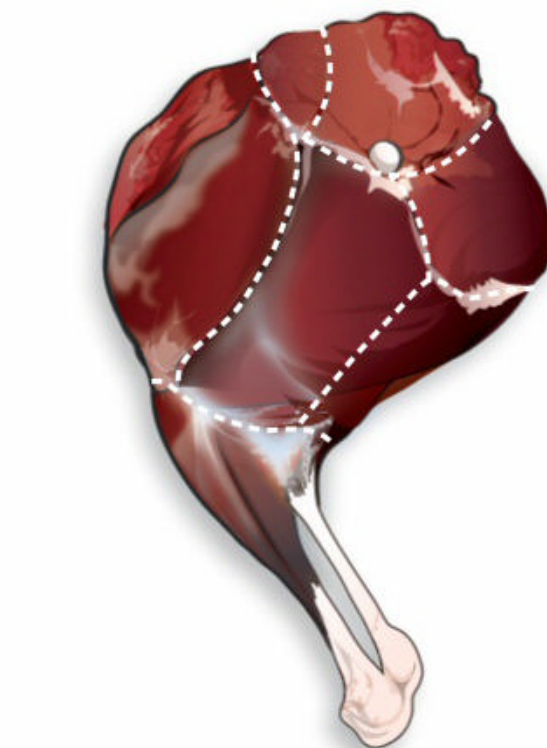
kneecap. You should feel the femur running beneath the tip of your knife.

Step 4

Cut on both sides of the kneecap and pull the meat back with your free hand. Continue cutting to expose the length of the femur. Work the blade tight around the bone's contours, alternating cuts along both sides. Keep the blade flat against the curve of the bone, and don't cut into the meat below. While holding the kneecap up with your offhand, cut below it and along the femur toward the ball until the entire bone is clear and comes free.

Step 5

Pull the round apart with your hands. The still-connected individual cuts should lay flat on the cutting board in front of you. You'll see a mass of connective tissue with a particularly thick concentration near the center of the round. Inside is a gland, which you should carefully remove by trimming the surrounding connective tissue. Left in place, it can taint the meat.



Step 6

Separate the cuts along connective tissue lines with your hands and knife tip. Seams are evident, so let nature be your guide. You should never have to cut into muscle. Trim excess fat and sinew, but leave the silverskin that surrounds muscles to protect meat during freezing. Leave cuts large to avoid exposing more meat to air.

THE CUTS

Larger cuts include the top and bottom rounds, eye of round and sirloin tip. You also have the sirloin butt (rump), tri-tip and shank. All are great in their own ways.

Top and Bottom Rounds

Pulled from the deer's hamstring area, these cuts are quite versatile. They're tender enough for cutting into steaks and hardy enough for making roasts or enduring low-and-slow cooking methods, like smoking or braising. Cube them into kabobs or slice thin for jerky or stir-fry. Or butterfly and pound them out for chicken-fried steak or jagerschnitzel.

Eye of Round

Called the hidden tenderloin because of its appearance, many cook them similarly. Pan-sear or grill whole, or as medallions. It's also good as jerky or fajita meat, or it can be cured.

Sirloin Tip

Also called the sirloin, football or knuckle, the sirloin tip is tougher than

the rounds but still makes great steaks, especially on young or aged deer. It's perfect for a roast. Or it can be smoked, braised, ground up or turned into jerky.

Tri-Tip

A well-known beef cut, the tri-tip is mostly overlooked on venison hindquarters because of its small size and how it blends in with the sirloin tip. It's great for flash-searing. Like tenderloins, lean toward rare and medium rare.

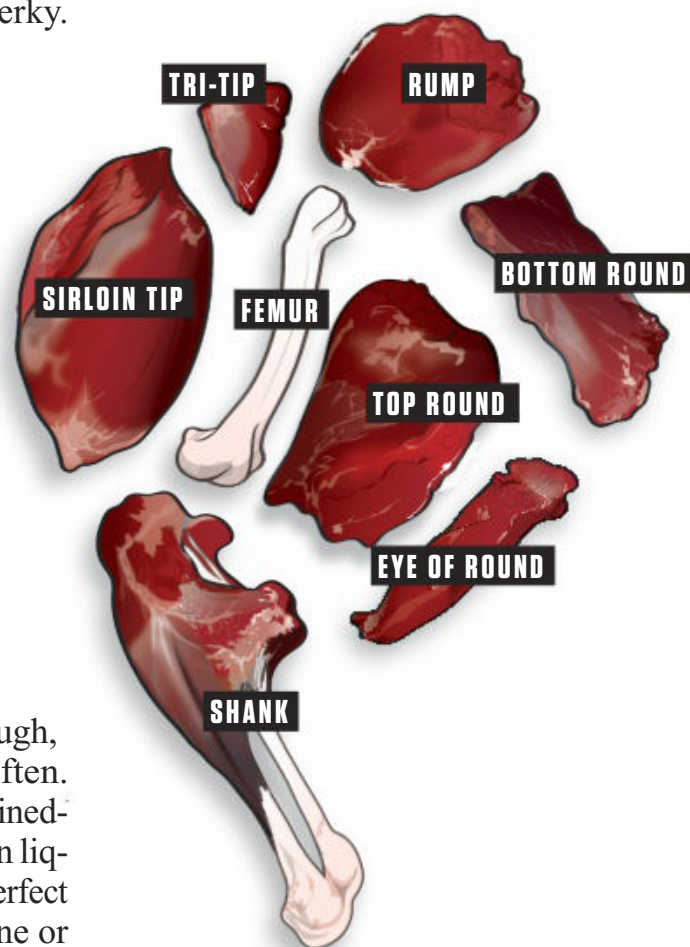
Sirloin Butt (Rump)

This cut's size depends on how well you removed the hindquarter. It's often small and used for pot roast, stew or grinding meat.

Shanks

Shanks get a bad rap. They're tough, sinewy muscles that deer use often. Cooked improperly, they're almost inedible. Cooked right—low and slow in liquid—they're delicious. Shanks are perfect for osso bucco, braising on the bone or

simmering in a broth to produce succulent stew meat. 



SITUATIONAL ETHICS



WE MUST APPLY STANDARDS OF CONDUCT WHEN NOBODY IS LOOKING.

By Andrew McKean

Let's call him Clay. He was a senior colleague and one of my mentors in thinking about hunters' obligations to wildlife. He could hold a room in rapt attention as he discussed the finer points of our North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. He could wax eloquent over a campfire about the spiritual connection between humans and wild animals.

He was also an occasional hunting partner. So, when he took a snap-shot at a running mule deer buck, I was surprised. But then when Clay refused to follow up on his "miss" to confirm there was no evidence of a hit, I was irked.

"Probably just a flesh wound, if anything," he rationalized.

I had been taught to confirm every shot at an animal, even when it appeared to

be a clean miss. To Clay's consternation, I hiked the couple hundred yards to the spot and found shards of bone, a swatch of hair, and enough blood and meat to confirm what I had seen in my binocular. Clay had hit the buck, probably low in the front shoulder. I walked back with the news.

"Let's keep moving. There's more where that one came from," Clay said. "That's the reward of good management."

That incident remains so clear because it's one of the starkest examples of the disconnect between the abstractions of conservation and the real-world application of it. We talk a lot about "fair chase" and "ethical harvest," but those are just squishy ideas unless they're implemented in the field.

Your state's hunting regulations will let you know in exhaustive detail what is illegal. The unwritten rules that guide interactions between us sportsmen and -women are even more extensive. But we also must follow the silent commandments of conservation, one of which is to keep the welfare of animals we hunt as a top priority. Another equally powerful commandment: exercise restraint.

ETHICS IN PRACTICE

I'll give you a few examples of how this plays out in the field. Obviously, Clay's unconcern for injuring that deer is a stark reminder that we should do everything in our ability not to inflict needless pain and suffering on wildlife, but sometimes the lines governing our behavior get fuzzy.

Take party hunting. In my home state of Montana, it's expressly forbidden for one hunter to fill the bag limit for another. I cannot, for instance, shoot a doe whitetail for my daughter. If she holds the tag, she must be the one to fill it. That rule is also in effect for waterfowl, but the total number of birds allowed by a group's size sometimes wrongly governs shooting instead of individual limits.

Consider our response to the sense of competition we feel when we hunt or fish on public ground and water. This is one of the timeless tensions in our sporting traditions. We love the idea of more hunters and anglers joining our community of sportsmen and -women, but we hate to see them in our places.

I'm as guilty of this as the next guy, racing a stranger's pickup to the sign-in

box so I can have first pick of spots, or setting up too closely to another hunter's blind at a public waterfowl refuge. Those are either subtle or stark violations of our unwritten rules of conduct in the field, but they can also lead to safety or resource implications. How does such behavior square with our public pronouncements that we are game-sharing conservationists?

Other examples of this include erection of treestands or blinds on either public or private properties. I've hunted the fencelines of places where I had permission and found stands placed just on the other side of the fence. Legal? Yes. Ethical? Maybe not.

Some of these violations of codes of conduct are intentional. Others probably aren't, though they can seem like it at the time. I've gotten up unnaturally early on a cold, windy morning, slogged through icy water in the dark to set up decoys in a public marsh, and waited in eager anticipation for legal light only to have the first flights of birds working my spread scattered by "slob" hunters pass-shooting from the peripheral dikes.

Are they really "slobs"? Or are they hard-working hunters taking advantage of an opportunity, same as me? As with the rest of these ethical lapses, it's situational.

LISTEN TO YOUR INNER VOICE

If you hunt or fish long enough, you get a sense for limiting your impact on a given resource. You exercise restraint. You don't keep all the big bluegills, or you let that buck walk if you are concerned that you won't be able to get all of his meat out of the backcountry without spoilage.

And you call out your buddy's excessive or unseemly behavior. This can be among the hardest things to do, as I was reminded in a hunter education class I taught in my hometown. I had mentioned to the students that one of the bravest things a beginning hunter can do is to point out a mentor's bad behavior, whether it's driving off established roads, trespassing or over-shooting a limit. After the class, as parents were arriving to pick up their kids, one father asked his son what he had learned that day.

"I learned that you do a lot of illegal stuff, Dad," the kid blurted out. The father flashed me a dark look and hurried his kid into the pickup, but I hope that moment made a difference. 

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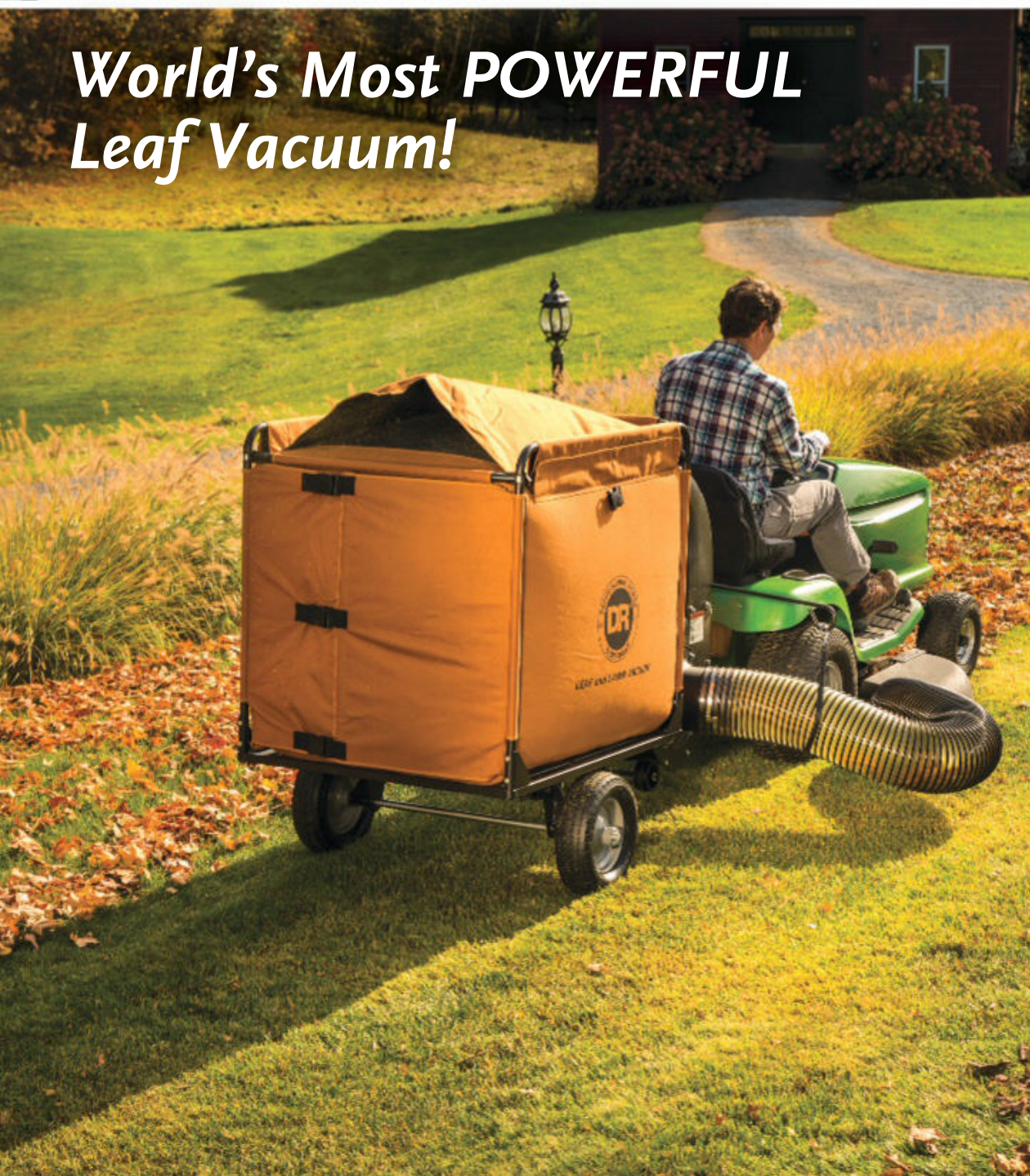


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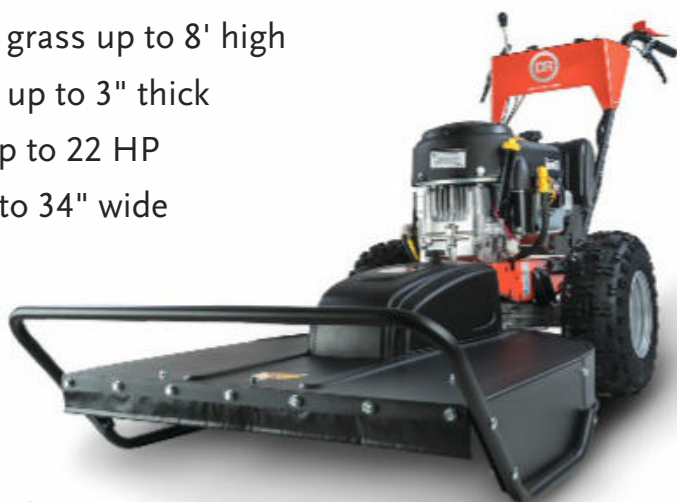
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CHASING A GHOST

**A WHITETAIL HUNTER GETS A RARE CHANCE AT REDEMPTION
WHEN AN ELUSIVE TROPHY CROSSES HIS PATH IN OKLAHOMA.**

By Dr. Todd A. Kuhn



The prairie grass bristled as an angry wind whistled through it. In the darkness I could barely make out the hill I was climbing. It wasn't particularly steep, but the icy incline offered no firm footing. At its peak, a ground blind was perched overlooking the ravine below, ratcheted with cables to ensure it remained anchored in the gale-force winds.

It was my first morning hunt in Oklahoma, and it was inhospitably cold and dreadfully nasty. A 100-year storm had transformed the landscape into a fragile crystal, enshrining it in ice. With a flashlight clenched in my teeth and thickly gloved hands, I chipped away at the accumulation on the blind's door with my pocketknife. Once it was freed, I shuffled inside, leaning my muzzleloader against the far wall.

Settling into my chair—with the wind howling through the blind's seams—I fired up the tiny space heater. It burped to life with a hiss, casting a muted crimson

glow. These were some of the most miserable conditions I had ever hunted in, yet sitting there I couldn't help but feel a sense of excitement. I'd finally made it to Oklahoma, a deer mecca overshadowed by more publicized whitetail venues.

After a lifetime spent bowhunting whitetails, I had yet to punch a tag with a rifle or muzzleloader. I hoped to change that during this trip. Little did I know this would be the beginning of a protracted Okie adventure I won't soon forget.

CAMP PROPER

My hunt took place at Rut-N-Strut Guide Service near Elk City in the far western portion of Beckham County. With a population of around 11,500, Elk City is a quiet, quaint kind of place, located on Interstate 40 just off historic U.S. Route 66, about 110 miles west of Oklahoma City and 150 miles east of Amarillo.

I was there to muzzleloader hunt at the end October. It just so happened to

be when Oklahoma was pummeled by its worst ice storm in a century. The entire landscape was ensconced in ice, the ground a frozen, slick mess.

After a dicey drive from the airport to camp, I sat down to a steaming bowl of homemade vegetable soup and a generous slice of buttery cornbread. Todd Rogers runs the outfit, a man of reserved demeanor with little to say, unless of course it needs saying. His two boys, Caden and Cole, help out with the guiding chores. Both are well-worn-cowboy-boot kinds of kids, with a polite "yes, ma'am" and "no, sir" genuineness about them.

As I finished a second bowl of soup, Todd sat with me and scrolled through trail-cam pictures like a kid leafing through his baseball card collection. On occasion he would stop to share his favorite animals with me, as well as a stat or two: "He's a four-and-a-half, runs over on our 403 parcel. He'll go 143 or 4, maybe a couple better depending on that left G3."



Rutting behavior was at peak levels during the author's November Oklahoma hunt, providing an endless stream of activity during his sits.

During our impromptu deer review, one buck caught my eye, a gnarly brute with 10 or so points, lengthy tines and thick, two-fisted mass. I half-jokingly asked Rogers if he could put me on something like that. He chuckled, saying that buck was “The Ghost,” a deer they’d only captured on trail cameras at night. Rogers added that no one had ever seen the buck during daylight hours in the six-plus years he’d been on camera. With that, I glibly announced I’d officially scratched him off my big-buck wish list.

FOILED AT FIRST

My first morning I sat overlooking a deep ravine with a feeding station in its bottom. During that initial sit I saw 10 rack bucks pass through, pausing to feed then moving along their way. All were quality deer, mostly 8-points, one a young 10 with tremendous potential, as well as a few scrubby 6s I didn’t count in my rack-buck tally. Four of the 8s were shooters by almost anyone’s measure, but I was willing to wait out a special deer. After a couple morning and evening hunts, I’d seen more shooter bucks with antlers that would measure from 130 to 140 inches than I’d ever encountered in one place.

Rogers’ real estate is littered with fantastic deer. This can be credited to the trophy management program he employs. He encourages hunters to shoot only mature deer, those 4 1/2 years or older, and it has obviously paid off in spades.

After I had passed up several very nice bucks on the previous days, Rogers put me in the “Ghillie Blind” the last morning. The Ghillie was his “go-to spot,” a 10-foot-high tower aptly named for its tattered-cloth concealment treatment, which melted into the tangled backdrop. And, lucky for me, it hadn’t been hunted all season.

The big blind overlooked a “green” field, which hadn’t received a smidgeon of rain since its sowing in August. As the sun rose on the barren, brilliant red-dirt parcel, which was now devoid of ice, I thought there was absolutely no way I was going to see a deer there. But, as is the case with all great guides, they always know better.

In about an hour’s time, deer seemed to begin oozing out from under every rock and materializing from every shadow. It was as if someone had kicked an anthill. I saw several great bucks, but opted to once again hold out.



With about an hour left in the hunt, I saw what appeared to be a really great buck walking on a faint two-track trail cutting through the field. As luck would have it, he was walking directly toward me. I got him in my binocular, sizing him up. The closer he got, the better he looked. At around 100 yards I decided he would be my Oklahoma deer.

With the buck now at 75 yards, I slipped the gun barrel through the blind’s ragged cloth and tried cocking the hammer, but it wouldn’t budge. It was binding on something. Apparently, when I moutned the scope, I’d positioned it too far back. When sighting in the gun, I had turned the scope all the way up to

The author's first trip to Oklahoma coincided with a hellacious ice storm that created inhospitable conditions in which to pursue The Ghost (above).





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its highest power. Now, with the scope set on the lowest power, the magnification indicator was blocking the hammer.

As I fumbled with the gun, frantically trying to figure out what had gone so terribly wrong, the big buck closed the gap to just 30 yards. Once I'd solved the binding issue, I dialed the scope to its highest power and cocked the gun. The deer now stood just 20 steps away.

I tried to get him in the scope but couldn't because the magnification was too high. I knew if I dialed the scope back down, the hammer would not clear. I was left to watch the big deer walk into the woods at arm's length.

I'd muffed the golden opportunity I'd patiently held out for, and it was no one's fault but my own. Back at camp, I hesitantly told my story to a group of bewildered hunters who simply couldn't believe my misfortune and, of course, stupidity. One last evening hunt came and went without fanfare, and I was done. No Oklahoma monster buck, just one more silly deer-hunting story about the big one that got away.



Todd Rogers (right), owner of Rut-N-Strut Guide Service, worked tirelessly to put the author on a mature Oklahoma buck.

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Once the ice had melted, the resulting moisture turned the Sooner State's fabled red dirt into a sticky, slick morass.

DIFFICULT DECISION

Rarely are hunters offered a second chance. It's one swing-and-a-miss and you're out. The hunting gods hardly ever offer mulligans. In my decades of bowhunting, I can't remember ever being granted a do-over.

Nevertheless, I booked a second hunt with Rogers, returning several weeks later during the rifle season for another

at-bat. This time the rut was roaring and the ice had retreated, turning the ground to a gelatinous, goopy mud—the kind that tugs at your boots and slathers your pant legs. No matter, I was back.

The third morning found me tucked into a box blind overlooking a great ravine that stretched a considerable distance to my left and right. Directly across the ravine was a gently sloping

bench running its length and devoid of any appreciable vegetation or brush.

Soon, the rising sun silhouetted two exceptional 8-points looking into the brushy ravine below. The bucks were at my 12 o'clock, a short chip-shot out. After giving them a good once-over, I decided to pass, again, holding out for something a bit better. As I watched the wide, particularly tall-racked buck to the right waddle away, I couldn't help but second-guess myself. Had I just made another big mistake?

Several hours had passed when a glint of movement across the ravine caught my eye. On the distant hillside some 300-plus yards away, I spotted a doe with purpose to her trot. She disappeared over the sharp ridge as quickly as she had appeared.

I propped up a bit taller in my chair, craning to see what was sure to be following her. Seconds later, two bucks popped out from the brush below and moved up the hillside, track-for-track with the doe that had been there moments before.

DR. TODD A. KUHN (2)

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The lead buck was nice, but the one in tow was incredible. He was a thickly muscled specimen, with antlers strewn in all directions. I quickly placed the rifle on the window ledge and settled the reticle on him. I flipped the safety off and readied for the shot ... and then a harsh dose of reality washed over me.

The wind was blowing a steady 25 mph, with frequent gusts into the high 30s. It was blowing directly from my left to right, whipping down the ravine then swirling up the hillside. My mind raced trying to calculate a windage hold in this insufferable situation. This was by far the biggest deer I'd ever seen on the hoof, and I was staring at a shot I definitely had no business taking.

As the buck came to a stop and stood broadside, now at 250 yards, I begrudgingly put the safety back on and pulled the rifle into the blind. It was the hardest thing I've ever had to do while hunting. Seconds later, I watched the buck's rump follow that amazing rack over the ridge.

Once I'd quit shaking uncontrollably, I texted my buddy and told him what had just happened. I'd just seen my biggest deer ever and was forced into passing. I was confident I'd never get another chance like the one I just had, but I wasn't comfortable winging a shot in such conditions.

USER ERROR ... AGAIN?

For the next two hours I sat in the blind replaying the situation, second-guessing my decision not to shoot. Doubt had now crept into my mind, and I had devolved into an emotional basket case. After the earlier muzzleloader mishap, I couldn't stomach this level of failure again.

Then I caught something moving in my periphery to my left, a long poke down the ravine. It was two bucks at what I guesstimated to be at least 400 yards away. I put my bino on them but couldn't tell what was on their heads for certain.

Luckily, they were making their way toward me, this time along the ridge on my side of the ravine. Both bucks were slipping in and out of the ravine, each time just a bit closer. At about 200 yards, I recognized one of the racks. It was him, the same buck I had to pass up earlier. I opened the front blind window and readied my rifle.

Several minutes later he had walked to 80 yards and was now at my 12 o'clock. Just as I went to slide the rifle through the window, a wind gust blew it shut, the noise echoing throughout the ravine like a car door slamming. The buck's head snapped, and he looked right at me. I froze, but he trotted quickly into a ravine finger to my immediate right, disappearing into the thicket.

I felt sick to my stomach, and I knew I had just blown yet another chance at

what would have been my biggest deer ever. I fixed my stare on where he had dropped into the ravine, hoping if I stared hard and long enough, he would magically reappear.

Lo and behold, he did just that.

A minute later I saw the tips of his antlers coming up the side of the ravine, three paces to the east of where he'd vanished. I opened the right-side blind window and got my gun ready. As he topped the ravine's crest, I put the



FIOCCHI FORCE

A new high-performance rifle load saves the day.

Fiocchi may be best known for its shotshells and rimfire ammunition, but the company recently spent considerable time reengineering and reimagining every aspect of its centerfire rifle cartridge lineup. The Fiocchi team devoted millions of developmental dollars, as well as countless research hours, in labs and on the range, to perfecting its centerfire offerings. This effort has led to the new Hyperformance Hunting centerfire line.

Fiocchi's R&D team forged advances in propellant formulations to offer increased performance across all centerfire cartridges in the line. Manufacturing processes were also perfected, specifically for Fiocchi's new Polymer-Tipped Copper Solid bullets. These are CNC-machined with longitudinal skives, or cuts, to produce dramatic petaling upon impact. The skives offer repeatable expansion to predictably increase both the bullet's frontal diameter and the diameter of the wound channels produced during penetration.

In Oklahoma I used the 130-grain 6.5 Creedmoor Hyperformance Hunting Polymer-Tipped Copper Solid load, which has an advertised muzzle velocity of 2,815 fps. My first shot was poor at best, hitting the buck well off my intended point of impact. However, the bullet's petaling action and subsequent controlled expansion produced a wound cavity that incapacitated the large-bodied deer, allowing me to place a follow-up shot.

I credit the design features of the Polymer-Tipped Copper Solid with grounding the buck. I am not sure this would have been the case with ammunition of lesser quality or performance.

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crosshair on him and pulled the trigger. Nothing. Instinctively, I squeezed with all my might. Still nothing but horrid silence.

I cycled another 6.5 Creedmoor cartridge into the chamber, its predecessor flying out and ricocheting off the fiberglass blind wall. The commotion again drew the buck's stare and concern. As he turned to leave, I settled the scope on him and nervously yanked the trigger with reckless abandon. This time there was plenty of boom, but it resulted in a clean whiff.

Unscathed and confused, the buck trotted several yards and stopped, still looking at the blind. I settled on him again and triggered another shot. This time I hit him, though evidently not where I was aiming. The impact crumpled him; he was definitely down but not done. I knew I had better give it another go.

I frantically worked the bolt, but the gun was now empty. I'd brought only three cartridges with me (I surely wouldn't need more than one), so I had to find the first round I'd ejected. I slid my chair back and started digging around for it. Somehow I found it quickly, shoved it into the gun and chambered it. My only shot was at the buck's neck. The crosshair was bouncing around like I was trying to aim while on a dead sprint. I gulped for a breath then tried to exhale, but it didn't help. My mind said to pull the trigger smoothly, but I was a mess. Miraculously, my last bullet hit its mark, and the ordeal was over.

I flopped back into my chair and couldn't help but wonder why the first round didn't fire. After some thought, the best I could come up with was I had failed to fully close the bolt when I chambered that first round. With the

deer down, I texted Rogers and told him I'd finally gotten my buck. Per the camp rule, I remained in the blind until he and his sons arrived.

When we walked up to the deer, Rogers and his boys each kind of half-shook their heads. Kneeling over the buck, Rogers looked up at me and asked if I knew which deer it was, referring to the trail-cam photos he had shown me. Well of course I did.

"Yes, the biggest one I've ever seen," I quipped.

"Nope," said Rogers, glancing back at the buck. "It's him. It's The Ghost."

Standing on a windblown, muddy hillside in Oklahoma, with three fellow hunters emotionally invested in this deer, I couldn't help but feel lucky, or blessed, or maybe a little of both. A second chance at any buck is rare enough, let alone a buck like The Ghost. 

The author cashed in a lifetime's worth of goodwill from the hunting gods in his pursuit of the buck known as The Ghost.





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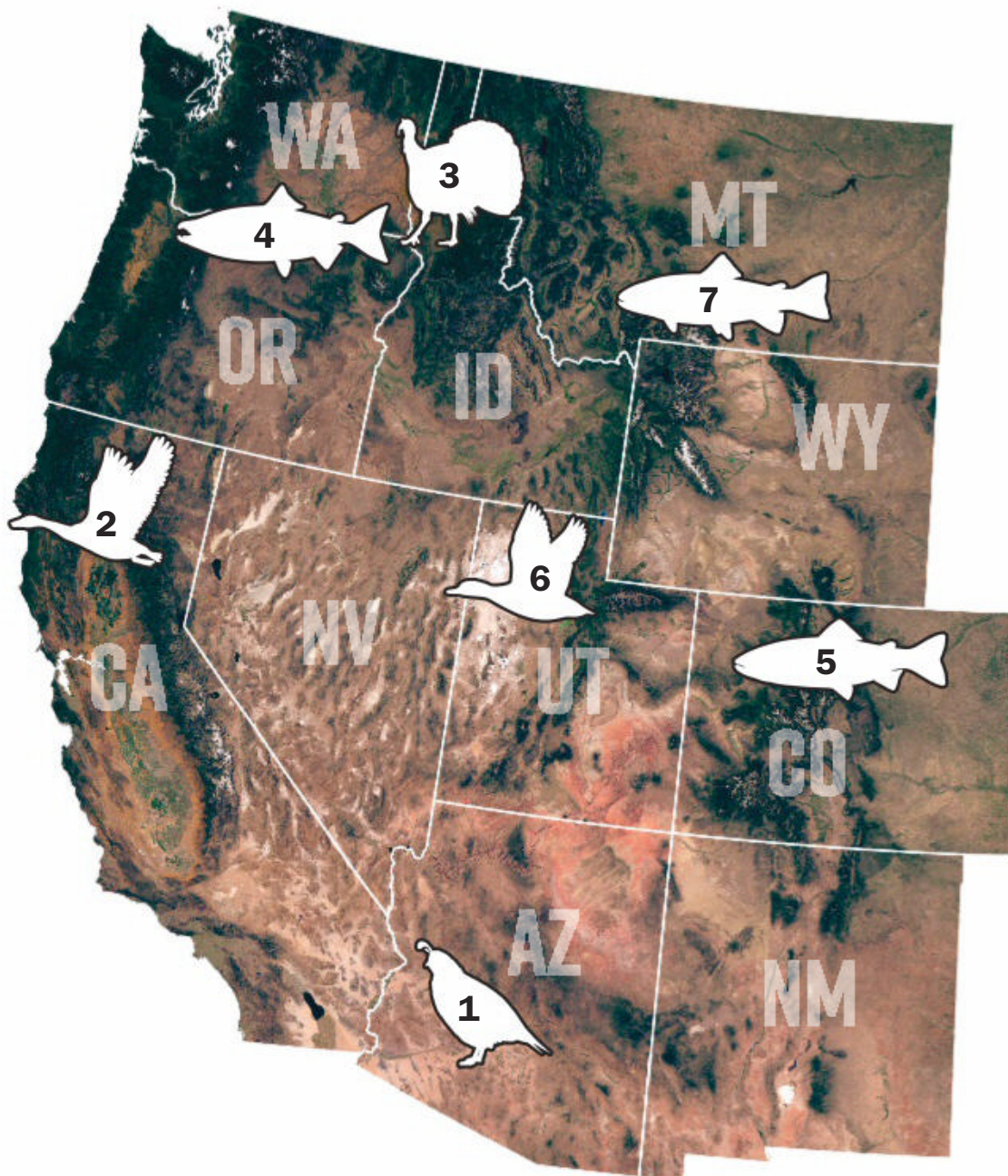
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AROUND THE WEST

A SAMPLING OF THE REGION'S BEST HUNTING AND FISHING OPPORTUNITIES THIS MONTH

By Andrew McKean



October is for the soft-siders—fair-weather dandies who hunt and fish only when the conditions are favorable. December is for the ferocious—those who are either atoning or compensating for something. November is for the rest of us—our month to punch tags, bonk fish, justify our bird dogs and recall the hundreds of reasons we live in the West. It's deer and elk season somewhere. That big push of salmon that entered the Columbia in August is nosing up smaller tributaries. Roosters are cackling as they flush. Brown trout are slashing at big streamers and spinners. Get out there while the afternoons are sunny and the mornings in the mountains are frosty. The weather's gonna turn soon enough.



ARIZONA QUAIL

After two consecutive years of bumper Gambel's quail numbers, will this be a third? Arizona's season opened last month, but this is the time to take limits of scaled and California (valley) quail, in addition to the state's most prolific upland bird, the ubiquitous Gambel's.



CALIFORNIA BRANT

One of the more overlooked species of Golden State waterfowl, brant opens November 9 in a couple special management zones. The northern zone is hot, from the Sacramento River north. Hunt the mouths of freshwater creeks and rivers in tidal exchange zones.



PANHANDLE TURKEYS

Idaho's liberal turkey regulations allow hunters with unused spring licenses to take fall turkeys in most game management units north of the Clearwater River. Additional tags are available for many units in the Panhandle. Fall turkeys are wherever you find them, but a few of the best spots to look include the ag fields along the lower Clark Fork River, the Bonners Ferry area and timbered ridges above the Pend Oreille River and lake.



BONNEVILLE DAM SALMON

Based on an estimated 580,000 fall-run Chinook headed upriver, the middle reaches of the Columbia should be good around the time this issue hits newsstands, with some decent later-running fish as far up as Drano Lake by November. This prediction is predicated on water temperatures and flows, but the mouth of the White Salmon, Deschutes, John Day, Umatilla and Walla Walla rivers could all see hot action this month.



BEER-CITY BROOKIES

In the Poudre River and its tributaries west of Fort Collins, Colo., bothersome numbers of fast-multiplying brookies will hit any spinner or twitched streamer right now. The gateway to Rocky Mountain National Park is paved with the gaudy splotches of spawning brook trout. Nearly every beaver pond, irrigation reservoir—and especially wind-whipped Horsetooth Reservoir—is full of hook-eager brook trout. This is the month to get after them; these tasty fish are not native and are overpopulated, so don't feel bad about keeping a limit for the smoker or elk-camp skillet.



SALT LAKE DIVING DUCKS

The rest of the West may go all ga-ga over green-head mallards and metallic-winged teal, but serious big-lake waterfowlers are in layout boats in the Great Salt Lake, bobbing amid blocks of diver decoys for a banquet of redheads, ruddy ducks, buffleheads, and the trophy of all diver hunters: the regal canvasback. Farmington Bay Waterfowl Management Area is the place to be when the wind is hard out of the northwest. If you have an airboat, hit the phragmite flats off Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge.



MONTANA'S BRUISER BROWNS

The Mighty Missouri River between Holter and Hauser lakes is a sleeper spot for big spawning browns, but probably the hottest river in the state is the Bighorn, southeast of Billings, where big, jointed streamers are the equivalent of ribeye for African lions. Bring a shotgun for bonus mallard action after you tire of netting arm-long brown trout in full spawning colors. Ask fly shops in Billings and Hardin for their best fall streamer patterns.



RATTLE & ROLL

RATTLING DURING THE RUT CAN BRING BLACKTAIL BUCKS INTO RANGE.

Story and Photographs by Scott Haugen

My 12-year-old son Kazden, who seconds earlier had pulled the trigger on a nice 3-point blacktail we'd called in, excitedly tapped me on the shoulder.

"Dad, look at that huge buck!" he said.

I looked up and saw one of the biggest blacktails I'd ever seen, standing in the exact spot where Kazden's buck had been. I was speechless.

That buck lived to see another day, as Kazden had made a perfect shot on his buck and I held only an archery tag. But its presence in that place at that time served as a reminder that when rattling migratory blacktails, anything can happen.

ON THE MOVE

We were hunting public land in the foothills of the Cascades at about 3,500 feet. When rattling migratory bucks, I like covering ground, as that's what bucks are doing to find does. The nastier the weather, the louder I rattle and the more ground I cover.

When it comes to rattling blacktails, knowing what the bucks are doing in different phases of the rut, as well as how they use and travel through the habitat, are keys to filling a tag. November 7 to 10 is generally the peak of the rut, with a second rut peaking around the week of Thanksgiving.

The largest movement of blacktails

from the Cascades starts at about 4,500 feet. While hunting up high can be productive, I like focusing efforts a bit lower. Find where multiple drainages converge and concentrate efforts within these funnels.

Because the country is big, rugged and densely forested, I like rattling loudly and covering ground when looking for migratory bucks down to about 2,000 feet. These bucks cover a lot of vertical ground in search of does. In windy, raining conditions, rattle loudly so sounds travel. If you don't see anything after 20 minutes, move forward to where you think the sounds reached and start over.

Homebody bucks—those in the



Coast Range, the lower foothills of the Cascades and on valley floors—will work does in their immediate area before expanding their search. Some old bucks may not even leave their core area if doe populations are high, as risk of injury through fighting isn't worth the off chance of being able to breed an extra doe. Then again, a homebody buck in its prime can travel 3 miles or more in a day looking for hot does. In the thick cover of the Coast Range, three miles is a long walk. Using trail cameras to monitor movement of local bucks is one of the best educations you'll receive.

Homebody bucks at lower elevations and on valley floors are more deliberate in their efforts to breed, as they know where the does are. They don't cover

miles searching for does every day as high-elevation bucks might. For these bucks, tone down the calling and stay in one place for a longer period of time.

I like rattling lower-elevation bucks when the weather is calm and my sounds travel farther. Homebody bucks can hunker in so tight when bedding that getting too close will spook them. Instead, get comfortable and start timidly rattling with real antlers. Rattle for 30 seconds or so, then wait a couple minutes and repeat with a little more volume.

I'll often spend two hours in one spot when rattling homebody bucks, rattling first with light antlers, then progressing to a rattle bag. When rattling for bucks in big country, I'll use heavy antlers and a synthetic bag, along with a grunt tube. 



TOOLS OF THE TRADE

When rattling to blacktails, it's good to have options.

When choosing the right rattling apparatus, there are a few key considerations to keep in mind.

GO SMALL: A young buck's rack emits high-pitched, non-threatening sounds that are great for starting off a setup or targeting homebody bucks. It's calm and not overpowering.

GO BIG: At the other end of the spectrum, a rack from an old buck is heavy, carries a deep sound and is loud. I like this when targeting mature bucks. However, young bucks are often intimidated by it, so hunters who are

looking for freezer meat from any legal deer should use caution with big antlers.

GO SYNTHETIC: The middle ground is a synthetic rattling bag. Over the years, I've rattled in more blacktails with a rattle bag than anything else. There's something about the tone and pitch that seems to get responses from deer of all ages.

A rattle bag can create volume that penetrates brush and forest and cuts the rain and wind extremely well. It's also easy to use and easy to store in a pack. I use a rattle bag that has no wooden parts, made by Point Blank Hunting calls (pointblankcalls.com) in Portland, Ore.

PACIFIC FLYWAY PRIMER



**HAVE A MORE
PRODUCTIVE SEASON**
BY PUTTING THE RIGHT
DECOYS IN THE RIGHT PLACES
AT THE RIGHT TIME.

By Art Isberg

Western waterfowl hunters truly have some mouthwatering hunting opportunities available to them. This is the case whether you knock on doors for access, frequent the many state and federal public shooting refuges available or hunt on private clubs. In my hunting life, I've been fortunate enough to do all three.

Wherever you hunt, one critical key to success is putting out a decoy spread that causes ducks to commit to you, which is not always as easy as it sounds. Your spread's ability to fool ducks depends largely on the realism of its composition and arrangement. Not all mallards, pintails, teal, widgeons or gadwalls arrive at the same time in the same place—different species migrate at various times



Part of the mallard's appeal is that it will decoy to a handful of blocks on a small pothole just as readily as it will to dozens of dekes on big bodies of water.

of the season. Realistic decoy spreads should reflect this for top gunning success. Let's take a closer look at the most popular species in the Pacific flyway and when and how to use decoys for each.

GREEN-WINGED TEAL

Green-winged teal are early-fall migrants down the Pacific flyway. The little speedsters arrive in numbers before

larger birds like widgeon, mallards or pintails. Because of their timing, they often make up a bigger portion of the hunter's bag throughout the first half of the season.

Any savvy shotgunner would be wise to float a dozen green-winged teal decoys along with his regular larger blocks. Floating all pintail or all mallard decoys when neither bird has moved into an

area in good numbers simply creates an unnatural-looking spread. As gunning pressure increases, natural-looking layouts of current local bird species always look best to suspicious birds that have now likely been shot at a few times.

I like to set my teal decoys either on the outside edge or the downwind portion of my spread. Positioned in such a way, they are out in the open and easy

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for passing ducks to see, not lost in the larger decoys at the center. Teal are quick to decoy to floaters of their own kind. Although you expect teal—and you want teal decoys to be the focus if these birds show up—you’re not hurt by having larger mallard or pintail decoys in the middle of the spread, too. The bigger decoys make your spread both more visible to passing ducks and more realistic because many places also have resident or semi-resident mallards or pintails around. The larger blocks will not cause teal to be alarmed, but without the teal decoys placed as a welcome mat, these little ducks may simply fly by your spread.

With mixed spreads of mallards or pintails and teal, I generally float 3- or 4-dozen blocks in total. Even late in the season, I still set teal dekes in my spreads. They help break things up so the decoys aren’t all exactly the same shape, size and color—something commonly found in many other hunters’ spreads and, thus, very suspicious to pressured ducks. To add to this natural look, I “tail-tie” a third of my teal decoys, as I do larger blocks, so they’re not all facing one direction. It adds another nice touch that makes any decoy layout look real.

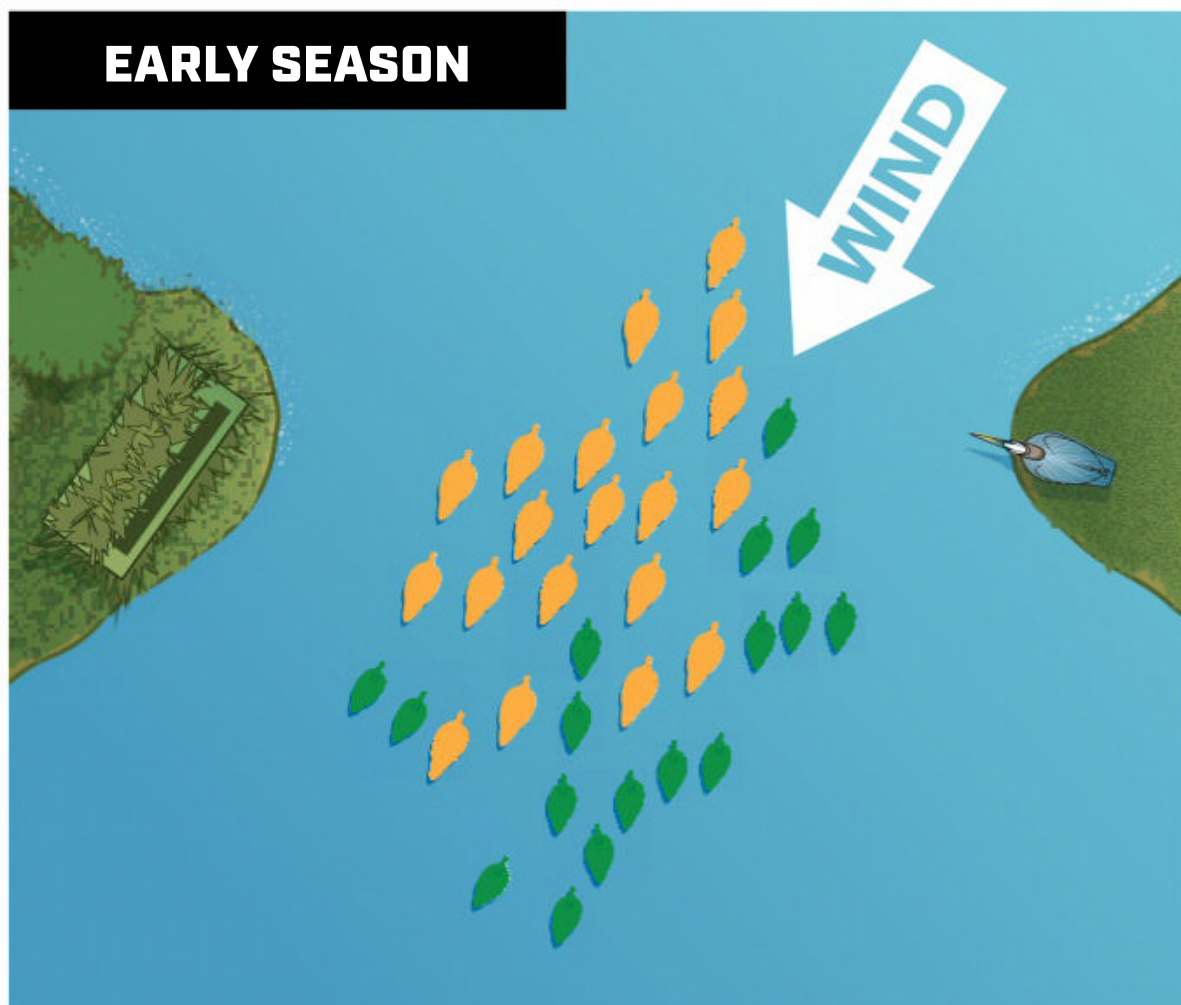
WIDGEON

The widgeon accounts for much of a Pacific flyway hunter’s bag and does so early in the season, like teal. Yet, for some strange reason, few hunters own or float widgeon decoys in their regular sets. I’ve never understood why.

Widgeon will readily decoy to other species, but a widgeon addition to your mallard or pintail layouts, along with teal, really does a solid job of matching natural bird gatherings in your area. Go to any nearby refuge and see for yourself. I like to set a dozen widgeon to a dozen greenheads or bull sprig, plus the teal.

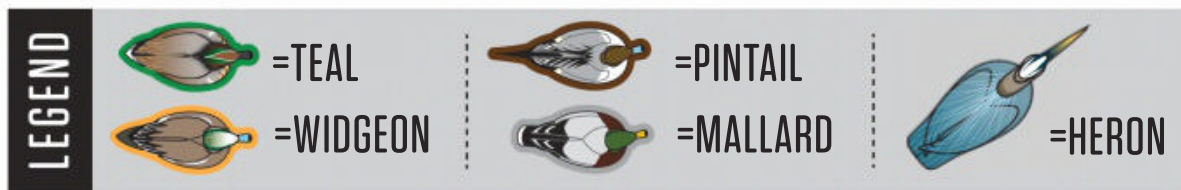
Also note that for reasons explained above, I often have mallard decoys in the mix. But let conditions on the water, and not preconceptions in your head, drive your choice here. At some locations early in the season, I’ve floated a set consisting only of widgeon and teal decoys because those areas held so few mallards. As a pair, however, teal and widgeon generally complement each other well.

I keep two-dozen flashy widgeon decoys in my stash, using them in various numbers as the season advances and bird



FIRST RESPONDERS: Early spreads should include teal and widgeon. Position teal on the spread’s outside edge or the downwind area, and use a heron as a confidence decoy.

FASHIONABLY LATE: The author adds mallards and pintails as the season progresses. Use magnum mallard decoys and toss out as many pintail dekes as possible to draw attention.



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Pintails take comfort in numbers. When targeting them, use as many decoys as you can muster, and don't hesitate to mix in a few green-winged teal fakes.

numbers change. Their colorful body patterns—that white front face and fancy side bars—add a nice touch of color and a different size and shape to any decoy layout, regardless of size. And I like to tail-tie three or four of these, just as I do with teal, to imitate busy feeders.

PINTAILS

Aside from the mallard, the graceful and wary pintail is the most sought-after bird in the Pacific flyway, though some dedicated sprig hunters would argue that point. Pintails are late-season arrivals throughout their winter range. Wherever teal and pintail migrations overlap, it's quite common to see small bunches of green-winged teal flying in flocks of pintails.

That tells us that the two species mix comfortably on the water, too, and your decoy rigs should reflect that. Because of their inborn wariness, pintails work best to large decoy spreads. In the pintail marsh I grew up hunting, private clubs thought little of floating one hundred sprig decoys to each set of double blinds.

Because most day shooters cannot match numbers like this, wise gunners need a way to haul big spreads without backaches. The answer is little “decoy barges,” which are small plastic sleds generally 5 feet long by about 3 feet wide. A single barge can hold more decoys than one man can carry on his back.

Four dozen fits nicely inside. By hunting with at least one partner, as most of us do, you double the number of dekes in your spread. I also add gun, shells and something to eat or drink in my barge.

These slick little sleds slide easily over mud, snow, ice and even dry ground. They can also be towed behind ATVs to hunting areas. I hook a short line from my barge to the belt on my waders, so I can tow it hands free—in the water or out. If I want to use a wading staff or flashlight, my hands are free to do so. Once set up to hunt, the dark- or camo-colored floats can be turned over to blend in with weeds, grass or tules.

MALLARDS

Big, gaudy and loud-calling, mallards are the number-one choice of Western waterfowlers, as they are across most of the nation. They respond well to authentic calling and will decoy to a puddle the size of a wash tub or, just as quickly, a large lake, reservoir or river. You can have success floating half a dozen decoys in a hidden, tule-lined pothole or four dozen riding the current on a bend in a river. That adaptability is the mallard's real strong point.

Regardless of where I'm hunting these big birds—whether I'm shooting on public grounds or freelancing on my own in open marsh outside state or

federal waterfowl areas I prefer to use magnum-size decoys for several reasons.

First, ducks see the big jumbos easier in low light, on cloudy days and in surrounding cover. Their flashy colors and size work real magic. I have one set of mallard floaters that are actually goose decoys painted in mallard colors and fitted with mallard heads.

Another advantage of oversized dekes relates to hunting public areas. Like it or not, public hunting means competing with dozens of other shooters and their decoy sets, and sometimes these other hunters are close by. You want your decoy layout to draw in circling birds and pass up other spreads. You do that by catching their attention, and that means using size and color to your advantage. I believe two-dozen magnum decoys have more drawing power than twice that number in standard-size decoys. For decades, I've relied on that power and enjoyed its benefits.

We are graced with both numbers and a wide variety of birds in the Pacific flyway, and have the opportunity to experience some of the finest waterfowl hunting anywhere. If you understand the many species of high-flying birds that visit us each fall and winter, and what decoy choices bring us success, you can enjoy spectacular memories season after season. 

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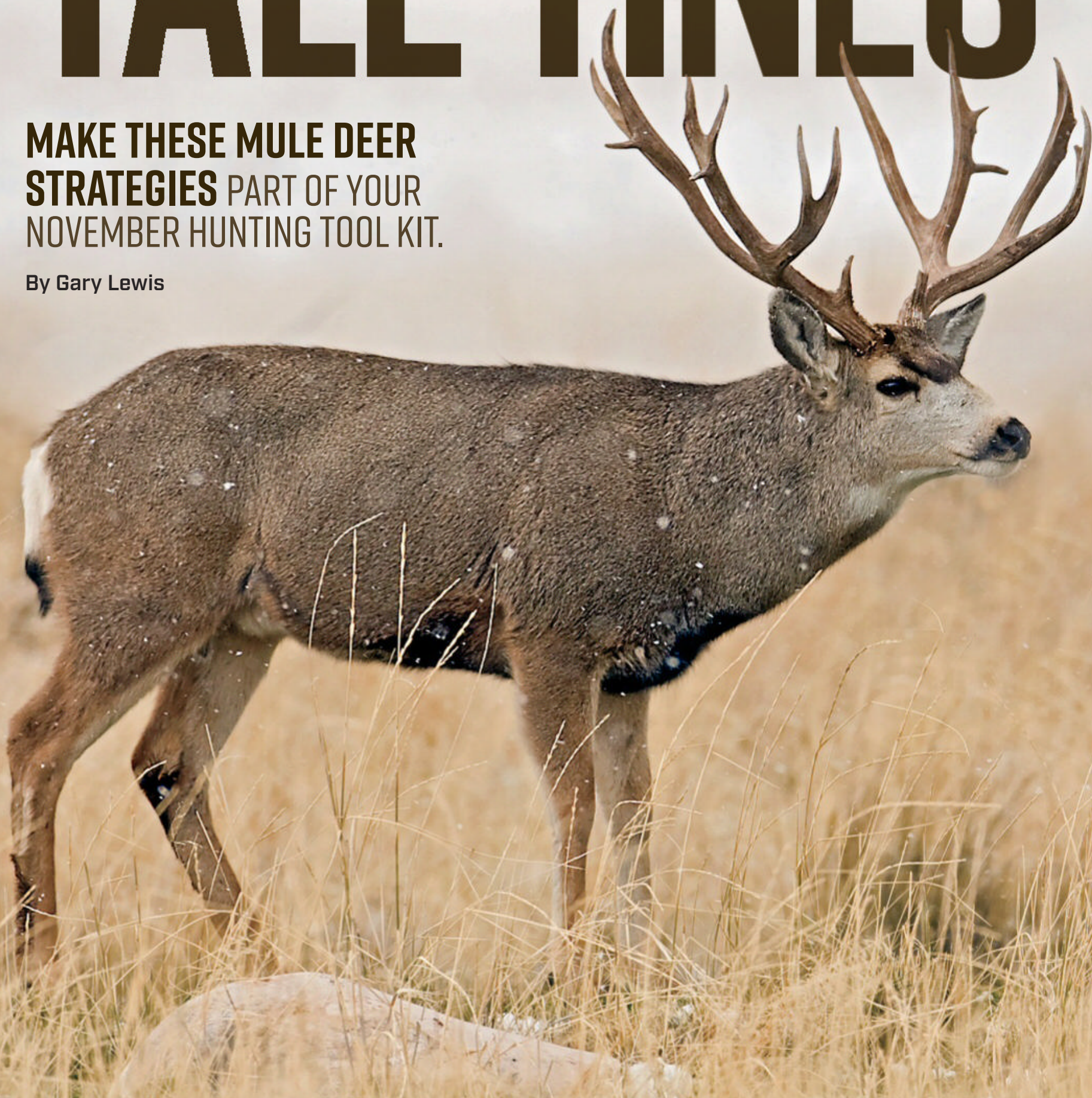
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SHORT DAYS, TALL TINES

**MAKE THESE MULE DEER
STRATEGIES** PART OF YOUR
NOVEMBER HUNTING TOOL KIT.

By Gary Lewis



ERIK RUF

Look for natural travel paths along migration routes—river canyons, low saddles between mountains and others—then find the does traveling them. Bucks will be nearby.



If you are sitting on a mule deer tag in November, consider yourself lucky. These are special hunts. The hard-to-get controlled tags. The seasons you remember when you're older and your hair has long since gone gray. It's a truly storied time to be hunting muleys.

As I look back on my mule deer hunting career, one moment that stands out was in Idaho. The rut was on, and the weather was so cold a four-letter word would shatter and fall to the ground before it could reach my horse's ear. Bitter cold. We all went home with bull elk and average bucks, except for the cook, who I guided to a 27-inch 4x4 he shot with his .270 Winchester off the tent stake. I spotted the buck when I came out of the tent and ducked back inside to collar the cook—the only one left in camp with a deer tag.

Such odd occurrences are simply part and parcel of hunting mule deer in November. And if you're fortunate enough to be able to hunt during this time, you owe it to yourself to do it right.

MUZZLELOADER HUNTING

Many states have muzzleloader mule deer seasons in November. In these special seasons, hunters get one chance to make a well-aimed shot, usually at 100 yards or less. Mule deer are creatures of wide-open spaces, and closing the gap on them can be difficult. However, your odds are never better than in November when big bucks are on the move and are more likely to make the kinds of mistakes they don't in other months. Muzzleloader season can also mean doe tags for some lucky hunters where the hunt itself is a trophy experience.

My taste these days runs to side-locks, Kentucky rifles, Hawkens—traditional blackpowder guns—but even with the modern muzzleloaders legal in some Western states, the technology is remarkably similar. So, too, are their weaknesses. Whether going old-school or modern, a hunter needs to protect powder and keep caps dry in rainy or snowy weather. Deer hunting is often better when it's wetter, but moisture can foul up a muzzleloader hunt in a hurry.

Fire a percussion cap after cleaning to minimize moisture that might be present in the barrel and load the rifle in a warm, dry place. Cover the muzzle with

electrical tape or a balloon. Protect the action from moisture with a plastic or leather cover. Check the sights to make sure water isn't blocking the aperture or fogging the optic. And be sure to fire and clean the muzzleloader at the end of each day.

RUT TIMING

In much of the mountain and desert West, the mule deer rut is said to begin in late October or early November. In some locales, mule deer may exhibit mating behavior as late as the third week of December. While the exact timing of the breeding season differs throughout the region, it will continue for a period that can last more than 40 days between the first doe coming into estrus and the last hot doe being bred.

When mule deer gather in large numbers in transition zones, with perhaps 20 or 40 deer in peak physical condition, the pheromone exchange triggers breeding. Mature bucks break out of bachelor herds and may attach themselves to one group of does or troll several small herds. In fact, there are probably several bucks shadowing the same herds, and when a

doe comes into heat, a buck will have to fight for the right to breed her.

Now more than ever is the time to park oneself on a hilltop to watch small herds of does and look for bucks. It means learning the keys to the migration and employing good glass to pick resting or feeding bucks out of tall cover.

MULEY MIGRATION

Whether you hunt with rifle, muzzleloader or archery equipment in November, the strategy remains the same: Find the migration routes, then find the does. Mule deer migrations are studied in terms of winter and summer locations. We tend to think of migration occurring in specific corridors, but the data reveals fan-shaped dispersals as the deer take their own paths. In my own corner of mule deer habitat, muleys often spend summers high in the mountains then migrate out to the desert.

Fall migration starts as early as the second week of October and continues through mid-November. These deer travel from 40 to 120 miles from their summer range to wintering grounds. Deer that summer at the top of our mountains might head north while other deer

move east into the sagebrush or south and east.

To gain an edge in tracking down migration routes, talk to a local wildlife biologist. This individual knows the habits of the deer in his or her management units, knows where they winter and has a pretty good idea where they spend summers. Armed with this information and a good map, probable migration routes begin revealing themselves. For example, river canyons and hogback ridges that funnel into the flatlands are perfect deer highways. If a small range of mountains lies between winter and summer habitats, even better, as notches in the skyline and low saddles create natural bottlenecks.

A NEW NOSLER

The venerable Western ammo maker adds a do-all cartridge to its lineup.

Last November on a hunt in Wyoming, I put the new .27 Nosler to work. The cartridge uses a .277-inch bullet, and Nosler bills it as the ultimate round for 99 percent of North American big game. To grasp the significance of this new cartridge, it helps to compare it to another .277-caliber round: the well-loved .270 Winchester.

Nosler Custom rifles chambered in .27 Nosler come with a twist rate of 1:8.5 to stabilize, and offer increased accuracy with, heavy-for-caliber, long-range bullets. Loaded with a 150-grain projectile, the .27 Nosler is 400 fps faster than the venerable .270 Win. The same load generates an additional 800 foot-pounds of energy over the .270 Win. at the muzzle. At 500 yards, the .27 Nosler drops 11 inches less than the .270 Win. and 7 inches less than the .270 WSM.



TONY BYNUM



Bucks do a lot of sparring during the early stages of the rut. This is prime time to break out a set of rattling antlers.



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Deer may move at night, but bucks are likely to move in daylight hours, too. Want to hunt peak movement? Turn to the Moon Times charts in the front of this magazine and look for the two-hour periods of major activity listed for each day.

One of the mistakes mule deer hunters make is thinking they can see large herds of deer from the truck and thereby spot a buck. It can happen, but the better play is planning the hunt in advance and then scouting for sign such as tracks at road crossings. If it's November, bucks will be following herds of does. Every herd of 5 to 15 does has a buck with it. He is there, watching, ready to drive off other bucks.

ATTRACTANTS AND RATTLING

For the past 19 years, I have kept track of the bucks on my place. All summer I would see the same spikes and forked horns and 2x3s, but I could count on big bucks to show like clockwork on the first day of November. They would fight and bloody each other for two, maybe three weeks to sort out who was who. By that time, I would no longer see the smaller bucks, and every group of does

would have a buck attached, although I would not always see it.

If we were to divide the rut into component parts, we might see different types of behavior in each phase: pre-rut, early rut, late rut and post-rut. Rattling antlers seem to work best in the early phases.

That said, there are certainly occasions in which they'll work deep into November as well. On one Thanksgiving Day muzzleloader hunt, a friend of mine found a set of antlers and used it to rattle in a big buck off a wildlife refuge. He ended up taking the deer in a cloud of white smoke from his perch in the rim-rock. While this is a somewhat unique scenario, it's a compelling argument for keeping antlers handy well into the rut.

Another way to ensure deer show up in the right places is to use scent attractants. These can fall into several potential categories, but let's make it simple by dividing them into food and urine attractants. Food attractants like vanilla, apples, corn and acorns can draw does, which often bring bucks with them. Synthetic and natural urine lures (where legal) can lure deer to cross a trail or stop at a certain spot.

They all work, but they are by no means magic. Do the scouting to figure out where bucks are likely to be and how the prevailing wind might carry the scent. Remember that deer have powerful scenting ability and might follow a wisp of scent for two miles or more.

Either approach requires a bit of patience. You'll want to give attractants the proper amount of time to work. The same applies to rattling for deer. Believe that it will pay off, that a buck is coming, and you may be surprised to find yourself right.

STAY THE COURSE

The mule deer rut can be both incredibly exciting and frustrating, depending on the conditions and scenarios you face. However, if you stay rooted in one place—on one good, well-scouted saddle or funnel, or in a brushed-in ground blind beside a game trail—you stand a pretty good chance. If there are does in the area, the bucks will show themselves. Keep your powder dry and savor these short days in mule deer country. They are rare and fine in a hunter's memory. **G-F**

Hunting the mule deer rut can be challenging, but if you determine migration routes, find the does and set up on a prominent travel path, you've got a good chance at success.



BILL BUCKLEY PHOTOGRAPHY

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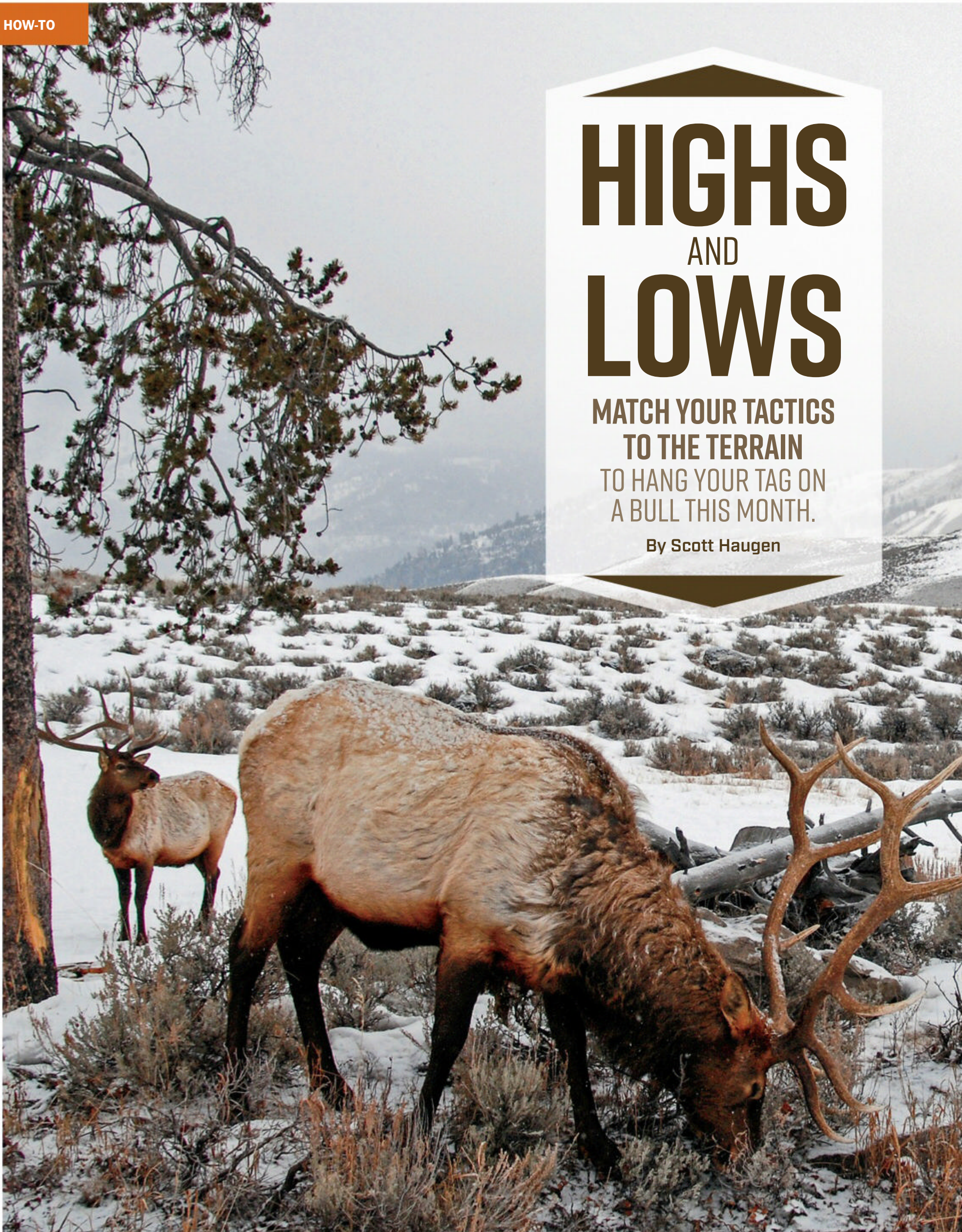
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HIGHS AND LOWS

MATCH YOUR TACTICS
TO THE TERRAIN
TO HANG YOUR TAG ON
A BULL THIS MONTH.

By Scott Haugen



My buddy whispered to me as he studied the 6x6 high in the Rocky Mountains.

“I hate to say it, but I think you should take this bull,” he said. “It’s up to you, but given this is the only one we’ve seen all week, and with no storms coming, this might be all you get. Unless you want to come back in a couple weeks.”

I thought hard about doing the latter but opted for the former. We commenced a stalk, I connected on the shot and soon we were filling saddle bags and heading off the dry mountain. I’d be lying

if I said I didn’t ultimately regret my decision. A week later my friend sent a photo of an incredible 392-inch bull his daughter shot in the same spot in nearly 3 feet of snow. I was happy for her but disappointed in myself because the tag I held required many points, and I knew better than to put my own busy schedule ahead of the elk’s schedule.

Whether hunting migratory or home-body Rocky Mountain elk, or pursuing Roosevelt bulls in the Pacific Northwest, matching your approach to the habitat, the elk, the pressure they’ve received

and, of course, the weather is key. The better you do these things, the better the bull you’ll tag.

MIGRATING BULLS

The Rocky Mountain elk tag I held was for a migration hunt, and my biggest mistake was heading into the mountains knowing there was no snow. The vast herds lived at higher elevations, and at the time of my hunt they were in another unit because they hadn’t been forced to move by cold weather. With no snow to drive elk down, my hunt ended up being



Monitoring weather conditions, predator activity, forest fire history and hunting pressure can improve your odds of tagging a migratory, late-season bull.

for resident bulls, and by November they were wise to hunting pressure.

When planning a hunt for migratory elk, be flexible. The worst mistake you can make is putting your schedule ahead of nature's. On migratory hunts, if the bad weather isn't there to move elk, you may not see one.

Monitor storms and time your hunt after a few feet of snow have fallen in higher elevations. Elk are a big, tough animal and designed to forage in rough country, so it takes a lot of snow to push them from their summer and fall range.

Just because a trophy unit has consistently produced big bulls, don't count on it automatically happening for you if conditions aren't favorable. If the snow doesn't fall, the elk likely won't move. If wolves have taken over an area, not only will this deplete herd numbers, but it can alter migratory paths. Scouting to identify this year's conditions can make a difference in your hunt.

The barrage of wildfires the West has experienced in recent years can also impact elk migrations. Some areas I used to hunt in multiple Rocky Mountain states have no elk in them anymore due to a combination of wolf predation and wildfires. On the other hand, re-growth in older burns can supply improved food for elk. Even if the forage is no longer lush by hunting season, its presence earlier in the year can alter how elk distribute themselves.

For all of these reasons, be sure to do research before embarking on a hunt for migratory elk. The fact you've been building tag preference points for 15 or 20 years means nothing if the area is devoid of elk.

Monitor the weather and call regional wildlife biologists for specific details on the hunt unit as well as neighboring units elk may be moving out of. And, of course, scout. If you can't scout in person, check out satellite imagery on the internet; the details might surprise you.

Hunting migratory bulls is a game of patience. Setting up with quality optics and covering ground with your eyes is efficient. A spotting scope will save time and energy, allow you to size-up bulls and ultimately devise an approach.

HOMEBOY BULLS

If you are hunting Rocky Mountain bulls at lower elevations, keep in mind that by November they've been pressured for months. Some homebody elk have seen hikers, anglers, horseback riders and mountain bikers since June. They've incurred the intrusion of shed hunters all summer, as well as early-season archery and possibly muzzleloader hunters in August and September, along with deer or even pronghorn hunters through October.

Under so much pressure, homebody elk can become largely nocturnal and will often spend their days hunkered down in the deepest draws and brush-choked



GET BUSY

Proper care of your elk is essential to preserving the meat.

Elk is some of the best wild game in the world, but in order to optimize its flavor and texture, your elk must be taken care of immediately. Even in the coldest of conditions, breakdown—or at least gut and skin—the elk as soon as you can.

Never leave an elk to deal with later, especially overnight. You wouldn't leave hamburger out all day and night and then eat it, and you shouldn't treat your elk that way, either. By November, their hair and fat are thick, and with their big bones and all the extra insulation, they quickly spoil.

My preferred way to deal with elk in the field is the gutless method. This process is fast, clean, and gets large chunks of meat cooling quickly. Once home, age the meat on the bone for at least five days, hanging quarters in a dry place with a temperature between 33 and 44 degrees in order to maximize tenderness and taste.

When targeting migratory elk in the Rocky Mountains, tracking big storms is a must. Having horses to access the high country can be vital to hunter success.

SCOTT HAUGEN (BOTTOM); WINDIGO IMAGES (TOP)

Elk are hardy animals built to withstand the most unforgiving conditions. It takes heavy snows to move them from their summer and fall range to their wintering grounds.



hideouts the area has to offer. Even so, elk are big animals that must eat, especially with winter approaching, so they have to leave the thickets to get food.

Though these bulls may not migrate in the classic sense from high country to low country, homebody bulls (and cows) are willing to travel miles each night to reach food and even water in dry conditions. Filling a tag with one of these bulls often means scouting and running trail cameras to learn the feeding and bedding areas, then intercepting them on the move. If you find their bedding areas, you know where to focus efforts.

Bulls choose bedding areas for security, but they'll switch bedding areas, too. The key is locating elk from afar at first light, watching them until they bed if you can't commence a stalk, then planning a move. Sometimes bedding areas are so dense the only hope of filling a tag is to move in close and wait for bulls to emerge in the final moments of shooting light. Sitting on a herd all day and waiting for them to make a move is common when it comes to tricky terrain and swirling winds.

You can also still-hunt for homebody bulls that you know are somewhere in the area, even if not exactly where. Slowly move through habitat watching for sign and, of course, elk. The sign you'll discover will ultimately influence the decisions you make, providing an education on the species you'd never attain while sitting in one place.

ROOSEVELT BULLS

Speaking of covering ground, rooting out Roosy's in their jungle-like habitat is the norm come November. With decreased logging on public ground in both the Coast Range and Cascades, glassing units is not as effective as it was 30 years ago. While logging exists on private timber lands, many hunters are reluctant to enter the pay-to-play game. Don't overlook two- or three-year-old burns on public land, however, which can attract elk.

The fact that Roosevelt elk habitat has become so dense creates what is the biggest challenge of tagging a bull—locating them. Bunches of elk are not uniformly distributed across the landscape, and hunting in an area without elk can waste days. By November, these biggest bodied of all North American elk have been pressured for two solid months.

Roosevelt bulls are notorious for gathering in small bachelor groups and retreating to the thickest, deepest, darkest canyons soon after the rut. Walking to the bottom of a gorge in the Coast Range and coming out with a bull isn't as simple as it sounds, for this is some of the most rugged terrain in the West. Add to it towering Douglas fir forests and brush so dense it's often impenetrable, and simple navigation is thwarted. But if you're in good shape, can navigate with a compass or GPS, don't mind crawling on hands and knees and are dedicated to starting the hunt well before daylight and emerging after dark, there's a chance of success.

Getting into the places bulls retreat to in the Coast Range and Cascades is the challenge of hunting Roosevelt elk. Sometimes the best place to start is

wherever you see an impossibly nasty-looking canyon and your first thought is, *I'm not going down there*. Elk don't think that way—but the hunters they are trying to avoid do. Don't be one of those hunters. If you hunt the tough places and follow the sign until you run out of light, then do it again the next day and the day after that, you're heading in the right direction. Tracking and navigation skills are put to the test with these elk, but it's doable, as many hunters fill tags with big bulls every year.

No matter where you're hunting elk this season, research the area, monitor the weather and make sure your gear and abilities fit the terrain and can withstand harsh conditions. Take these steps and the odds of filling a tag greatly increase. But know that once a bull is down, that's when the real work begins for an elk hunter. 

While the author was happy with this 6x6 bull, several feet of snow drove massive herds from the high country just a week later, including a 392-inch giant taken by his hunting buddy's daughter.





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Topwater baits are popular in November. They produce all day on bass that have moved shallow and that will strike anything that makes a commotion.

FOLLOW THE LEADERS

**BASS ARE PARTICULARLY SUSCEPTIBLE NOW
AS THEY GO ON THE HUNT FOR MOVING FALL FORAGE.**

By Ken Duke

If you were an alien trying to catch a human being at mealtime, you might cast your bait near a pizza shop. If you're a bass fisherman, you should do the same thing when targeting fall bass.

No, don't fish near pizza shops—not exactly. What you should be doing, though, is something similar. The best bass anglers follow the forage for their fall bass, and there's no better time to key on bass food sources and emulate that prey than the fall. It'll get you more bites, and it might just be the most enjoyable bass fishing action you have all year.

TAKE 'EM ON TOP

Major League Fishing pro Josh Bertrand calls Arizona home and loves fall's topwater action in Western reservoirs.

"The bass are super shallow in the fall," he says. "Definitely less than five feet deep. In fact, there's almost no minimum depth for them. They can be in just inches of water, and I can usually catch them on top."

To catch the reservoir bass he most often chases in tournaments or with his guided clients, Bertrand usually throws a Berkley Choppo 90 in the Bone coloration. It's big enough to cast well

but small enough to land quietly, and it has a great buzzing action as he reels it across the surface.



"The Choppo 90 is just the right size to get the attention of larger bass without turning off smaller fish," he says. "I like a medium to medium-fast retrieve and throw the lure on 30-pound-test Berkley

Trilene X9 braid spooled onto an Abu Garcia Revo MGX casting reel with an 8:1 gear ratio and a 7-foot, medium-action Abu Garcia Veritas rod. This is one technique where you really need a fast reel. It'll save you a lot of wear and tear over the course of a day."

And Bertrand will throw the Choppo all day long. That's one of the great things about his fall topwater pattern—it can work from dawn to dusk because the bass are typically very shallow and aggressive. Finding them can be easy, too. Bertrand often does it by watching for birds.

"I'll look for baitfish like shad in the backs of creeks and pockets," he says. "We have a lot of 'dead water' on Western impoundments. An easy way to find good areas with baitfish is to look for diving birds. If I don't see birds or signs of baitfish at the surface, I keep moving. If an area looks good, I might fish it for 10 or 15 minutes, but if I haven't seen bait or gotten a couple of strikes in that time, I'm gone."

Bertrand's topwater pattern can still be hit-or-miss. Often, he'll work through

several areas with all the right indicators before finding feeding bass.

"Sometimes there's no obvious explanation for why one pocket or creek is loaded with fish and another is just dead," he says. "If you really know the lake well, you might realize there's a spring under the surface or there's an important bottom composition change, but other times it just seems random."

And that's why Bertrand loves his topwater pattern. The Choppo allows him to cover a lot of water quickly. He can zip through unproductive areas until he hits it big. Then the action can be fast and furious.

"This is a numbers pattern," he says. "If you're not getting bit pretty quickly, you should probably change areas before you change baits or depths. When you're in the right spot, you're definitely going to know it."

Bertrand focuses on whatever cover is available in the backs of shallow creeks and pockets. It might be vegetation on one reservoir and rock on another. Brush can be found on most

Western lakes, and it's always worth a cast or two.

"But don't overlook the nothing-looking areas," the Arizona pro says. "If there's bait in an area, the bass will usually be there, and they don't need cover to feed. They're there to chase and eat shad or other baitfish and to feed up for the colder weather that's coming. By then, these same fish are often 30 feet deep. Fall can be the last shallow-water hurrah of the year."

His final tip may be his best. Despite all his tournament success, Bertrand is quick to admit that he doesn't have all the answers and that sometimes persistence is just as important as analysis.

"When you fish an area that just looks perfect—it has baitfish, shallow cover, everything—but you can't buy a strike, make a mental note of the spot and come back later," he says. "If all the elements look right to you, there are almost certainly some good bass nearby. The timing might not be right for them to eat, but the fishing could be lights-out an hour or two later."



Brush, whether submerged or visible, offers shelter for all types of forage. It will often be flush with bass, too.



Crawfish are a prime forage in the northern part of the West in November. A crankbait bumping along the bottom will draw strikes from bass keying on them.

CRANK 'EM UP

Former Bassmaster Classic champ Jay Yelas loves river fishing for his fall bass, and living in Oregon means he has plenty of opportunities. Unlike Josh Bertrand's fall pattern in the Southwest, Yelas's approach is not primarily shad-based.

"In the northern half of the West, we have a lot of different forage," Yelas says. "We have some threadfin shad, but we also have American shad, crawfish, yellow perch, squaw fish, bluegill and lots more. Almost everything is up shallow in fall, and it makes for some really exciting fishing."

Yelas's baits of choice for fall bass on Western rivers are medium-running crankbaits like the Storm Wiggle Wart, Lucky Craft LC 1.5, Strike King Pro Model Series 3 or other lures that dive 3 to 8 feet and allow him to cover water.



STRIKE KING
PRO MODEL
SERIES 3

THE O.G. PLOPPER

The popular topwater bait has a surprisingly long history.

Plopper-style baits really took off in the bass market with the introduction of River2Sea's Whopper Plopper in 2010. Since then, it seems that every bass angler has thrown a plopper of some kind, and there are several on the market, including Josh Bertrand's favorite: the Berkley Choppo.

Although it's been wildly successful and often imitated, the plopper is not a new bait style. The CC Roberts Bait Company of Mosinee, Wisc., began making the first plopper-style lure in 1918, and it's still being made today. They call it the Mud Puppy, and it was invented by Constance C. Roberts (1888-1955). He received a patent on his design in 1929. The Mud Puppy has been a popular musky lure for more than a century, but it took the Whopper Plopper to crack the bass market wide open.

What's special about ploppers? Well, for one thing, they can be fished like a buzzbait, but you can stop them dead in the water without them falling to the bottom. For another, because ploppers float, you can fish them slower than a traditional lead-and-wire buzzbait.

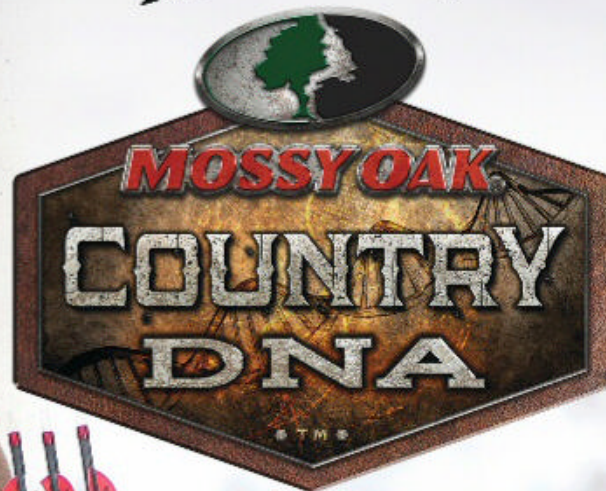


KEN DUKE (LEFT); COURTESY STRIKE KING (TOP)

LIVING AN OUTDOOR LIFESTYLE EVERY
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One reason that Yelas recommends fishing deeper than Bertrand does in fall is that the water's colder in his part of the West. Another is the forage types he's emulating. Shad tend to be surface-oriented at this time. Crawfish and most of the forage on rivers in the West are not.

"Early in the day, the bite may be really shallow," he says. "But once the sun gets up, the bass tend to hold closer to the bottom. A crankbait that hits bottom and deflects off rocks and cover is the best and fastest way to catch them."

When it comes to crankbait colors, Yelas most often opts for a crawfish-, bluegill- or perch-patterned model. He fishes the baits on 12-pound-test Strike King Tour Grade Fluorocarbon line and a 7-foot-6-inch Lew's Mark Rose Ledge Series casting rod designed for small crankbaits. He matches it with a Lew's Team Lite casting reel with a 6.8:1 gear ratio.

"It's not a fast reel," Yelas says, "but with a slow to medium retrieve, I can get my crankbaits down where they need to be, bumping bottom and cover and triggering strikes."

According to Yelas, fall river fishing is all about current. He focuses his casts on eddies, points, substrate transitions (sand to rock, small rock to larger rock, etc.) or anything that creates a current break. Bluff banks and the mouths of creeks always seem to hold fish, too, he says.

"Fall offers some of the best fishing we have all year," says Yelas. "Later, things can get slow, but as long as the water is in the high 40s or 50s, the fishing can be great."

On top or just a few feet beneath the surface, fall bass are out there in great numbers and ready to attack your topwaters and crankbaits. Take a page out of Josh Bertrand's and Jay Yelas's playbooks to get in on the action. 

Bass find deep-diving crankbaits irresistible when fished around eddies, current breaks and substrate transitions in moving water.

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Photographer: Austin Hilgenberg

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LAST BEST MEAT HUNTS

AS LONG AS YOU'RE NOT LOOKING FOR HORNS, MONTANA HAS ABUNDANT OVER-THE-COUNTER DEER AND ELK TAGS, AND MILLIONS OF ACRES TO HUNT.

By Andrew McKean

If venison was currency, most eastern-Montana landowners would be deer-meat millionaires. Ranchland from Plentywood in the northeastern corner to Lewistown in the middle of the state is literally crawling with mule deer and whitetails, and while it sounds strange to say in this day of pay-to-play and drum-tight private-land access, the deer are yours for the taking.

For much of this region, antlerless deer tags are available over the counter for country rich in hunting access. All you need is a tag and a copy of Fish, Wildlife & Parks' Hunter Access Guide, plus a willingness to field-dress one or more deer. What you do with the venison—whether it becomes a year's worth of burger or you transform it into jerky or sausage—is limited only by your work ethic and your culinary abilities.

The reason for the abundance can mainly be attributed to nature's cycles. Montana's mule deer populations spike and dip on a roughly 10-year cycle, and we're currently at a high point on the abundance curve. (Whitetails also cycle, though generally not as dramatically as mule deer.) Second, warmer winters and relatively moist spring and summer conditions have created optimum conditions for survival. Does of both species

are dropping their second or third sets of twins in as many years, and it doesn't take many productive years to build a deer population.

Game managers have responded to the abundance by issuing thousands of antlerless tags. Many of them were distributed in the draw, the deadline for which was back in June. But residents and non-residents alike can purchase over-the-counter Deer B Licenses valid in many hunting districts in eastern Montana. The cost is \$10 for residents and \$75 for non-residents.

Many hunting districts also have leftover antlerless tags, which are sold as surplus items on a first-come basis. You can find the districts and leftover tag numbers by visiting Fish, Wildlife & Parks' website (fwp.mt.gov) and clicking on surplus license tabs.

Note that Deer B tags (this is FWP's designation for antlerless) are species-specific, which means you can't use a whitetail B tag on a mule deer and vice versa. And the rest are designated for a particular region (in the case of Single-Region Whitetail B Tags) or hunting district, so make sure you read the regulations carefully.

Montana antlerless elk tag options and hunting areas are fewer in number, but there may also be some leftover Elk B

tags remaining after the drawing that are available as surplus items. Check FWP's website for these, too, though note that many are valid in hunting districts with tight private-land access.

UNLOCKING BLOCK MANAGEMENT

Once you have your B tag in hand, the next step is to find a place to spend it. Luckily, Montana has both abundant public land and a good amount of private land enrolled in its Block Management access program.

A good place to start finding a place to hunt is FWP's useful Hunt Planner (fwp.mt.gov/gis/maps/newHuntPlanner/) that lets hunters input species, locations and seasons, and offers guidance on regulations, license types and harvest statistics. It also has maps of public- and private-land opportunities. For those who like a physical map, you can order a directory of Block Management maps from FWP's site and have it mailed to you, or you can pick up a guide at any FWP office.

Because the scope of this story is FWP's administrative regions 4 and 6, consider visiting agency offices in Great Falls, Lewistown or Glasgow for more information on where to go to fill a B tag. The regions are different enough in terms of landscape and hunting opportunity that it's worth looking at each in turn.



For just \$75—the cost of a non-resident antlerless tag in Montana—out-of-state hunters can pursue free-range protein in some of the most spectacular settings in North America.



Central Montana is rich with elk, and the region has ample Forest Service and Block Management land on which to hunt them.

REGION 4—CENTRAL MONTANA

Defined by island mountain ranges such as the Little Belt, Highwood and Judith mountain rangess—all of which have significant Forest Service land in their higher elevations—this is probably the “elkiest” region in the state. Securing private-land access for antlered bulls is tough, but many properties are open to antlerless hunting, either through the general season or the later “shoulder” seasons that extend into February.

Lewistown is a good base from which to hunt elk on either Block Management land or public land adjacent to big ranches that perpetually hold elk. Elk, and access to them, have become pretty contentious in the last few years, culminating in legislation that has directed FWP’s management action.

Lewistown has decent camping options and motels that cater to hunters. The best include the Trails End Motel (406-535-5468) and B&B Motel (406-535-5496). Do-it-yourself hunters can

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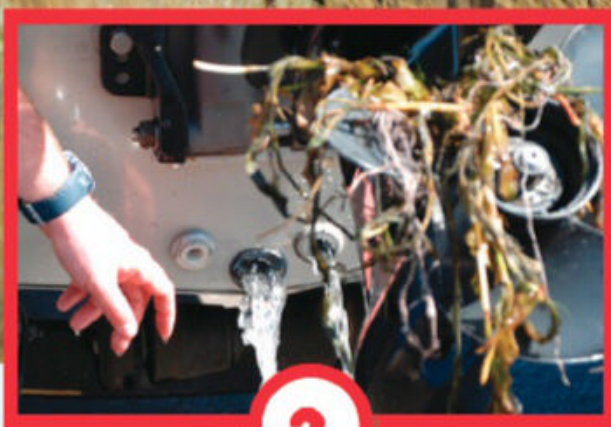
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2

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Learn to identify invasive species in your area. Report findings to a local fish and wildlife agency!

also find a growing number of options to rent rural homesteads through home rental apps like VRBO and Airbnb. As you go east and north from Lewistown, the amount of open BLM land increases, and camping is allowed along most designated roads.

REGION 6—NORTHEAST MONTANA

Amenities like full-service hotels and restaurants get fewer as you go even farther north and east in Montana. This is the “big open” part of the state, where it’s a good idea to pack extra fuel and tires if you venture far off the highways. But it’s also the most deer-rich part of the state, especially as both whitetail and mule deer numbers spike.

Consider lodging options in Havre (on the western end of the region), Malta, Glasgow or Plentywood. Each have a selection of hunter-friendly motels, decent meal options and other services like wild-game butchers and stores where you can buy coolers and sporting goods. But don’t count on much for services in the smallest towns of the region.

Region 6 has the highest number and acreage of Block Management properties in the state, so finding a place to fill a doe tag shouldn’t take a huge amount of work. Elk hunting options are pretty scarce in this part of the state, as most of the B tags were distributed in the draw. Still, even if you don’t have an elk tag, a trip here for antlerless deer will give you a good idea where to apply for elk in future years.

If you do have an elk tag, some of the best elk country is along Fort Peck Reservoir in the Missouri River Breaks. There are also good deer options in the Breaks, but keep in mind that B tags are not valid on the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge, the nation’s second-largest wildlife refuge, in the heart of the Breaks.

Instead, look to the Milk River and its larger tributaries for good whitetail hunting, which extends north and east in the uplands around Fort Peck Indian Reservation. For mule deer, look to any rough country adjacent to irrigated alfalfa and other crops.

TAKE-AWAYS

There may be no better place in the country right now to fill antlerless deer tags than the eastern half of Montana. Burgeoning numbers of deer exist on private and public land, and access is generally a cinch.

However, there’s an important consideration to carry with you as you think about a DIY meat hunt: Don’t overdo it. In years past, parties of hunters have descended on the area with a couple dozen antlerless tags between them and hauled out trailers full of doe carcasses. That doesn’t sit especially well with local hunters and landowners, who are happy for you to come, spend money and time in town, and help reduce the deer population in modest measures—but also expect neighborly behavior in return.

Take care not to rut up muddy roads, be respectful of private property and don’t crowd other hunters. As long as visiting hunters color within the lines, they’ll be welcome to come back year after year. 

Warmer winters and moist springs have provided optimal conditions for mule deer survival in northeast Montana in recent years. As such, mule deer numbers have spiked.



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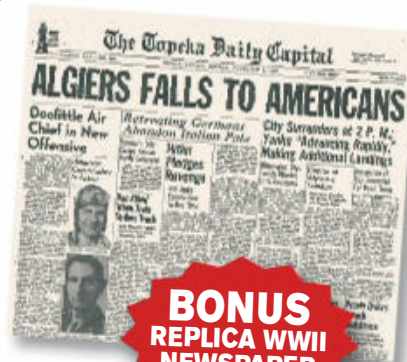
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RETURN TO WONDERLAND

**THE UNTAMED COUNTRY OF FAR WEST TEXAS
OFFERS EXTRAORDINARY BIG-GAME HABITAT, BUT FINDING
WHITETAILS AMID THE SPECTACULAR NATURAL SETTINGS
TESTS EYES AND RESOLVE.**

By John Taranto

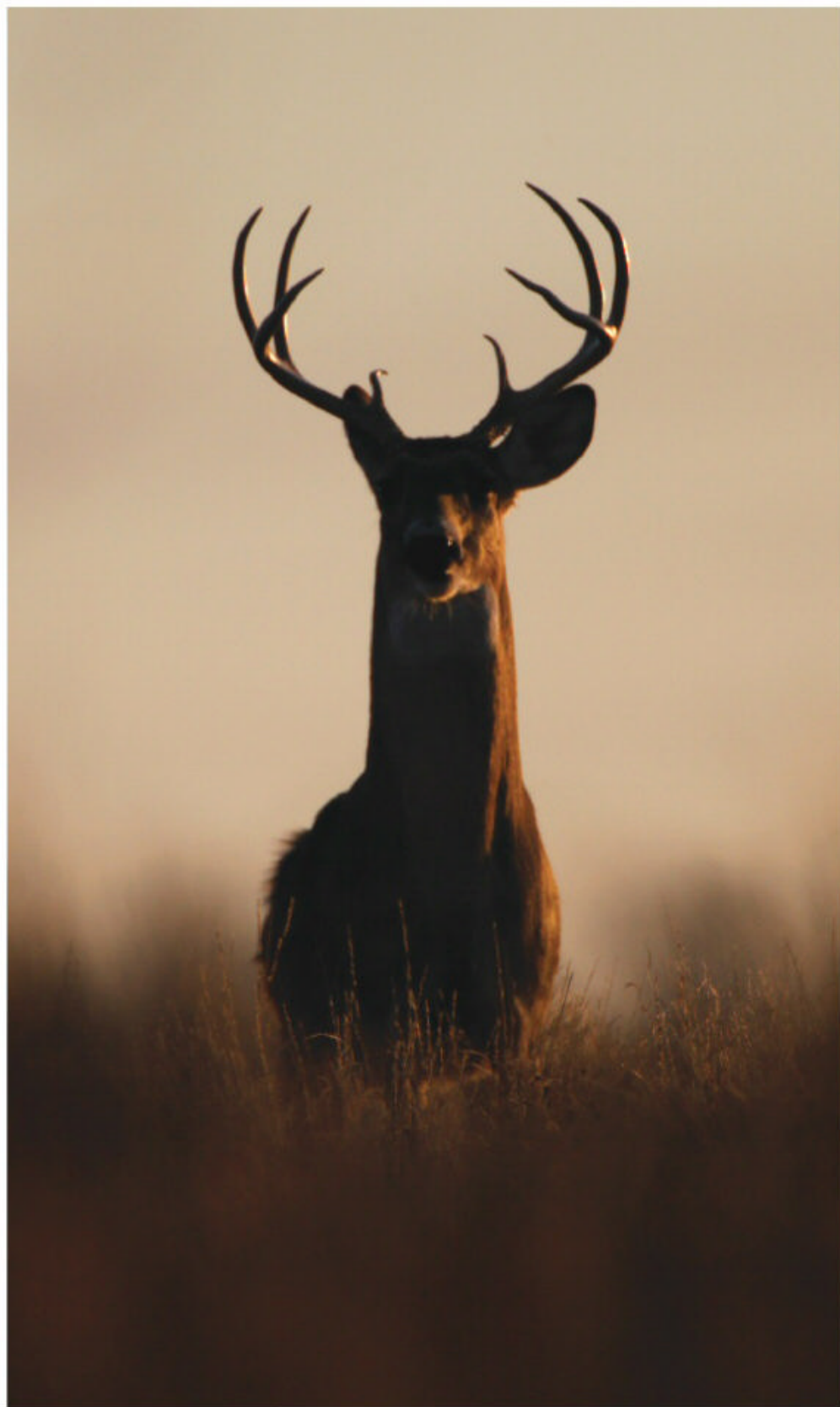
As Steve Jones' 1985 Dodge Power Ram began to backslide down a cattle trail faintly etched into the side of a steep bluff, I immediately started thinking about which way I was going to bail. I was sitting atop an elevated bench in the bed of the truck, far better off than my cohorts trapped within the cab, who would have to fumble with 35-year-old door handles and clamber over one

another to avoid plummeting to their deaths. Fortunately, our skid ended a few feet short of the switchback, and Steve gunned the engine to deliver us from near-certain peril. He would later tell me it was a "controlled slide" to better position the truck for the run up the incline. Whatever it was, I was now fully awake. As we continued up the bluff and my white-knuckled grip on the rail in front of me loosened, I looked

out over the valley below and remembered how grateful I was to be in this place again.

It's difficult to oversell the rugged beauty of Far West Texas. Peaks and bluffs rise dramatically from an endless sea of mesquite, cedar and low-slung bushes that can cause puncture wounds without much effort. Tortuous canyons gouge the landscape. Red and yellow cliffs pop against an impossibly blue

JOHN TARANTO (MAIN)



Whitetails move furtively through the vast ranchland surrounding Mitre Peak and the mountains near Fort Davis, Texas.

sky. Everywhere you look feels like the set of an old western movie.

The first time I visited this magical corner of the Lone Star State, in 2006, was for a pronghorn hunt. My second pilgrimage, a half-dozen years ago, was a hunt for free-range aoudad that live in the craggy mountains of this picturesque land. In addition to those species, the region is home to elk, black bears, mountain lions, feral hogs, mule deer

and whitetails. Few areas in the Lower 48 can rival the region's abundance of big game and staggering beauty.

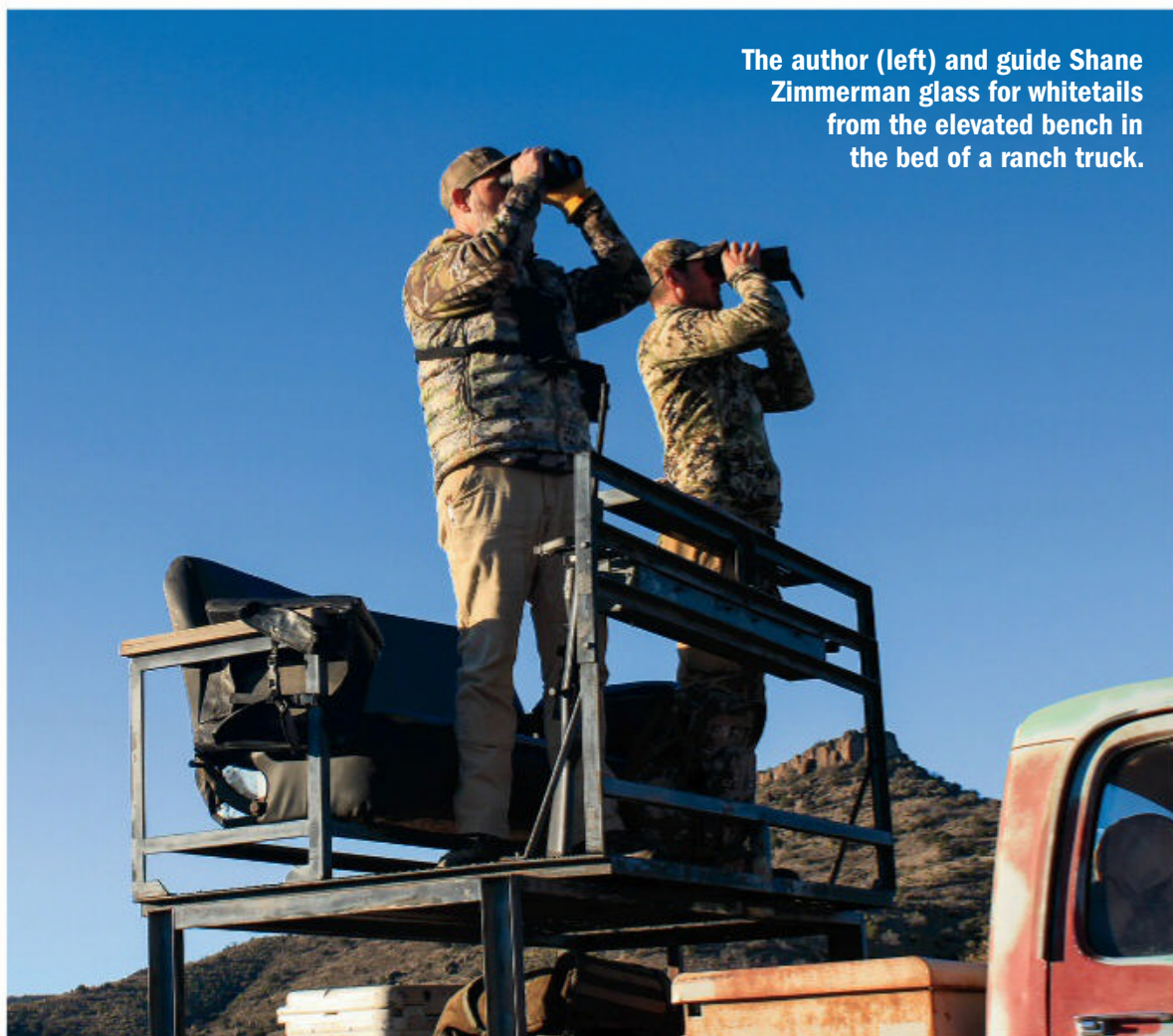
So, when I was invited to hunt whitetails on the Kokernot O6 ranch, an expanse of land totaling nearly 300,000 acres between Fort Davis and Alpine, I eagerly accepted the opportunity to return to the scene of two of my most memorable hunts and a part of the world that continues to captivate me. What

further piqued my interest was this was being billed as a spot-and-stalk affair that would, ideally, allow us to put Mossberg's new Patriot LR Hunter rifle, chambered in 6.5 Creedmoor, to the long-range test. Essentially, it was to be the antithesis of the typical Texas whitetail hunt, most often characterized by interminable sits in a stuffy box blind positioned approximately 100 yards from a feeder.

GLASSING GAME

Dawn of opening day of deer season found me bouncing around a section of the O6 known as the King Pasture with Mike Holm of Federal Ammunition and Shane Zimmerman. A guide with Jones' Backcountry Hunts (backcountryhunts.com), Zimmerman is a real-estate agent by trade, but he spends the fall months guiding with Steve in their home state of New Mexico and on several ranches in West Texas. The plan that first morning of the hunt was to pick our way around the pasture, in the shadow of 6,000-foot Mitre Peak, in hopes of intercepting a buck that had yet to bed down for the day.

As we rolled along, we cut multiple tracks but spotted no bucks, so we decided to park the truck and climb a knob to do some glassing. Already, I was bolstered by the active pursuit of our quarry. I'm OK with sitting in a treestand in an Ohio woodlot or on a field edge in Iowa, but country like this demands to be explored. Picking bedded deer out of the scrubland below us proved



The author (left) and guide Shane Zimmerman glass for whitetails from the elevated bench in the bed of a ranch truck.

AT HOME ON THE RANGE

An affordable rifle built for wide-open spaces

Since its introduction in 2015, Mossberg's Patriot line of bolt-action rifles has grown to include predator, youth and tactical models. For 2021, the company introduced a long-range hunting iteration called, fittingly, the LR Hunter. The **Mossberg Patriot LR Hunter** carries forth several standard features found on the original Patriot—a polymer drop-box magazine, a spiral-fluted bolt, an oversized bolt handle, a user-adjustable (2 to 7 pounds) Lightning Bolt Action trigger—and it also has a number of attributes that tailor it to long-range shooting and hunting.

Perhaps most noticeable is the polymer-coated Monte Carlo stock with its raised comb and flat-bottom, benchrest-style fore-end. These design characteristics are meant to maximize comfort and stability when bearing down on a distant target.

The fore-end, too, has dual swivel studs for a sling and a bipod. Lest you think this is an overtly heavy rifle meant for stationary shooting, the un-scoped weight is a mere 6 1/2 pounds.

The free-floating, fluted, 22-inch barrel is threaded for a muzzle brake or suppressor. A one-piece, 6-inch Picatinny rail offers ample mounting space for optics. The push-feed action features dual locking lugs, a sliding-plate extractor and a plunger-type ejector. A two-stage, rocker-style safety is easily manipulated aft of the bolt handle. Aluminum bedding pillars lend rigidity to the barreled action's interface with the stock.

You might expect such a nicely appointed long-range rifle to retail well north of \$1,000, but the MSRP is a very palatable \$766. You'll find it for less at many dealers (mossberg.com).



JOHN TARANTO (2)



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The Glass Mountains provided a beautiful backdrop to the view from the rickety blind from which the author shot his buck.



THE GLASS AND THE BRASS

A look at the scope and ammo used on the hunt

To my LR Hunter I mounted the new **6-18x50 mm Bushnell Banner 2 riflescope**. The entire Banner 2 line offers a ton of value, with most models retailing for around \$100. The glass is above average for the price and the second-focal-plane BDC reticle is clean and easy to use. Best of all, it pairs with the free Bushnell Ballistic app, which provides yardages for each of the hashmarks on the vertical axis once you enter your scope configuration and load data (bushnell.com).

I fed my rifle **Federal Premium ammunition** loaded with 130-grain Swift Scirocco II bullets. The Scirocco II is a bonded bullet featuring a pure-copper jacket and lead core. Its distinct black polymer tip aids in expansion at both far and close range, but it really shines at longer distances thanks to a sleek design that leads to a high ballistic coefficient of .571. The Federal Premium round produces a reported muzzle velocity of 2,800 fps, and the bullet retains 2,054 fps at 500 yards. It dumps 2,012 foot-pounds of energy at 100 yards and 1,218 at 500. A box of 20 costs about \$66 (federalpremium.com).



JOHN TARANTO (4)

to be a challenge, but the glint off an antler would occasionally betray a mule deer buck here and there; unfortunately, muleys were not on the menu for this hunt. We spotted herds of aoudad and a couple cow elk, too, but no whitetails.

After returning to Shane's truck, we spent the rest of the morning driving the serpentine roads of the pasture, glassing feeders and water tanks from afar. These checkpoints produced only does, javelin- as and a group of hogs that disappeared at full speed into a creek bottom before Mike or I could put one in our crosshairs.

For the afternoon hunt, we crossed Highway 118 to the east side of the ranch, opposite the King Pasture, where the vast majority of the O6 lies. Somehow, this part of the ranch is even more breathtaking than the west side, and we spent the last few hours of daylight alternately shaking our heads at the incredible landscapes and the fact that the only deer we could seem to find were of the mule persuasion.

Drive. Stop. Glass. Drive. Park. Hike. Glass. Hike. Drive. It's not a terrible way to spend an afternoon in Far West

Texas, but the only critter we found willing to cooperate was a too-trusting coyote that stood broadside 109 yards from Shane's truck for too long. The passenger-side rearview mirror proved to be the perfect rifle rest, and I dropped the 'yote where it stood.

HOLED UP

Two other hunters in camp fared better than me on Day 1, both taking good bucks with single shots from their Patriots, and they decided to join us for Day 2. I was glad to have the extra sets of eyes along as we explored another part of the eastern side of the ranch, though my partners were probably wishing they'd slept in during Steve's "controlled slide." Having escaped that episode unscathed, we spent most of the morning glassing canyons and flats from high vantage points.

At one stop, Steve produced an odd-looking whistle from his coat pocket and proceeded to blow an ear-splitting series of high-pitched notes that reverberated off the canyon walls. Upon closer inspection, the "whistle" was in fact two .30-30 casings with primers removed, welded together at the bases, and with a reed stuck in one end. Steve told me his homemade predator call often prompted bedded deer to stand up and reveal



Steve Jones often uses a homemade predator call to locate deer.



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While the author's hunt didn't play out the way he envisioned it, he had no complaints with its outcome or the time spent in Steve Jones' camp.

themselves in the thick cover at the bottoms of canyons, but none responded to the call that day. Nonetheless, it was an exhilarating morning of spotting game and seeing parts of the ranch that Steve himself had previously never explored. One such spot, a pond at the top of a

butte that was loaded with ducks, had countless deer hoofprints in the mud surrounding it, but nary a live whitetail to be found.

Over lunch, we met up with Dave Callaway, another of Steve's guides, who had seen a couple good whitetails earlier in the morning. One of his hunters shot one of them, and Dave was confident he had the other, a solid 5-by-5, pegged, but he felt the best way to kill him was to sit in a box blind approximately 100 yards from a feeder—the very scenario I had hoped to avoid. However, a day and a half of driving, hiking and glassing had produced few whitetail sightings, so I agreed to hole up in the blind that evening and see what transpired.

Later, as we prepared to leave camp for the afternoon hunt, I noticed Dave loading an extension ladder into the bed of his truck.

“What's that for?” I asked as I set my rifle and pack in the cab.

“This is how you're going to get into the blind,” he replied matter-of-factly.

Turns out, this box blind was something of a relic. Once I'd ascended the ladder, I found it to be well ventilated, with several large holes in the walls and floor. A stuffy box blind it was not. I managed to position my seat so that I could properly shoulder the rifle if need be, and settled in for my sit.

The feeder, complete with bales of alfalfa, was to the south of me, and that's the direction from which a strong, steady wind blew for most of the afternoon. On one hand, there was no chance of my scent wafting into the cover from which the buck was supposed to arrive. On the other, a few of the gusts had me wondering if this decrepit structure would topple over with me inside.

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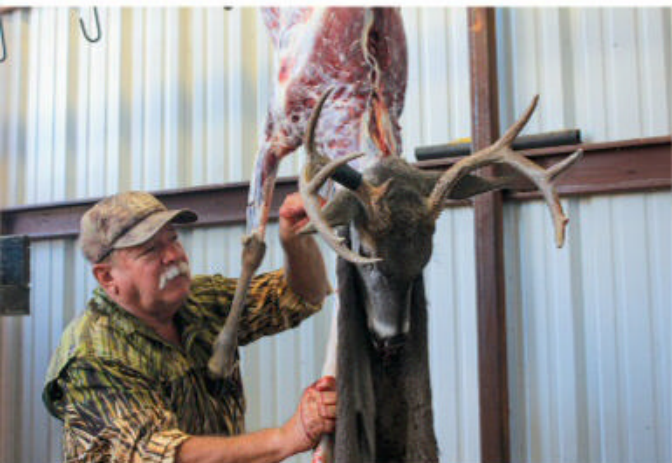
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Around 5 o'clock the wind mercifully laid down, and a half-hour later a buck fitting the description Dave had given to me—a big-bodied 5-by-5 with good G3s—materialized from the brush and slowly approached the feeder, making a wide loop. Once he cleared the brush, I centered the crosshair and pulled the trigger. The buck ran about 40 yards straight toward me and piled up behind a mesquite bush.

As I sat there in the aftermath of this brief encounter, after radioing Dave that the deed was done, I quietly soaked up the sights and sounds that surrounded me. Out the side window of the blind, Mitre Peak rose in the distance, bathed in the hazy yellow light of dusk. Birds chirped and old steel windmills creaked, keeping me company on yet another memorable evening in Far West Texas. 

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V167

MODERN CLASSIC



THE HENRY X MODEL IS A LEVER-ACTION RIFLE BUILT FOR TODAY'S HUNTERS.

By Adam Heggenstaller

Lever-action rifles are steeped in tradition and soaked with nostalgia, but that doesn't mean a lever gun isn't just as useful now as it was at the turn of the 19th century. Henry Repeating Arms is one manufacturer that recognizes there is a lot of life left in lever guns. They are by far the company's primary focus, and with manufacturing facilities in Rice Lake, Wis., and Bayonne, N.J., Henry is among the top five long-gun makers in the U.S.

Although part of the company's mission is to embody the history and heritage of lever guns—it takes its name from Benjamin Tyler Henry, the inventor of the first lever-action repeating rifle

patented in 1860—it also strives to update its firearms' features to address the current needs of hunters and shooters. The Lever Action X Model line is one example of how Henry marries classic form with modern function. I tested the sleek-black Model H009X .30-30 Win. version and, while I've long been a fan of traditionally styled lever guns, I can appreciate several contemporary characteristics of the X Model that give it some advantages over its predecessors.

Let's start with the stock. Rather than hardwood, which the company uses on the majority of its lever-action rifles, the X Model sports a polymer buttstock and fore-end. A benefit of polymer is that it permits desired features to be

molded into the stock, such as integral sling-attachment points. There are no screw-in studs to come loose, rust or squeak. Angled relief cuts at the attachment points provide clearance for sling hardware. In addition, panels of stippling are molded into the sides of the fore-end and the buttstock wrist to improve grip.

Unique to the X Model, the fore-end is one of the rifle's defining features. Molded into its bottom in front of the sling-attachment point is a four-slot Picatinny rail, and two Magpul M-Lok slots are located at the 3 o'clock and 9 o'clock positions. These provide options for attaching accessories, such as lights and lasers.

Some traditionalists may question the practicality of this update, but keep in



The Henry X Model in .30-30 Win. is equipped to fill the roles of deer rifle, truck gun and camp-defense firearm.

mind that hog and predator hunting is often done at night, when a light or laser on the gun can be the difference between hitting a target and simply making noise. A lever-action .30-30 Win. is about perfect for hogs in many situations, and it will certainly work on coyotes while serving as a multi-purpose truck gun.

In addition, the bottom rail provides a convenient way to attach a bipod. Many shooting rests are not ideal for lever-action rifles because they do not allow the action to be fully cycled without raising or tilting the gun. A bipod on the fore-end, combined with a sandbag of adequate height under the buttstock, solves this problem by allowing room for the lever to move during cycling while the rifle remains in a consistent position.

Also remember that lever-action rifles have a history of being used for home defense and personal protection. Henry optimizes the X Model for these tasks

with a means to mount two types of accessories that can provide huge advantages in low-light situations.

Perhaps the best characteristics of the rail and slots are what they do not add to the rifle. They are not bulky or obtrusive, and they do not interfere with handling. Most of the fore-end has traditional lines that give it a familiar feel.

Along with the fore-end and buttstock features, the X Model's threaded muzzle sets it apart as a lever-action rifle built for today's hunters and shooters. Suppressors have become more popular in the field and on the range, and the muzzle's 5/8x24 thread pattern permits easy attachment of many models. Adding a muzzle brake is another option. The X Model comes with a checkered cap that protects the threads when a suppressor or brake is not in use.

A tubular magazine with a brass liner and a loading port beneath the barrel is a

SPECIFICATIONS

HENRY X MODEL

henryusa.com

TYPE: lever-action centerfire rifle

CALIBER: .30-30 Win.

BARREL: 21.38"; blued steel; 5/8x24 threaded muzzle with cap; 1:12" twist rate

TRIGGER PULL WEIGHT: 4.38 lbs.

SAFETY: transfer bar

MAGAZINE: tubular; 5-round capacity

STOCK: black synthetic; solid-rubber recoil pad; Picatinny rail and Magpul M-Lok slots on fore-end

SIGHTS: fully adjustable fiber-optic rear, fiber-optic front; receiver drilled and tapped for scope bases

OVERALL LENGTH: 40.38"

WEIGHT: 8.07 lbs.

MSRP: \$1,019

hallmark of Henry rifles. Loading requires twisting the checkered-steel liner cap to unlock the liner from the magazine's exterior tube and then sliding the liner forward to open the port. Insert cartridges through the port, push the liner—which includes a follower and spring—back into the tube, and turn the cap to lock the liner in place. Cartridges in the magazine do not have to be cycled through the action to unload the rifle. Remove the liner and dump out the rounds either through the port or the front of the tube. The X Model keeps this design, although the liner cannot be removed with a suppressor in place. Current .30-caliber cans have diameters that are too great to permit clearance.

In 2019 Henry introduced its first rifles with a loading gate in the side of the receiver, and the X Model also includes this feature. The magazine can be loaded through the gate with a suppressor in place. Moreover, whether the



A 2-inch length of Picatinny rail molded into the fore-end allows easy attachment of accessories to cover a variety of situations.

rifle is equipped with a can or not, this loading method is faster than removing the magazine's brass liner and loading through the port in the tube.

There are two other areas of the X Model where Henry enhances the functionality of the traditional lever-action rifle. First, the lever loop is widened and extended to match the curve of the buttstock's grip perfectly. It's not an overly huge shape, which can lead to excessive hand movement within the loop, but it's large enough to accommodate nearly any size of gloved hand.

Sights have disappeared on many hunting rifles, but Henry gives them emphasis on the X Model. The front and rear sight both contain fiber-optic inserts for better visibility. The rear sight is adjustable for windage and elevation. The receiver of the X Model is also drilled and tapped for mounting an optic. Henry offers low and medium, one-piece Talley mounts and an Evolution Gun Works Picatinny rail for the H009X model via its direct-to-consumer Henry Pride website (henrypride.com). In addition, the hole pattern is compatible with a Weaver 63B one-piece Top Mount base.

I went with the latter option when setting up the rifle for testing, topping the Weaver base with a Leupold VX-3HD 2.5-8x36 mm scope in quick-detach rings. I found that if I removed the scope, I could look through the trough that runs the length of the base and use the iron sights. It's always a good idea to have a backup plan, and in really thick brush, iron sights might be the better option.



SHOOTING RESULTS

LOAD Hornady LeverEvolution MonoFlex
BULLET WEIGHT 140 grs.
MUZZLE VELOCITY 2,336 fps
AVERAGE GROUP 1.24"

LOAD Hornady Custom InterLock FP
BULLET WEIGHT 170 grs.
MUZZLE VELOCITY 2,128 fps
AVERAGE GROUP 1.47"

LOAD Winchester Super-X Power-Point
BULLET WEIGHT 170 grs.
MUZZLE VELOCITY 2,143 fps
AVERAGE GROUP 1.07"

Muzzle velocity is the average of 10 consecutive shots fired through an RCBS AmmoMaster chronograph at 10 feet. Accuracy is the result of five consecutive, three-shot groups fired from a sandbag rest at 100 yards.

During testing I put more than 140 rounds through the rifle, and it functioned without fail. Every cartridge fed smoothly from the magazine, and the rifle threw empty cases clear of the action with no hang-ups. I appreciated the easy loading offered by the side gate, and the transfer-bar safety provided peace of mind when lowering the hammer.

The transfer-bar mechanism prevents the gun from firing unless the hammer is fully cocked and the trigger is pulled. Removing pressure from the trigger while lowering the hammer keeps the transfer bar, located within a slot cut into the face of the hammer, from contacting the receiver-mounted firing pin. If the hammer accidentally falls while it is being lowered and there is no pressure on

the trigger, the rifle will not fire. There is no half-cock position, and the rifle can be safely carried with the hammer down while a cartridge is in the chamber.

The X Model was among the most accurate .30-30 lever-action rifles I've ever shot. The average of 15, three-shot groups with three different loads fired from 100 yards was 1.26 inches. The Hornady MonoFlex and Winchester Power-Point loads both produced a couple sub-MOA groups.

In terms of performance and appearance, the X Model .30-30 more than meets modern expectations. At the same time, though, the rifle retains many of the features hunters love about lever guns. The lever-action rifle is alive and well, and Henry proves it with the X Model. 



Two orange rods border the notch of the fully adjustable, semi-buckhorn rear sight, while the ramped front sight consists of a green rod within a metal housing.

ADAM HEGGENSTALLER (TOP LEFT, BOTTOM MIDDLE, BOTTOM RIGHT)

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PICK A PACK

WHETHER IT'S AN ALL-DAY VIGIL IN A TREESTAND OR AN 8-MILE HIKE IN THE BACKCOUNTRY, THESE PACKS WILL KEEP YOUR GEAR ORGANIZED DURING THE HUNT.

By Game & Fish Staff

There are two main things hunters pay for when they buy a pack: capacity and technology. Capacity's influence on price is pretty straightforward; the larger the pack, the more material required to make it and therefore the higher the price. Technology is a more complicated subject and covers pack features from the design of the frame to the materials used in construction and the type of water-proofing applied to the fabric.

To get the best pack for your needs without overpaying, analyze how you're going to use it. For example, it makes no sense to pay for a lightweight pack that can hold a few days' worth of gear if most of your hunts are three-hour sits that require a 15-minute walk to the stand. In that case, the number of pockets and their arrangement may be the most important features to consider. On the other hand, don't sell yourself short on capacity. Make sure a pack will hold all

the gear you're planning to take into the woods without being so jammed you have to yank on the zippers to close it. And remember, as the season progresses and temperatures drop, you'll need more space for hauling heavier clothing.

Here are four packs at four price points with features that cover the gamut of big-game hunting. Finding the right pack has never been easier, as options like the following meet specific sets of hunter needs perfectly. 

COURTESY OF ALPS OUTDOORS

ALPS OUTDOORZ IMPULSE

CAPACITY: 1,850 cubic inches
TOP FEATURE: Quiet access
MSRP: \$150
alpsoutdoorz.com

Some do-it-all daypacks are too big. Some are too small. But the ALPS OutdoorZ Impulse is just right. The wide, fold-down top secures in place via silent magnets and offers unhindered access to the main compartment. The pack features a square base so it sits upright, or it can be hung from a tree via the carry handle. Its fleece exterior is quiet and backed by a soft fabric that also minimizes noise when contents are moved around as you dig for that last Snickers bar.

TENZING HANGTIME

CAPACITY: 1,600 cubic inches
TOP FEATURE: Tons of pockets
MSRP: \$220
tenzingoutdoors.com

No matter if you're heading to the tree-stand or the ground blind, this pack will carry all the essentials for a successful day in the woods. The Hangtime Day Pack was designed with the archery hunter in mind. Easily strap your bow to the back on the ambidextrous bow carrier while all your other gear remains at hand in the pack's 15 pockets. The Hangtime's rigid EVA-molded shell holds its shape for hassle-free accessibility to all your gear. If you're hunting on the ground, attach your quiver to the side of the pack for quick access to arrows.



KUIU PRO 2300 KIT

CAPACITY: 2,300 cubic inches
TOP FEATURE: Interchangeable bag sizes
MSRP: \$489
kuiu.com

The Pro pack kit includes a bag made from 500-denier Cordura Ripstop material treated with K-DWR for water resistance, carbon-fiber frame with Spread Tow technology for increased rigidity and strength, padded suspension with 4 inches of torso adjustment, and two hip belt pouches. Four other Pro bags come in capacities of 1,850 to 7,800 cubic inches, and all are interchangeable with the Pro frame and suspension. Each bag includes a 2,500-cubic-inch load sling that enables carrying meat or additional gear outside the pack. The Pro 2300 pack setup weighs less than 4 1/2 pounds.



STONE GLACIER EVO 6900

CAPACITY: 6,900 cubic inches
TOP FEATURE: Lightweight storage space
MSRP: \$684
stoneglacier.com

Born out of necessity for backcountry excursions, this pack has a 6,400-cubic-inch main bag and an additional 500-cubic-inch hood. With that amount of space, you shouldn't have any issues loading all your gear for a multi-day hunt. In case you need extra room for cold-weather clothing or other bulky items, you can put more stuff on the 2,500-cubic-inch load shelf, which doubles as a meat hauler for the pack out. This pack weighs just a little more than 5 pounds empty when attached to Stone Glacier's Medium Evo Frame, and it can carry 150-plus pounds comfortably.



BRAGGING RIGHTS

SOME GUYS DON'T KNOW HOW TO SHARE SUCCESS.

When Shane was younger, the boy's father hunted ducks with a fellow named Robert. Bob, as Shane's father called him, was in his early 30s, ambitious and outspoken. Many considered him an up-and-comer at the company where Shane's father worked.

Robert was always outfitted with the latest gear, and it didn't take long for Shane to recognize that the former high-school quarterback star was a darn good shot. Robert shot at everything that flew or paddled by, and he was seldom short on shells. He was quick to call out his triumphs and even quicker to tease anyone who missed a duck, young Shane included. Despite all this, Robert was a decent enough guy and so he was often invited when Shane and his father ventured afield.

One overcast morning the three were hunkered in a blind on Charlie's Pond. They were bagging a few birds, but the flights of ducks weren't exactly coming fast. A duck or two would pass cloud-high every 20 minutes or so, and it was just enough to keep them in the blind.

Since Shane's father was the most experienced duck hunter in the group, he was also the shot caller. It was back in the days of the 100-point-maximum bag-limit system, where each species and gender of duck was assigned a conservation value by the game department based on the population's overall health. The shot caller's job was not only to tell the rest of the crew when to start shooting, but also to identify ducks on the wing and call them out to



minimize the risk of any hunter breaching his daily point allotment.

Robert had shot at the majority of the ducks that morning as usual, and as usual he had claimed them as fast as they fell. Everyone in the blind realized who was killing the most ducks, but as even young Shane knew, sometimes when companions shot at the same bird at the same time, it didn't matter whose pellet administered the fatal blow.

A courteous duck hunter would simply declare, "We got 'em!" or "Good shooting!" and go on. Yet Robert seemed to shoot by the mantra of "If it falls, it's mine!" Shane could tell his father was growing increasingly annoyed at this behavior.

Around 9 o'clock Shane heard the tell-tale whistle of wingbeats overhead and glanced up to see a familiar silhouette.

He was surprised when his father yelled, "Take it!"

A volley of shots planted the bird on the far bank with a spectacular thud.

"I nailed it!" exclaimed Robert with glee.

"You did, did you?" asked Shane's father.

"Yes sir!" replied the brash Robert.

"Dang it, Bob," interjected Shane's father, clearly irritated. "How do you know you killed that bird when all three of us were shooting at it?"

"Because when I pulled the trigger I saw him fall right away," said Robert matter-of-factly.

Shane's father looked at the young executive and nodded his head as he untied the boat's anchor line. The hunters paddled to the opposite side of the pond where the duck fell. Before

reaching the dead duck, Shane's father turned to Robert.

"And you're sure you got it?" he asked again.

"No doubt about it," Robert said, smiling at his success.

"OK, Bob," said Shane's father as he pulled the mottled brown body of the mallard hen from the reeds. It was the crown jewel of ducks, worth 100 points by itself. Every duck hunter knew you could only shoot one mallard hen per day. That's why most hunters avoided shooting them, and it was a big reason why mallards were making such a comeback.

"Congratulations, laddie! You're done for the day," said Shane's father.

Robert's smile vanished as he accepted his mallard hen. He kept his muzzle, and his mouth, quiet for the rest of the morning.

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