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A hand holding a large hunting knife with an orange blade and black handle, set against a background of a wooden crate and autumn foliage. The knife has a white butterfly logo on the blade. The hand is wearing a camouflage sleeve. The background shows a wooden crate with a piece of rope and a piece of wood on top. The overall scene is outdoors with autumn leaves visible.

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ART DIRECTION Chris Gorrell

STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER Michael Anschuetz

FIELD EDITORS

EXECUTIVE FIELD EDITOR Craig Boddington

WESTERN FIELD EDITOR Joseph von Benedikt

CONTRIBUTORS

Will Brantley, Colton Heward

Keith Wood, Jim Zumbo, Chris Hunt,

Andrew McKean, John Wootters

PRODUCTION COORDINATOR

Jenny Kaeb

ENDEMIC AD SALES

VP, ENDEMIC SALES

Michael Savino mike.savino@outdoorsg.com

NATIONAL ENDEMIC SALES

Jim McConville (440) 791-7017

WESTERN REGION

Hutch Looney hutch@hlooney.com

EASTERN REGION

Pat Bentzel (717) 695-8095

MIDWESTERN REGION / WHERE TO GO

Mark Thiffault (720) 630-9863

NATIONAL AD SALES

ACCOUNT DIRECTOR – DETROIT OFFICE

Kevin Donley (248) 798-4458

NATIONAL ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE – CHICAGO OFFICE

Carl Benson (312) 955-0496

DIRECT RESPONSE ADVERTISING/NON-ENDEMIC

Anthony Smyth (914) 409-4202

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A hiker with a large backpack is seen from behind, ascending a steep, rocky mountain slope. The hiker is using a trekking pole. The foreground is filled with large, grey, jagged rocks. The background shows a vast, hazy mountain range under a cloudy sky. The overall tone is rugged and adventurous.

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CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER,
PUBLISHING & BRANDED MEDIA Mike Carney

EVP, GROUP PUBLISHER & OPERATIONS Derek Sevcik

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VP, MANUFACTURING Deb Daniels

SENIOR DIRECTOR, PRODUCTION Connie Mendoza

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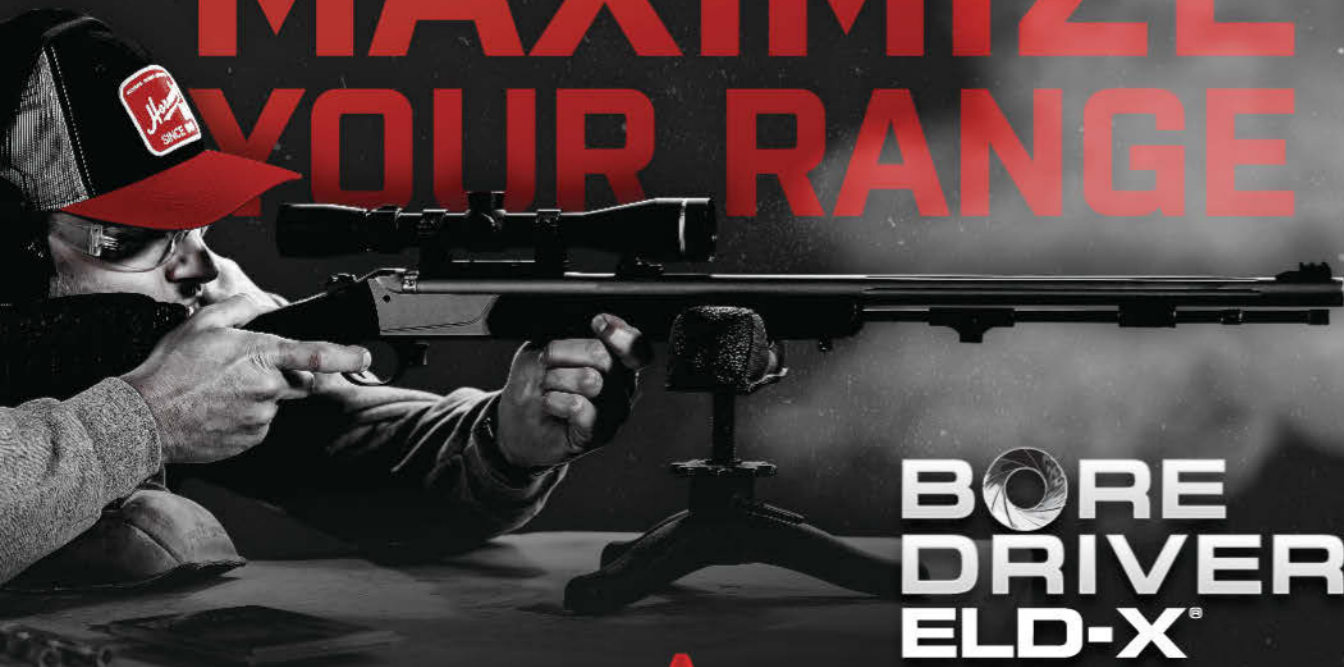


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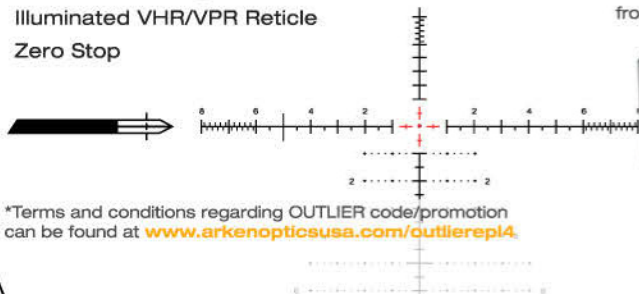
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Editor: David Draper, 2 News Plaza, Peoria, IL 61614
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An Autumn Encounter

CLOSE YOUR EYES for a moment. Imagine you're sitting 15 feet off the ground, swaying ever so slightly as a stiff northern breeze buffets the oak tree you've strapped yourself to on a cool, November morning. The last leaves of the year relinquish their grip, spiraling to the forest floor below.

You've selected this spot carefully, basing your decision on a variety of factors, from wind direction to mast availability to subtle changes in the terrain. Oh, and of course, there are those dozen photographs of a mature buck sent to your phone from the cellular-equipped trail cam staked nearby. For the modern deer hunter, woodsmanship has given way to advanced technology.

Since we're pretending, let's imagine you forgot to change the batteries in the trail cam, so you don't know exactly when and where the deer is set to appear. No, this is still a game of chance, with the odds wavering in and out of your favor along the fickle, swirling winds of fall. Those winds threaten to betray your presence when that unseen doe blows at the strange scent reaching its nose. You lock every muscle, scarcely breathing as you move your eyes, hoping to spot the deer before it sees you.

The doe stands just off the trail—the long, Roman nose outstretched, nostrils flared as it tests the breeze. One hoof raised, ready to stomp out an alert warning the entire woods to the presence of a human. You wait long minutes, though it can seem like hours, willing the doe to wander off, and take its two yearlings with her. You could kill her. Fill your tag. Some fresh meat would be good, but it's November. The rut. The time for killing does is yet to come, when the weather turns cold. No, you're here for a buck.

Finally, still unsure of itself, the doe turns and trots back into the woods



the way it came, trailing its fawns. You release the breath held deep in your chest, stretch cramping muscles and loosen the knuckles that grip the rifle stock like a vise.

That moment of relaxation lasts only a second before a faint crunch of leaves starts the whole process over again. As you tense up, there's another crunch, and another, each one a step closer. You shift your eyes far to the side, not chancing to move so much as a muscle as you try to see what's approaching. Squirrel? No. Something bigger.

The buck marches purposefully, its eyes locked on the spot in the woods that swallowed the doe as she disappeared. It's white-tipped tines, reaching above its head, catch your focus. Maybe it's a record-book buck, face grizzled with age. Maybe it's a small basket-racked adolescent, wild-eyed with the scent of the doe in its nostrils. Maybe it doesn't matter and you're happy to have a chance to punch your tag.

If you've spent any amount of time in the deer woods, an encounter like this is a familiar one. It plays itself out every season in an infinite number of variations. And though it's so common as to be nearly predictable, it never gets old, no matter how many seasons you have under your belt. This moment, when a deer walks below your stand, is what we dream about all year long. And whether we take the shot or pass on it hoping for something bigger, being there, in the woods on a November morning with a tag in our pocket and a deer in range, is what keeps up coming back, season after season.

See you around the campfire,

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink.

David Draper | Editor in Chief
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OUT THERE



B

Busted! Every hunter who has walked the woods has experienced the heartbreak of watching a big whitetail buck bound away with its tail raised in alarm. Usually a white flag signifies surrender, but in this case it's the hunter who is forced to throw in the towel.

Spooking a mature whitetail makes it almost unkillable, at least for the rest of the day. Better to back out, regroup and make a new plan. The good news is a whitetail buck has a home range. Unlike elk, which will clear out of the country at the first push of pressure, a buck should reappear within a day or two, especially during the rut when hot does keep them moving. —David Draper



WAR EAGLE 1648

Back when we were in our early 20s, my wife and I were living in a one-bedroom apartment and sleeping on an air mattress. What we really needed was some furniture and down-payment money for a house. Instead, we spent every penny we had on a camouflage aluminum boat; a 16-foot War Eagle with a 40-horse Yamaha on the back, a trolling motor up front, and two new depthfinders. We dubbed it the *Kitty Tickler*, since it was used in the summer for catfish noodling and some of the old-timers around us called hand fishing for flatheads “tickling.” But this was no single-use boat, what with rivers all around and 12 months of fun to be had every year.

We ran that little boat up the Mississippi to hunt mallards on the sandbars, and it’s a wonder we didn’t get killed doing it. I snaked it through the trees when the Hatchie River got out of its banks. Early in duck season, I’d push it across mud flats and beaver dams to hunt for wood ducks and teal, and then come winter we’d set longline spreads of goldeneyes and bluebills from it, out on the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers.

I’ve spent many spring mornings standing on the bow of the *Kitty Tickler*, owl-hooting for turkeys, and the same spot works well for hauling climbing stands or squirrel guns in the fall. Several years ago, with cracked welds and

CONSERVATION CORNER



TAKING NEW HUNTERS FROM THE FIELD TO THE FORK

IT’S IMPORTANT for all of us to help others become hunters, and it’s amazingly rewarding. Research suggests there are roughly 25 million Americans who are interested in learning to hunt. Many of these aspiring hunters did not grow up in and around hunting, and they are the ones we really need to mentor to diversify and expand hunting participation.

NDA’s Field to Fork program is a food-focused hunter recruitment program for adults from nonhunting backgrounds. Field to Fork’s goal is to sustainably increase and diversify participation and societal acceptance of hunting by building, empowering and educating a diverse

community of mentors and new adult hunters who enjoy a shared passion for deer hunting. Field to Fork invites adults outside of the traditional hunting culture to learn self-sufficiency in hunting and sourcing their own protein.

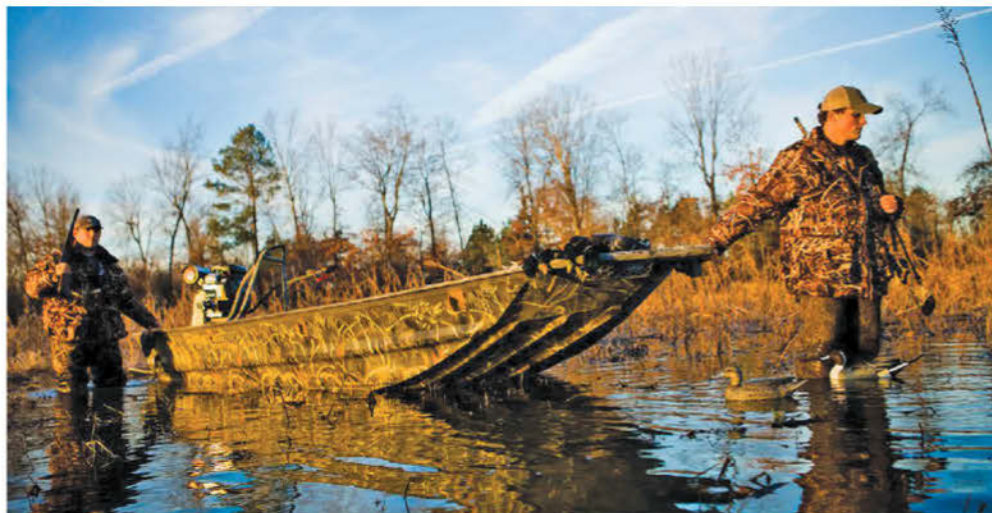
Field to Fork continues to blaze a new trail in hunter recruitment, proving there is strong desire among many nonhunting adults to learn to hunt deer for food. Field to Fork has proved the “efficiency” of recruiting adult hunters: They have the independence and ability to hunt on their own immediately after they receive a helping hand for their first experience, and the majority of Field to Fork recruits are in fact continuing to hunt independently. These new hunters are sharing their venison with others, buying hunting equipment of their own and even taking other new hunters into the deer woods.

For more information check out the National Deer Association at deerassociation.com —*Hank Forester*



fading paint, the boat got towed down to Monticello, Arkansas, where the War Eagle employees looked over the abuse as if it were nothing more than a sunburn. They put in a new floor, re-did the wiring and fixed the miscellaneous broken stuff. If there's one guarantee of owning a boat—even a great one—it's that something will break.

I've thought about selling the boat and getting a new one, but since it's been around for 15 years, three dogs, three trucks, one kid and two sets of furniture and hasn't failed me yet, I might just hang onto it a while longer. —*Will Brantley*



BULLET BOARD

BULLET BASICS

This is Barnes' traditional deep-penetrating, bone-breaking all-copper bullet in its purest form. It's a flat-base design, which makes for easy accuracy. The nose features a massive hollow cavity to ensure dramatic expansion. And the shank has several grooves to reduce bearing surface and keep pressures low so it can be driven fast. Although it doesn't have as high BCs as the Tipped TSX and LRX versions, the standard hollow-point TSX has the edge in terms of deep penetration. As such, it's a prime choice for crossover use on moose, bison, big African antelope and dangerous game such as Cape buffalo.

TESTING GROUND

My friend Austin Brown recovered the bullet shown from a huge free-range kudu bull he shot with Kowas Hunting Safaris in Namibia. With his PH and tracker, he'd followed the bull for hours through a massive, dense acacia thicket. Finally, they jumped the bull at about 20 yards, and Austin shot him like a flushing quail, taking the only shot he was offered—up the tailpipe. Thankfully, he had the right bullet for the shot presentation.

Barnes 300-grain .375 TSX



FIELD PERFORMANCE

Muzzle velocity was 2,450 fps, and muzzle energy about 4,000 ft-lbs. The 300-grain TSX took the kudu bull up through the hip, shattering the big bone socket and raking forward through the abdomen and diaphragm and into the vitals. The bull took the bullet hard, but rallied and vanished into the thornbush. He piled up some 80 yards later.

STATS

After penetrating an estimated 40 inches, angling through heavy bone, dense muscle, paunch and vitals, the bullet came to rest against the hide mid-ribs. Retained weight is 294.9 grains, or 98%. Average expanded diameter is 0.74 inch, or nearly double original diameter.

NOTES/OBSERVATIONS

Invariably accurate, hard-hitting and deep-penetrating, this bullet is one of the best choices available for all-around use in a .375-caliber magnum, to distances of 300 yards or so. —*Joseph von Benedikt*



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BELT IN

Statistically speaking, using a treestand is about the most dangerous thing a hunter can do. I personally know a dozen or more people who've fallen from stands. Some hit the ground and were hurt badly, but most were caught by safety equipment and only hurt a little. Put me in that second group. A ladder stand fell out from under me a few years ago, but I was in a harness and attached to a Hunter Safety System LifeLine. The fall wasn't fun, but I didn't go to the hospital either.

The problem with safety gear is that not everyone uses it properly, and one of the most misused items is the lineman's climbing belt or rope. Many new treestand harnesses come with two belts. The shorter one goes around the tree and attaches to your harness tether, and the long one is the lineman's belt, made to be used in conjunction with the two loops near the hips on either side of a safety harness. There are also aftermarket lineman's ropes that use two carabineers and a prussic knot, rather than a buckle, to take up the slack.

Both are designed to be used for quick climbing, and also for added security when you need to use your hands up in the tree. They're not your primary protection from a fall. "People look at the lineman's belt or rope as a fall-restraint device, but that's not what it's really for," says John Wydner with HSS. "With the lineman's belt or rope, you should always be doubly attached, either with a tether or a safety line." —*Will Brantley*



SETTLE IN

Where the lineman's belt shines is for hanging treestand steps and lock-on stands. I prefer a belt over a rope. I thread it through one loop of my harness, behind me across my hips, through the other loop, then around the tree and finally through the belt's buckle, which I keep on my right-hand side. I can loosen or tighten the belt as I climb. When I'm hanging sticks for a new set, my initial ascent is with the lineman's belt around the tree, but I also pull up a LifeLine clipped to my tether.

Once I'm at hunting height, I install the LifeLine around the tree and then clip onto it. At that point, there's virtually no way to fall. I pull my stand up and, with the lineman's belt, I can lean back and have both hands free to work with complete confidence.

The belt has uses after the stand is set, too. I use mine when I need to lean out to trim shooting lanes, and sometimes even while I'm hunting. Last fall, I had a lock-on set in a sycamore that was ideal in every way except that it was crooked, so my stand platform leaned slightly. Drawing my bow for shots behind the stand was all but impossible because I had to balance myself against the trunk. So, I pulled the lineman's belt out of my pack, put it around the tree, cinched it up tight and then was totally comfortable leaning back just a bit to draw my bow (keeping in mind that I was still clipped into my LifeLine the whole time, too).

For me, anything that might keep me from falling and also potentially help me get a shot is worth bringing on every hunt.



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After last season's successful launch of their Proximity line, Kuiu has introduced a second series of clothing dedicated to deer hunters. The **Encounter Jacket** brings midseason versatility in the form of a quiet, bonded exterior and warm fleece lining. Designed to be silent, it features magnetic pockets and quiet zippers. The line also includes a vest, pants, t-shirt and base-layer pants. **\$239; kuiu.com**



There is a lot of doe pee on the market, but we find ourselves reaching for those from Wildlife Research Center the most often. A staff favorite, the **Golden Estrus Xtreme** is formulated with a concentrated dose of doe-in-estrus odor that lasts longer than most other scents on the market. New 2-ounce bottle comes with a flip cap for mess-free application and includes a pair of wicks. **\$18; wildlife.com**



Do the woods really need a new deer cartridge? Looking at the ballistics of the new **360 Buckhammer**, we think so. Delivering 2,399 fps of muzzle velocity and 968 ft-lbs of downrange energy at 200 yards, the 180-grain Core-Lokt bullet lengthens the lethality straight-wall lever guns are capable of. Look for more bullet options from Remington and Federal to come soon. **\$37 per 20; remington.com**



It's easy to be skeptical of Ozonics, but our staff has had enough success in the field to prove it really does work. The new **HR500** features a quieter fan that eliminates the annoying buzz during all-day sits, and a Hyperboost mode for 25% more ozone. Easy to operate via a Bluetooth-connected smartphone using the Ozonics app, which also provides weather updates. **\$599; ozonics hunting.com**

A Whitetail Worthy Cartridge

Norma's deer-centric ammunition is specifically engineered to perform on big bucks.

By a large margin, North America's most popular big-game species is the whitetail deer. According to the National Deer Association, more than 6 million deer are taken yearly by hunters in the U.S.; Canadians kill their share as well. It makes sense, then, that companies produce ammunition specifically tailored to taking whitetail deer. There's a difference, though, between stamping whitetail on the box and creating ammunition specifically tailored for that species. With the Whitetail line of ammunition, Norma has done the latter.

Norma has been a leader in the ammunition industry for more than 120 years, having been founded in Oslo, Norway at the turn of the previous century. What began as a tiny manufacturing operation in Åmotfors, Sweden, with one woman running two machines, eventually snowballed into a company with worldwide distribution. Norma began loading cartridges designed for hunting way back in 1950 and has remained a staple in the field ever since. Norma's product line is vast. In 2021, the firm loaded more than 100 million cartridges in 100

different chamberings. Among those products are the various loads in the company's new Whitetail series.

Norma's Whitetail line of ammunition consists of 15 different cartridges that include: .243 Winchester, 6.5 Creedmoor, 7mm-08 Remington, .270 Winchester, 7mm Remington Magnum, .30-06 Springfield and .300 Winchester Magnum. Each of these cartridges are used frequently by deer hunters and, used skillfully and with common sense, each of them are capable of taking any whitetail deer that walks this continent. Despite the long-range antics we see on video, I would venture to guess that the vast majority of whitetail deer are taken at between 50 and 350 yards. That gives us a performance window through which to view what a great whitetail load looks like.

We all love to debate the merits of various cartridges and the 6.5 Creedmoor is certainly a lightning rod for such arguments. The fact is, though, bullets kill game—not headstamps. There's an art to creating an ideal bullet for big game. A bullet that is soft or fragile will expand explosively, creating great trauma at the entrance but often failing to penetrate ade-



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quately. Such designs are great for varmints, but will eventually lead to disaster on larger species.

Controlled-expansion bullets including Norma's own Oryx, Nosler's Partition, the Barnes Triple-Shock and Federal Premium's Terminal Ascent are fantastic products capable of amazing performance—especially on larger game such as elk. That said, these loads are not always warranted for hunting whitetails. Premium bullets are expensive to produce and sometimes offer less expansion than hunters desire. A tougher bullet will no doubt kill an animal reliably, but sometimes



Of course Norma uses premium components for this loading, but still manages to keep the cost to the consumer fairly budget-friendly.

a softer design will achieve that goal more rapidly. Premium bullets can sometimes be finicky when it comes to accuracy, as well. As we search for our own Goldilocks projectile, it all comes down to individual preference.

Norma's Whitetail uses a traditional flat-based cup-and-core soft point—there's no futuristic magic bullet here. All soft points are not created equal, though, and this one is special. The jacket construction and lead composition on these bullets is such that a near-ideal combination of expansion and penetration is achieved. The Whitetail is adapted from Norma's own proven controlled-expansion bullet, the Oryx. This more economical bullet shares the chemical bonding properties of the Oryx, along with a mechanical lock to prevent jacket/core separation. Like the Oryx, the Whitetail bullet uses a tapered jacket for expansion regardless of impact velocity. Both the mechanical lock design and the tapered profile allow for the controlled expansion, both at low- and



Using a classic cup-and-core design, Norma's Whitetail bullet hits that magic mark between controlled expansion and deep penetration.

high-velocity impacts. The Whitetail is, in essence, a sort of premium cup-and-core bullet.

I hunted throughout the 2022 deer season with Norma's 140-grain 6.5 Creedmoor load and offer two performance anecdotes that sit at both ends of the performance spectrum. The first was a fat Alabama whitetail doe taken at 140 yards using a Barrett Fieldcraft with an 18-inch barrel. This would be the first time that my oldest daughter would be by my side when I killed a deer, and I wanted it to be as painless as possible for everyone involved, including the deer. Between the distance and the barrel length, that bullet was moving relatively slowly when it hit the animal broadside. Such is a recipe for deep penetration, but would the bullet expand sufficiently? The bullet exited, leaving a healthy blood trail as the deer ran a few yards before quickly expiring. It was obvious from the exit wound and internal damage that the bullet did, in fact, expand at that impact velocity.

The next example provided far more of a challenge for our humble soft point. I was hunting deer down in Florida when a feral hog made the mistake of walking past my ground blind right at dark. The 200-pound boar was quartering away at roughly 20 yards when I let loose with a 6.5 Creedmoor equipped with a 22-inch barrel. That bullet was moving at full speed ($\pm 2,580$ fps) when it hit his tough hide, putting tremendous mechanical strain on the jacket and core. In such a situation, it would not be unusual to have a bullet come apart and fail to penetrate. The opposite happened—the bullet plowed through the hog's hair and skin, his subcutaneous shoulder shield, through both lungs, broke the offside shoulder and exited. He never knew what hit him. In my experience, it is rare to see such a balance between expansion and pen-

ACCURACY TEST		
(Average of three 3-shot groups at 100 yards)		
Bullet Weight	Muzzle Velocity	100-yard Accuracy
Barrett Fieldcraft 6.5 Creedmoor 140gr. SP	2,526	1.0
Author's DIY Custom 6.5 Creedmoor 140gr. SP	2,585	0.5
Kimber Mountain Ascent 6.5 Creedmoor 140gr. SP	2,631	0.8
Bergara B-14 Ridge Carbon 6.5 Creedmoor 140gr. SP	2,596	0.7
Springfield Armory 2020 Waypoint .308 Winchester 150gr. SP	2,760	0.9
CZ 600 Alpha .30-06 150gr. SP	2,705	0.8



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etration. Like I said, this is a special soft point.

These days, bullets with ultra-high ballistic coefficients are extremely popular, but the reality is they offer few advantages at traditional hunting distances. Don't get me started on the terminal performance of match bullets on game animals. Additionally, some of these bullets require fast twist rates which are uncommon in older rifles. The bullet weights that Norma uses in its Whitetail line all fall within the normal distribution for a given cartridge: 150-grain in 30-06, 100-grain in the .243 Winchester, etc. These bullets should stabilize easily in any barrel that one can imagine.

Thanks to a healthy supply of this ammo, I have used this product extensively in numerous rifles both on the range and in the field. Regardless of chambering, I have found this ammunition to be both accurate and consistent. Three-shot 100-yard groups have averaged sub-MOA and standard deviations of velocity hover just



Norma's Whitetail ammo was put to a real-world test with the author's daughter along for the hunt. A clean, quick kill made for a great introduction to hunting.

above single digits for ten shots. Flat-based soft points are generally easier to produce than controlled-expansion bullets and, as a result, are often more accurate in a given rifle. Norma's commitment to quality control is another important factor. A quick internet search established that the street price of Norma's Whitetail ammunition ranges from \$30-35 per box of 20 depending on the load and the retailer. By today's standards, this is relatively inexpensive.

Thanks to their varied habitat, hunting whitetail deer can mean anything from close shots in thick swamps to cross-canyon shots in stiff Western winds. For the ma-

jority of these presentations, a simple and reliable well-placed bullet will get the job done without drama. It is impossible to build a bullet and cartridge that is right for every deer hunting scenario but, with its Whitetail line, Norma has created a product that will cover the vast majority of them. ⓘ

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HUNT



A Legend Lives On

The .30-30 remains one of the best big-game cartridges ever made.



A good-sized Texas hog, dropped in its tracks at about 60 yards with a Ruger-made Marlin 336 Classic, using factory open sights and a 170-grain Remington Core-Lokt.

After the shot, the pig was running hard, vanishing into yellow grass at the crest of the ridge. There had been no reaction—other than the kick into a higher gear—but sometimes there isn't. The shot wasn't far; my swing and lead felt good. Sometimes you feel sure, but you can be wrong. My companions were less certain. Downright skeptical. We piled back into the Jeep and circled around, intending to quickly check for blood on the clear dirt track on top of the ridge, just past where the pig disappeared.

There was no blood and no fresh tracks, because the pig lay stone dead short of the road, close to where it was last seen. The bullet entrance was where it should have been, low on the right shoulder with an exit on the left side. Yellow grass on the back trail looked like someone had spilled red paint. The cartridge was the venerable .30-30 Winchester, now 128 years old. The bullet was newer: Hornady's 140-grain MonoFlex, one of few California-legal unleaded .30-30 projectiles.

Back in 1895, the .30-30 was the first sporting cartridge designed for smokeless powder. It quickly became America's favorite deer cartridge, a position it held for 50 years. It is

often said "the .30-30 has accounted for more deer than any other cartridge." Maybe. Another candidate, because of the timing of its popularity, could be the old .44-40. However, thanks to at least 12 million rifles (all makes and models) produced to date, the .30-30 has accounted for a pile of deer. And black bears and wild hogs and lots of other game.

CLOSE-QUARTERS KILLER

At the dawn of smokeless powder, the .30-30 was considered fast and flat-shooting. By 1925, its ballistics were no longer flashy. Today, with our seemingly insatiable thirst for greater range, too many of us view the .30-30 as anemic and obsolete. It is not a long-range cartridge, but it is no pipsqueak. Gun-writing great Col. Townsend Whelen theorized that we should have 1,000 ft-lbs of energy at the animal to effectively harvest deer. As a rule of thumb, I've always liked that. However, if it were absolute, the .44-40 would never have killed a deer; its best loads don't produce 800 ft-lbs. Today, the .223 Remington is generally considered adequate for deer. In the .223, you can



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This California porker was taken with a Mossberg 464 .30-30, using an Aimpoint red-dot sight and Hornady's 140-grain MonoFlex bullet.



The only aerodynamic .30-30 bullets safe for use in tubular magazines are, left, Hornady's 140-grain MonoFlex and 160-grain FTX. A traditional 150-grain round-nose is on the far right.

get a heavy 70-grain deer bullet to about 3,000 fps, yielding 1,400 ft-lbs. By 200 yards, you're below 900.

The deer hunter's traditional standby .30-30 load features a 150-grain round-nosed bullet at 2,480 fps. Not fast by today's (or 1925's) standards, but this load yields 2,049 ft-lbs. For those slow on math, that's more than a ton of muzzle energy, and more than double Col. Whelen's proposed minimum for deer. Because of the poor aerodynamics of round-nosed bullets, this load is down to 900 ft-lbs at 200 yards.

Who cares? Even though virtually all .30-30 rifles of recent manufacture can be easily scoped, few of us think of the .30-30 as a 200-yard cartridge. Many whitetail hunters, hog hunters and black bear hunters don't need that much range; honestly, a lot of us need less than half that. We hunt in places and with techniques that dictate close shots. We want to hit our game hard, get it down quickly and do as little tracking as possible. The .30-30 has plenty of power to accomplish these things coupled with mild recoil.

A BULLET REVOLUTION

The majority of .30-30 rifles have tubular magazines, traditionally relegating them to blunt-tipped bullets (round or flat-nose), to preclude detonation in the magazine. Aerodynamics are poor. Trajectory is arcing; velocity drops off fast, as does residual energy. Short-range shooters don't care. For those who do, Hornady solved the problem 15 years ago with their FTX (Flex-Tip eXpanding) and, more recently, the copper-alloy MonoFlex bullet, both using a sharp but compressible polymer tip safe in tubular magazines. Hornady loads both bullets to a mild 2,400 fps in their LeveRevolution and Full Boar ammo lines.

Curious, I ran both loads through Hornady's Ballistic Calculator. Downrange, bullet shape matters a bunch. At 2,400 fps, the 140-grain MonoFlex I shoot in California holds 1,080 ft-lbs at 200 yards. With greater weight and higher Ballistic Coefficient (BC), the 160-grain FTX does considerably better. At 2,400 fps, it yields 1,306 ft-lbs at 200 yards, almost holding 1,000 ft-lbs to 300 yards. With either load, zero about three inches high at 100 to be dead-on at 200. At 300 yards, drop is about a foot.

With proper zero and trajectory knowledge, the .30-30 can stretch out a bit, but I don't carry my .30-30s in places where I need to. In fact, despite the spitzer bullet's ballistic advantage, in the .30-30 I often revert to the old blunt-nosed bullets. In proper .30-30 country I don't need extra range, and we forget that the old round-nose and flat-point bullets have a close-range advantage. They transfer more energy on

MARLIN 336 CLASSIC .30-30

The "new" Marlin 336 is proof positive that neither the all-American lever-action nor the .30-30 are dead. Ruger acquired Marlin in late 2020 and moved production to Mayodan, North Carolina. The first Ruger-made Marlin was the 1895 .45-70; the 336 Classic .30-30 was introduced at the 2023 SHOT Show.

The Marlin 336 is America's second-most popular sporting rifle, following the Winchester 1894. The side-eject Marlin with solid-top receiver always offered the advantage of easy, over-the-receiver scope mounting. In 2021, I hunted with a Ruger-made Marlin 1895 SBL .45-70 in stainless and laminate. It was fantastic, so I was on pins and needles awaiting the 336. It didn't disappoint.

The 336 Classic comes in traditional blued steel with checkered walnut. Fit and finish are marvelous, the action is smooth and slick and accuracy with a scope is excellent. Its first outing was for Texas hogs, using factory iron sights and Remington 170-grain Core-Lokt. As the .30-30 does, it thumped with authority. Now scoped, I'm looking forward to using it this deer season.

Older fans of lever-actions and the great old .30-30—guys like me—will be jazzed by the new Ruger-made Marlin 336 .30-30. So will younger hunters, as they discover, or rediscover, the great American deer rifle.

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impact, and initiate expansion more rapidly. Translate: They hit visibly and noticeably harder. Starting in 1895, these were the bullets the .30-30 made its bones with, and until the FTX came along, these were the bullets all .30-30 shooters relied on.

The sharp-pointed FTX and MonoFlex bullets perform great. I've taken lots of hogs and some deer with both. However, just as a for-instance, my firm but impossible-to-prove belief is: If I'd hit that California hog with a round-nose 150-grain Interlock (or any other round-nose) in the same place, I wouldn't have wondered whether I'd hit it. It probably would have run the same 50-60 yards, but I'd have seen reaction upon impact.

In my experience, the standard 150-grain (or 140- or 160-grain) loads are ideal deer medicine, and adequate for hogs. However, for larger hogs, and certainly for black bear, don't overlook the .30-30's other traditional load, a blunt-nosed 170-grain bullet. It isn't as fast; standard velocity drops down to 2,200 fps, thus can't have as much energy (1,827 ft-lbs). Paper ballistics aren't everything. The heavier bullet penetrates deep-



A nice South Texas whitetail, taken at about 90 yards with a Winchester M94 .30-30 using an aperture sight.

er, increasingly important on larger animals. Elsewhere from California, that's my preference for hogs, just in case I get a chance at an extra-large porker.

As I've written before, all but one of our two dozen Kansas deer stands are easily within .30-30 range. So far, I'm the only one who has taken deer there with a .30-30. It worked just fine, and I intend to use the new Ruger-made Marlin .30-30 there this deer season.

My personal interest in the .30-30 stops with whitetails and hogs, always in close-range situations. However, we do the .30-30 disservice to suggest that its utility stops there. Over bait

or with dogs, a handy .30-30 carbine is relied upon by many experienced black bear hunters. Wouldn't be my choice for elk or moose, but at close range it's enough gun. Plenty of each are taken every fall with a .30-30. A ton of energy is, well, a ton. In recent years, George Lawrence III used a .30-30 to take all four North American wild sheep. Again, it wouldn't be my choice, but he made it work. Take your time and get close, and the .30-30 can get it done. 

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Lockdown Luck

An aggressive spot-and-stalk strategy can pay off for peak-rut bucks.



Photo: Macquien / Dreamstime.com

I was going through the gate when I saw Doc, the landowner, coming toward me on his side-by-side. He was wearing an insulated flannel shirt and the faded orange cap that he always dons during hunting season. Doc had made his rounds that morning, feeding cows and checking fences, and I could tell by the way he was motioning at me that he'd probably seen some deer along the way.

It was November 17, muzzleloader season in Tennessee, clear and cold with a blistering north wind. I was late getting to the farm, but planned to hunt the rest of the day.

"My friend, I wish you'd have been with me this morning," Doc said, meeting me at the gate. "I saw a bruiser of a buck." Doc doesn't hunt much himself, but he does know a big deer when he sees one. It was encouraging, but it was 8:30, and I knew Doc started his rounds at daylight. The buck was probably long gone.

"He was walking across the pasture pretty as you please with a doe," Doc said. "I don't know how many points he had, but he was big. They went in that little woodlot down there." He motioned to an island of trees across the pasture that was no more than 5 acres, surrounded by field on all sides. We'd run



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Despite a late start, and a missed shot, the author managed to tag this nice Tennessee buck.

beagles there while rabbit hunting, and so I knew the woodlot was full of blackberry briars and washed by a deep ravine in the middle. If ever there was a place for a big buck to lock down with a doe, that was it.

"How long ago has that been, Doc?" I asked.

"Shoot, not 10 or 15 minutes," he said.

Worth a look, for sure. I loaded my muzzleloader, stuck an extra charge and bullet in my pocket, and eased into the trees on the south side of the wood lot with the wind in my face.

WOOD LOTS AND LOVE

The "lockdown" phase of mid-November can be tough. It happens when most does in an area are receptive, and so bucks no longer have to search the countryside looking for them. During that time, breeding pairs of bucks and does isolate themselves in cover for 24 to 48 hours until the doe's estrous cycle ends and breeding is complete. Overall deer activity can seem to slow to a crawl, especially compared to the frenzied seeking and chasing of early November.

But there are silver linings to the lockdown. A receptive doe is one of the few things that will get a truly mature buck on his feet during shooting light. In much of the country, gun seasons of some sort are open. Finally, the cover where breeding pairs hole up is somewhat predictable.

Not that breeding cover is as easy to identify as, say, a flickering neon vacancy sign outside of a by-the-hour motel. But the cover is often small, thick, isolated and adjacent to open country where the lovers can see other deer approaching. Little woodlots full of briars and surrounded by open fields are perfect, but I've seen pairs lockdown on thick creek banks, around dozer piles and in overgrown fencerows. These aren't places that you can really identify in the preseason, hang a stand and then hunt on hope with any regular success. But when the circumstances are right, you can sure sneak into them on foot with a rifle in hand and have a better-than-good chance at killing the deer of a lifetime.

That morning in Tennessee, the circumstances were right.

HUNT THE EDGES

A sharp knife is required equipment in a deer hunter's pack, and we've had great success with those crafted by Benchmade. For 2023, they've refocused some of their most popular knives on the deer hunter, delivering sharp edges in comfortable-to-use designs specifically made for the whitetail woods.



Raghorn – This version of their popular fixed-blade all-purpose hunter replaces the carbon handle with new G10 scales that feature a subtle swell for a perfect fit in the hand. The OD green complements the satin-finished S30V stainless blade that's honed to a perfect edge. Though it has a nice heft, the Raghorn weighs little more than 3.5 ounces and measures nearly 9 inches overall. \$300



Tagged Out – Hunters who prefer to tuck a folder in their pocket or pack should consider this handy blade. Like the Raghorn, it has OD green G10 handles, but with a S45VN blade for increased durability and edge retention. Pocket clip and thumb stud makes the Tagged Out a great dual-duty EDC option as well. \$300

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IT'S GOOD TO BE LUCKY

I stepped into the woodlot, leaned against a tree and watched. "This won't work," I thought to myself. As I did, I saw the twitch of a white tail, and a large doe fed casually into sight 75 yards ahead. I raised my binoculars and could see that she was content, nibbling browse and acorns. And behind her, through the briars, I could see the white throat patch, black eyes and antlers of a giant buck, staring straight at me.

I pressed the muzzleloader's forend against the tree and cocked the hammer, but the buck's body was completely obscured by thicket. He'd seen me for sure, and under normal circumstances I'd have never known he was there. But the doe was oblivious, and he wasn't leaving her side. I watched her feed for a few seconds, and then she stepped down into the ravine and out of sight. The buck seemed to vanish.

I lowered the hammer and thought of leaving, but instead I stepped back out to the field edge. I knew the deer were down in the ravine and out of sight, and so I thought maybe I could hustle ahead of them. It'd take real luck to see them again and get a shot before they caught my wind, but I knew I wouldn't kill that deer by moping off to sit in a stand, either. I crouched low, hustled ahead and nearly propelled myself into a somersault when I spotted the doe feeding in the field, broadside, just 150 yards away. I pulled myself against a tree just as the buck walked into the field behind her.



When bucks are locked down with does in thick cover, gun hunters can have better success by being aggressive than by waiting in a stand.




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SUNDAYS

10:30 P ET

SPORTSMAN

SCHEDULE SUBJECT TO CHANGE



Doc had seen this deer earlier in the day and tipped the author off to its hiding spot.

I cocked the muzzleloader and missed him clean.

The pasture was large, and instead of bolting back into the wood lot, the doe trotted farther into the open, checking behind her for the buck that was now hesitant to cross the field. I had one more shot left in my pocket. I laid on my side to work the ramrod while also staying out of sight. The buck was walking when I again closed the breech, settled the gun against the tree and cocked the hammer. "He's 200 yards now," I thought to myself. "This is my last chance." I held high on his shoulder and squeezed the trigger.

When the smoke cleared, I could see his white belly laying still in the brilliant November sunshine. The buck was heavy and old, with a broken G2 and drop tine; a deer I'd never seen on a trail camera, despite having one over an active scrape not 100 yards away.

But Doc saw that buck, headed for that little woodlot with a doe, and he told me about it just in time. Now, I had some skinning to do, good luck to celebrate and a hell of a deer story to share. 🍷

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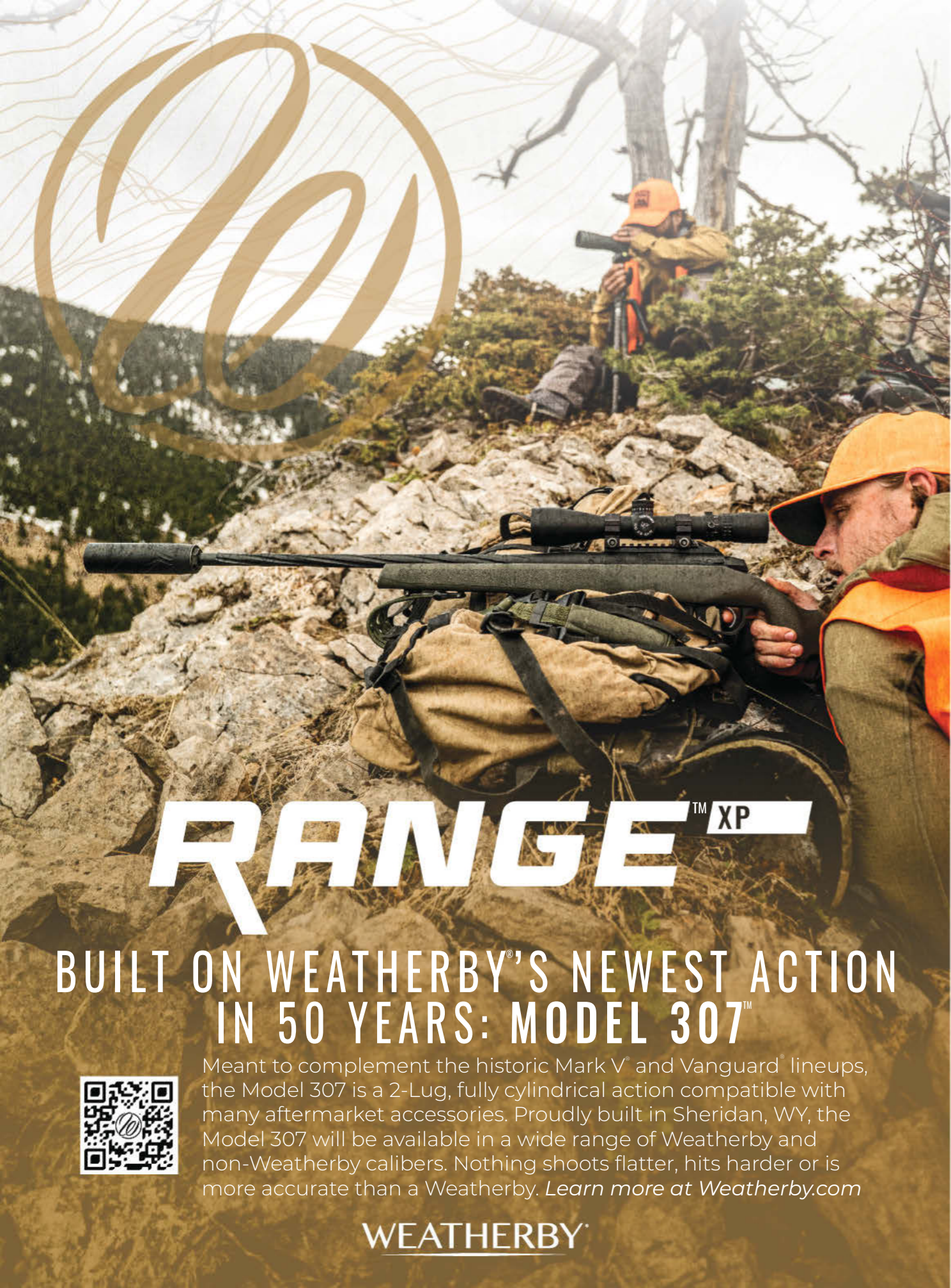
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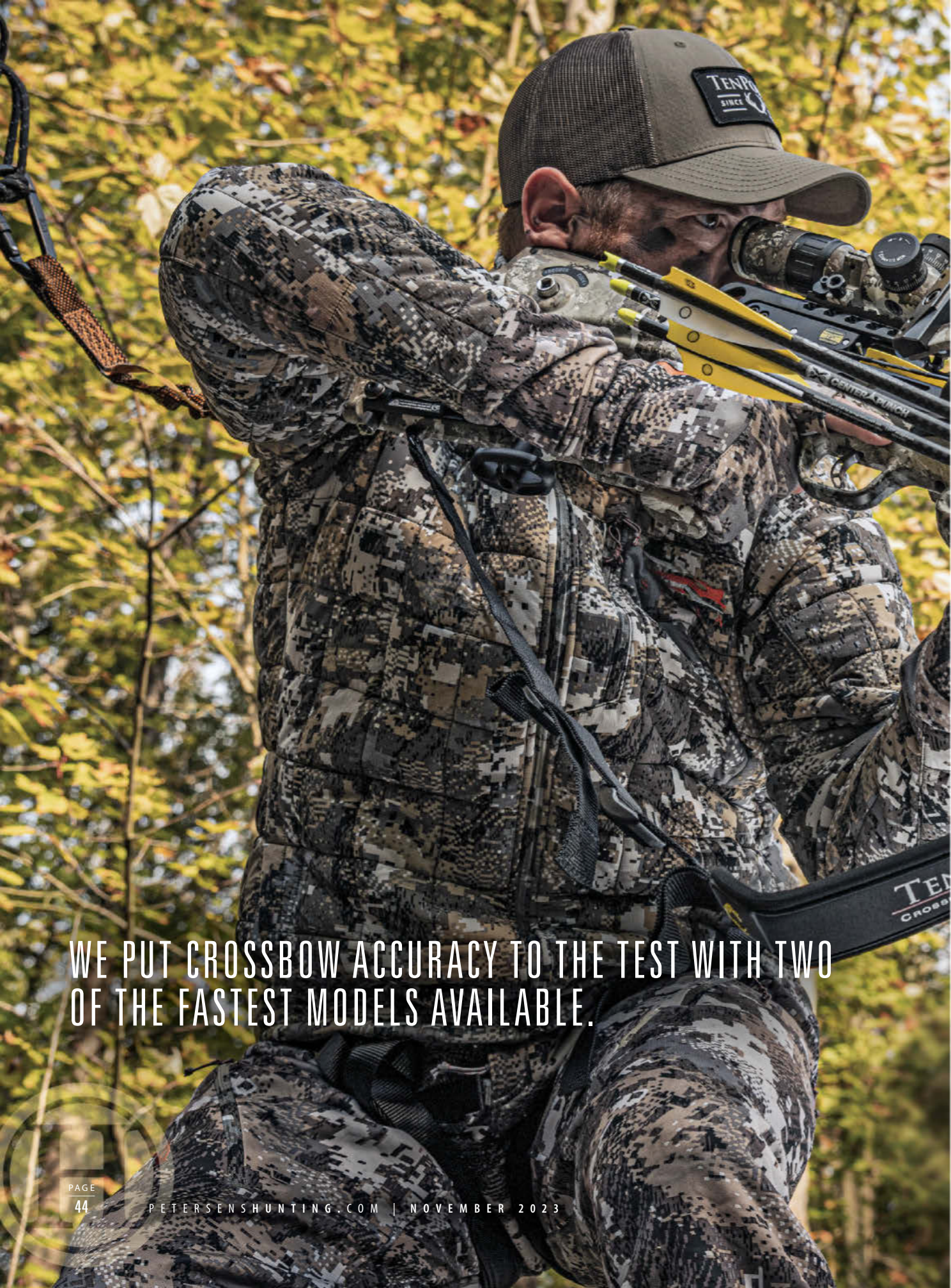
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THE 500

WILL BRANTLEY

CROSSBOW

I SHOT a crossbow for the first time about 20 years ago. It was an unwieldy contraption that was cocked by hand, looked to have been plucked right out of a late-'80s action movie and would group minute-of-bag-target at 30 yards. I wasn't impressed.

But things changed big time a dozen years later. After multiple—and sometimes vicious—debates over the crossbow's place during archery seasons, the crossbow proponents won out and more states began relaxing their cross-

bow regulations. That caused the market to explode, and innovation and performance to accelerate.

Unlike vertical bows that are bound by the limits of human strength, crossbows can use pulleys, winches, straps and gears to load strings and limbs that would be physically impossible to draw otherwise. The best designs pack incredible power into compact packages.

One of the trendsetting examples of that was the Ravin R15, which launched in 2017 with the marketing campaign: "Meet Your Next Rifle." The R15 would shoot 425 feet per second and promised 100-yard accuracy. Though just about every boilerplate review of the Ravin included some version of "never take such shots in the field," it was all of six months before I heard a story of a Wyoming hunter who killed a mule deer with one at 117 yards.

Crossbows have only gotten better since. Some new models have electronic cocking devices, and they hit even harder, clocking speeds of 500 fps with 400-grain bolts. That's almost double the speed and energy of a hunting arrow fired through a modern compound bow with average specs.

I've tested most of the major crossbow models of the past decade and have hunted with them extensively for whitetails, pigs, alligators, turkeys and antelope. I spent a lot of time testing both the Ravin R500 and the Tenpoint Nitro 505; the undisputed muscle cars of the crossbow world. Both shoot close to 500 fps and both retail for more than \$3,000 with accessories. They represent a category of hunting weapon that simply didn't exist a few years ago—but they're not quite your next rifle.

If you're spending three grand on a crossbow, it's a safe bet you expect the kind of long-range performance that can make the difference when a trophy animal steps out at 70 yards. But if you think you can take one of these bows out of the box, shoot a few field points, and then screw on your broadheads and kill a buck at 100 yards, you're in for a big letdown.

Furthermore, crossbows that shoot to these speeds come with their own set of surprises, even for experienced shooters like me. Here's what hunters need to know.

PRACTICE IS PRICEY

Archery target technology has not kept pace with crossbow technology. I've only found a few field-point targets that will stop bolts at these speeds for any appreciable lifespan. The Morrell Kinetic 1.0 is about the best I've tried, and the one I used for most of this test. It's also expensive at \$150, and a pain in the ass to move around because it weighs 65 pounds. But if you're doing a lot of shooting, it's a worthwhile investment.

Broadheads make it all worse. I had a brand-new Block Infinity 20 target on hand that is rated for 500-fps crossbows. It would stop broadhead-tipped arrows, but not by much. The broadheads would be sticking out the back of the target, and removing them required me to unscrew the broadhead and press the arrow backward through the target with a block of wood (note, it's a \$200 target, too). I had two other older broadhead targets, another Block and a Morrell High Roller, each with a year's worth of use on them. Broadhead-tipped arrows simply zipped right through them.

Expect fast wear on arrows that pass through foam broadhead targets. Fletchings are often mangled and the friction causes target residue to stick to the arrow shafts, which can eventually affect flight. You need to buy plenty of arrows anyhow. Nocks and inserts get broken quickly with these crossbows, particularly when you're shooting groups. In fact, inside 50 yards with a good rest, it's likely that you'll break most of your arrows if you shoot them all at the same spot. The novelty of a Robin Hood fades quickly.

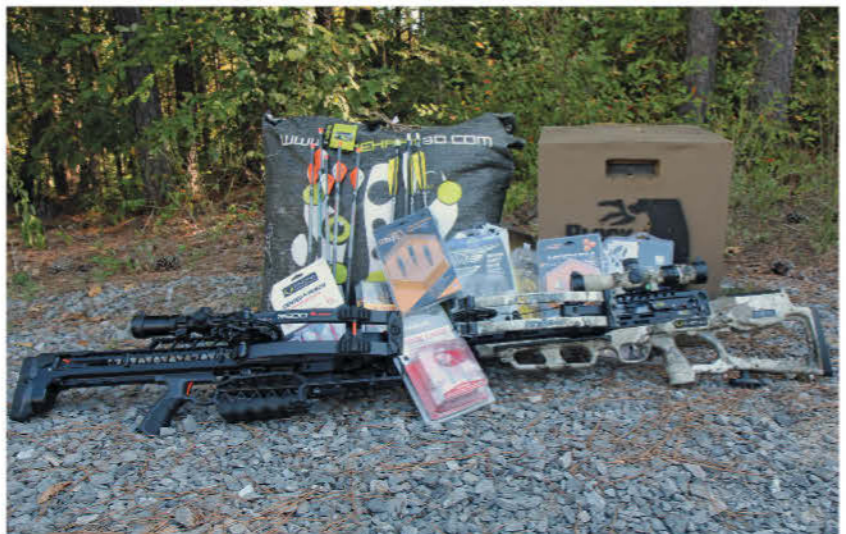
Though it takes longer, you can save money and arrows by sighting in with paper targets stuck to your archery tar-



The Ravin R500



The Tenpoint Nitro 505



Modern crossbows, plus all the accessories, can prove to put a rather large dent in your pocketbook.

get, and shooting for groups one arrow at a time. When practicing, always shoot at different spots on the target face.

BROADHEAD FLIGHT IS ELUSIVE

A broadhead that hits exactly with a field point is the mark of a well-tuned bow. I've rarely had flight issues with any sort of broadhead from slower crossbows. I started noticing deviations from my field points with faster models a few years ago, though, and it especially seems to be a challenge the faster you push the arrow.

I sighted in both the Nitro 505 and R500 with field points at 30 yards, and then fine-tuned the zero on both bows to 70 yards. Next, I shot them with multiple fixed and mechanical-blade broadheads. From the Ravin, I used a Wasp Drone (fixed), an Iron Will single bevel (fixed), SIK SK2 (mechanical), SEVR 1.5 Titanium (mechanical), a Wasp Jak-Hammer (mechanical) and a G5 Montec M3 (fixed). Only one of them, the SEVR, hit within an inch of my field points at 30 yards. All the others were 4 to 6 inches off at 30 yards and would've missed the target completely at 70. It's worth noting the Iron Will broadhead weighed 125 grains, and so you'd expect it to be a bit off compared to the 100-grain broadheads that matched the

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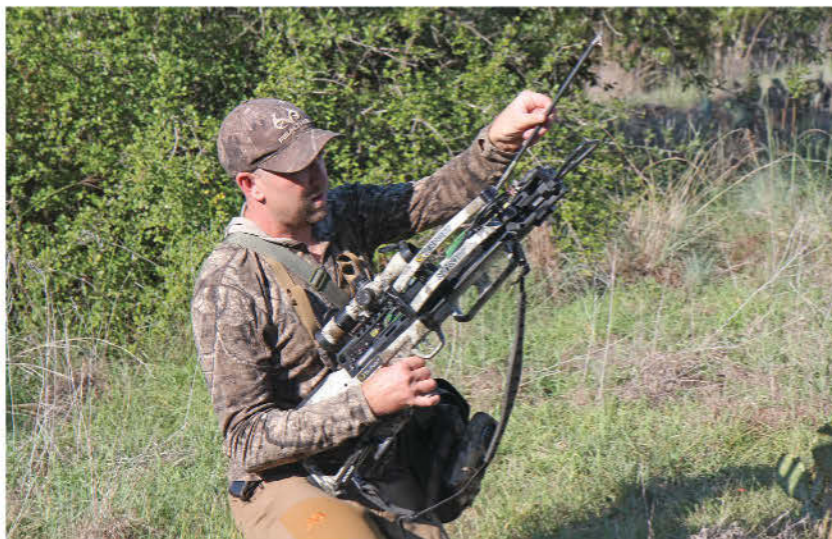


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The author tested both crossbows with a variety of fixed and mechanical broadheads.



The Nitro 505 has excellent ergonomics. The author dialed it in with a Wasp Mortem fixed-blade broadhead for hunting.

weight of my field points, but it was really no more or less.

Results were a little better through the TenPoint, from which I tried the TenPoint EVO-X CenterPunch (mechanical), a Wasp Mortem (fixed), a Wasp Havalon HV (fixed), a Rage Hypodermic NC (mechanical), a Blood Sport Grave Digger (hybrid mechanical) and the Iron Will single bevel. The Rage hit an inch lower than the field points, and three of the others hit 2 to 4 inches off. The Bloodsport—one of my all-time favorite broadheads—was a crazy 8 inches off at 30 yards.

So, the takeaway is to just use a compact mechanical, right? Not exactly. The Wasp Jak-Hammer and EVO-X are compact mechanicals, too. Besides that, some hunters (like me) much prefer

fixed-blades. The good news is, I was able to adjust the scopes of both crossbows and dial in with the broadheads of my choice to 70 yards. It just took more time, and I have to set up broadhead targets for practice between hunts.

Speaking of hunting, we shot the Iron Will broadhead from the R500, and it was lethal. My wife has used the combo to kill a coyote and a pair of whitetails with three perfect arrows. I haven't shot a critter yet with the Nitro 505, but I dialed it in with the Wasp Mortem and expect it to be just as effective.

Budget extra money for a variety of broadheads and, like working up a

good hunting load for your favorite rifle, put in hours on the range to find what works best in your setup.

ARROWS MAY VARY

Vertical bow makers advertise the speeds of their newest models set to IBO specifications. There is no such baseline for crossbows or crossbow arrows, and I wondered if the performance difference with broadheads between the R500 and Nitro 505 could be due to arrow design. It's important to note that every high-performance crossbow made requires use of its own specialized arrows. Using something different might damage the bow (or your hand or face) and void the warranty. I personally think some standardization of a micro-diameter crossbow bolt that works in all models could be the "next big thing" in crossbows, but right now, you need to use the arrows that come with the bow you buy.

Anyway, I did my broadhead testing from the Nitro 505 with Pro Elite Carbon 400 arrows, which, at 400 grains finished, weigh the same as the Ravin bolts and allow the bow to shoot to maximum speeds. Both the TenPoint and Ravin arrows are 20 inches long, but the Tenpoint's fletchings are 3.5 inches long, compared to the Ravin's 2-inch fletchings. With 100-grain field points installed on each, the Ravin arrow's front of center—the buzzword that's supposed to cure all broadhead woes the higher it is—was higher (18%) than the Tenpoint's (15%), at least according to my measurements.

Did any of that contribute to broadhead flight? Almost certainly. Can I explain the why of it? Not at all. See that bit above about buying extra arrows and testing plenty of different broadheads.

ABOUT THAT 100-YARD PROMISE

Both of these crossbows are equipped with scopes calibrated to 100 yards. Can you reliably shoot them to that distance? Is a slower crossbow capable of the same accuracy?

The answer: from a bench, with field points, on a calm day, it's boringly easy to shoot a decent 100-yard group with either crossbow. And the speed is a huge

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A 50-yard group with the R500. Notice the busted nock.

advantage at long range. I also shot at the 100-yard target on my range with an old Stryker Katana that I still own and use. That crossbow shoots just over 350 fps with 400-grain bolts, and I have an aftermarket Hawk crossbow scope on it calibrated to 70 yards. It also has brand-new strings and cables, and it's a setup that'll hit quarters at 40 yards. But at 100, I struggled to even hit the bag. The trajectory itself was challenging enough, but a 15-mph crosswind would push the arrows right off the target, too.

Not that the faster crossbows were immune to the wind. With the same breeze, I struggled to get basketball-sized groups with either bow at 100 yards, with field points (I didn't want to risk losing the broadheads). That's not good enough for hunting—and besides, it takes 2/3 of a second for the arrow to hit the target after you pull the trigger. That doesn't sound like much, but I can jump about 8 feet in 2/3 of a second. That's on 40-year-old legs, and with a midsection that's soft-

er than it once was. I only tried this when no one was looking. A deer or elk can do things far more impressive in less than a second.

CONSENSUS ON CADILLACS

There are limitations of skill, but also limitations of equipment—and despite the hype, I still don't think 500-fps crossbows are ethical 100-yard hunting tools. But 70 yards is pretty reasonable, if you've taken the time to dial in the perfect arrow and broadhead combo. Fifty yards is even better.

Meanwhile, 40 yards is the maximum effective range in the field for all but a handful of gifted compound bow shooters—and 30 is better. Using one of these crossbows means the motion of drawing the string with an animal in close is removed. Their excellent scopes offer low-light advantages (especially with a lighted reticle). They can be used in tight quarters, like inside a box blind, and the learning curve for them is still much shorter than it is with a compound bow. A 500-fps crossbow may not be your next rifle—but if you can use one in archery season, the advantages are decisive indeed. 🏹



Michelle Brantley has used the R500 to fill a couple tags in Kentucky. The broadhead of choice is an Iron Will 125-grain single bevel.

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LESSONS LEARNED THE HARD WAY

A man wearing a yellow cap, sunglasses, and camouflage clothing is riding a mountain bike through a wooded area. The bike has 'KENDA' tires and 'JULY' and 'KETT' written on the frame. The background shows trees with some autumn-colored leaves.

COLTON HEWARD

THE WHITETAIL WOODS SERVE A SLICE OF HUMBLE PIE
TO A DIE-HARD WESTERN BIG-GAME HUNTER.

THE BONE-CHILLING

December breeze cut through every layer of clothing I had on as the sun rose on opening day of the Illinois second gun season. Shivering nearly uncontrollably, I sat motionless, suspended 30 feet above the wooded floor, watching and listening for the slightest indication of life. But for the clamoring of a flock of turkeys roosted behind me, the woods were seemingly void of life. Minutes slowly drug into hours as my mind began to wander and the mental games set in. By 11 a.m. I had not seen hair nor hide of a deer, and my extremities were completely numb. Had a shooter buck stepped out and presented a fleeting opportunity, I doubt I would have even been able to pull the trigger as the motor-skills of my fingers lagged as if in slow motion.

I sheepishly accepted defeat, slipped out of my stand and headed back to the house to lick my wounds, eat some warm food and re-evaluate my approach to this hunt. Whitetail are hands down the most pursued and sought-after animal in our great country, yet I struggled to see the “fun” on my first morning in the whitetail woods. Looking back, I was simply ill-prepared and had an extremely skewed idea of what it took to successfully hunt a mature, Midwest whitetail. I also quickly realized that despite my extensive experience hunting the West and other parts of the world, that hunting whitetails was a foreign endeavor. After spending a few brutal days in the whitetail woods, I gained a whole new level of respect for dedicated whitetail hunters.

When the opportunity arose to hunt late-season whitetails in the heart of the famed “Golden Triangle” region of west-central Illinois with Performance Outdoors, I couldn’t pass it up. With nothing to go off of other than my preconceived notions of whitetail hunting, I loaded up my gear and headed east.

Tips, tactics and gear for what it takes to head west and hunt the rugged landscape of the Rocky Mountains is extensively covered. Yet rarely is it mentioned what it takes for a passionate Western big-game hunter to head east and hunt the elusive mature bucks that call the

hardwoods home. Reflecting back on my Illinois whitetail hunt, I have five critical takeaways that contributed to the ultimate success of the hunt. These lessons can serve as 101 whitetail education for rookies like myself as well as provide insight from an outsider’s perspective for seasoned veterans.

BE A STUDENT

It was blatantly obvious after my first morning in the whitetail woods that I was a long way from home and well out of my hunting comfort zone. Fortunately, I was surrounded by several passionate whitetail hunters in camp that were more than willing to share their knowledge with me. Every now and again, I was able to draw a parallel between Western hunting and the tactics these successful hunters employed, but more often than not, their words of advice were tailored specifically to hunting whitetails.

Hunting is a continual education that humbles me at every turn. That is why so many are drawn to the challenge of hunting and killing a mature deer, I’d say. Be humble enough to seek the wisdom of those far more experienced than we are and be smart enough to employ different tactics when our tried-and-true methods of success continually fall short.





E-bikes are incredibly quiet, and are fast becoming a popular way for hunters to access their stands.



The author couldn't make out the buck's rack in the waning light, but his gut feeling paid off.

ADEQUATE LAYERING SYSTEM

The damp, bitter-cold temps of the Midwest hit differently than the cold I was used to in the West. That first morning in the stand was a rude and unpleasant awakening to how important an adequate layering system was during the late season. If you're cold, you simply will not be able to stay out as long. Out West, when I get cold, I can

go for a hike or do some jumping jacks to warm up, even in subzero temperatures. When hunting out of a treestand, you do not have that same luxury. Utilizing a proper layering system is of the utmost importance to your comfort and ultimately your success.

I am convinced it is nearly impossible to stay warm while sitting still, but the

subsequent hunts following my first miserable morning in the stand were far more comfortable. Both foot and hand warmers were my best friends and down layers underneath my Vail Chaos Fleece jacket and bibs were the winning ticket for making the remainder of my hunt bearable. Little did I know that I would take this hunt down to the final minutes of the last day before an opportunity at a mature buck presented itself.

LEARN TO COPE WITH BOREDOM

Battling boredom is a skillset that many struggle with in the fast-paced world we live in, myself included. Luckily, it was too cold for me to even pull my phone out to pass the time mindlessly scrolling or playing a game, but I guarantee you that opportunities on big bucks are missed every year by hunters distracting themselves from boredom. One of the other hunters in camp suggested putting an earpiece in to listen to music or a podcast. To that, one of the other hunters pointed out that we often hear deer approaching before we see them. Point taken.

Overcoming boredom is 100% a mental game that gets easier with time. The longer I sat in the stand, the more determined I became, investing myself deeper and deeper into the hunt. As

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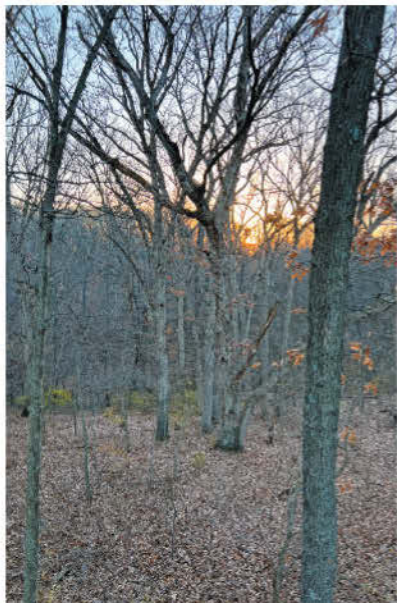


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After four days, the author learned to take pleasure in the time spent in the stand enjoying everything nature had to offer.

one day quickly rolled into four, I found myself enjoying my time alone more and more. There are few places where your mind is freer and clearer than on a mountain or in a blind.

PATIENCE KILLS BIG BUCKS

“Patience kills big bucks,” has always been a motto I’ve lived by in pursuit of mule deer. That same principle applies to whitetails but on a whole other level. Patience when hunting mule deer requires the ability to sit on a bedded buck or glass the same basin for several hours waiting for an opportunity to present itself. The difference being that you are not tied to a tree and can move about as needed to make something happen. With whitetails, if I were to get out of my stand and tromp around the woods in an attempt to make something happen, chances are I would blow out my target buck and never see him again.

The patience of a dedicated whitetail hunter is unmatched, sitting in one spot for countless hours, waiting for a mature buck to slip out of the deep hardwoods and show himself during daylight hours. The saying “the early bird gets the worm” rarely applies in the whitetail woods. Instead, it’s, “he who has the patience to sit the longest” that will punch their tags year after year.



The Traditions NitroFire uses Federal’s innovative FireStick cartridge to give hunters a fast, easy way to reload.

It goes without saying that dedicated whitetail hunters sit with purpose. Rarely are they sitting in a stand without an intended buck in mind and some sort of reconnaissance information to support their reason for sitting there. That purpose undoubtedly increases one’s ability to exhibit extreme amounts of patience.

ADAPT

On the second evening, Ron, the manager for Performance Outdoors, picked me up with a grin on his face. He said, “I know where you are sitting tomorrow night.” He continued to tell me of a ma-

ture nine-point that he watched that night and was confident the buck would do the same thing the following day. Ron spent the next morning hanging a make-shift treestand for me to hunt that evening. Sure enough, the impressive buck from the night before stepped into the field with an hour or more of shooting light left. Unfortunately, he was on the opposite side of the field and the Bushnell Broadhead rangefinder confirmed that



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The author put his time in, overcoming boredom and bone-chilling cold, to finally tag this fine Illinois whitetail within the last three minutes of the hunt.

he never came closer than 315 yards, 200 yards further than I felt comfortable shooting my Traditions NitroFire.

Armed with more intel, Ron once again checked the wind and we adapted to the buck's routine, placing another set on the opposite side of the field where the buck had come out. After four days of hunting and nearly 40 hours of sitting in a stand, the hunt came down to the final evening of the season. Riding my QuietKat E-Bike to the stand that evening, I couldn't ignore the palpable sense of anticipation for the sit.

As the sun slowly crept towards the horizon, the first deer finally made its way into the field less than 100 yards in front of me. It was followed by another and another until there were nearly a dozen deer in the field, but still no sign of the buck. As light faded, I verified what time shooting light ended and watched as the minutes of legal light rapidly faded away.

Finally, with nine minutes of legal light left, the broad shoulders, thick neck and blocky head of a mature buck appeared on the edge of the hedgerow. Between the diminishing light and the trembling in my hands, I couldn't make out the details of his antlers, but there was no denying that this was a mature buck. He looked into the field at the other deer for several minutes, calculating his next move. With three minutes of legal light left, he finally broke cover and stepped out. From my stand, I had two windows to shoot through. After he walked right through the first one, I knew I was going to have to stop him in the next one. I gave a quick grunt, the buck stopped in his tracks and snapped his head my direction. He was quartering away, but I felt comfortable with the shot and the NitroFire barked. When the smoke cleared, I was confident I had hit the buck, but doubt seeped in as he dashed for cover.

After finding very little blood, the decision was made to play it safe and back out. A restless night and little sleep followed. The next morning, we returned to find the buck not 100 yards from where he had entered the woods. I was elated to put my hands on my first Midwest whitetail. Had I not notched my tag, the hunt would have still been a resounding success. My eyes were pruned wide open to the allure of pursuing these mature bucks, and the tactical game of chess that it requires to consistently put yourself in front of them. I'd be lying if I said I still don't prefer chasing mulies across the vast landscape of the West, but the fire has been lit and I can promise this won't be my last time in the whitetail woods. ⓘ



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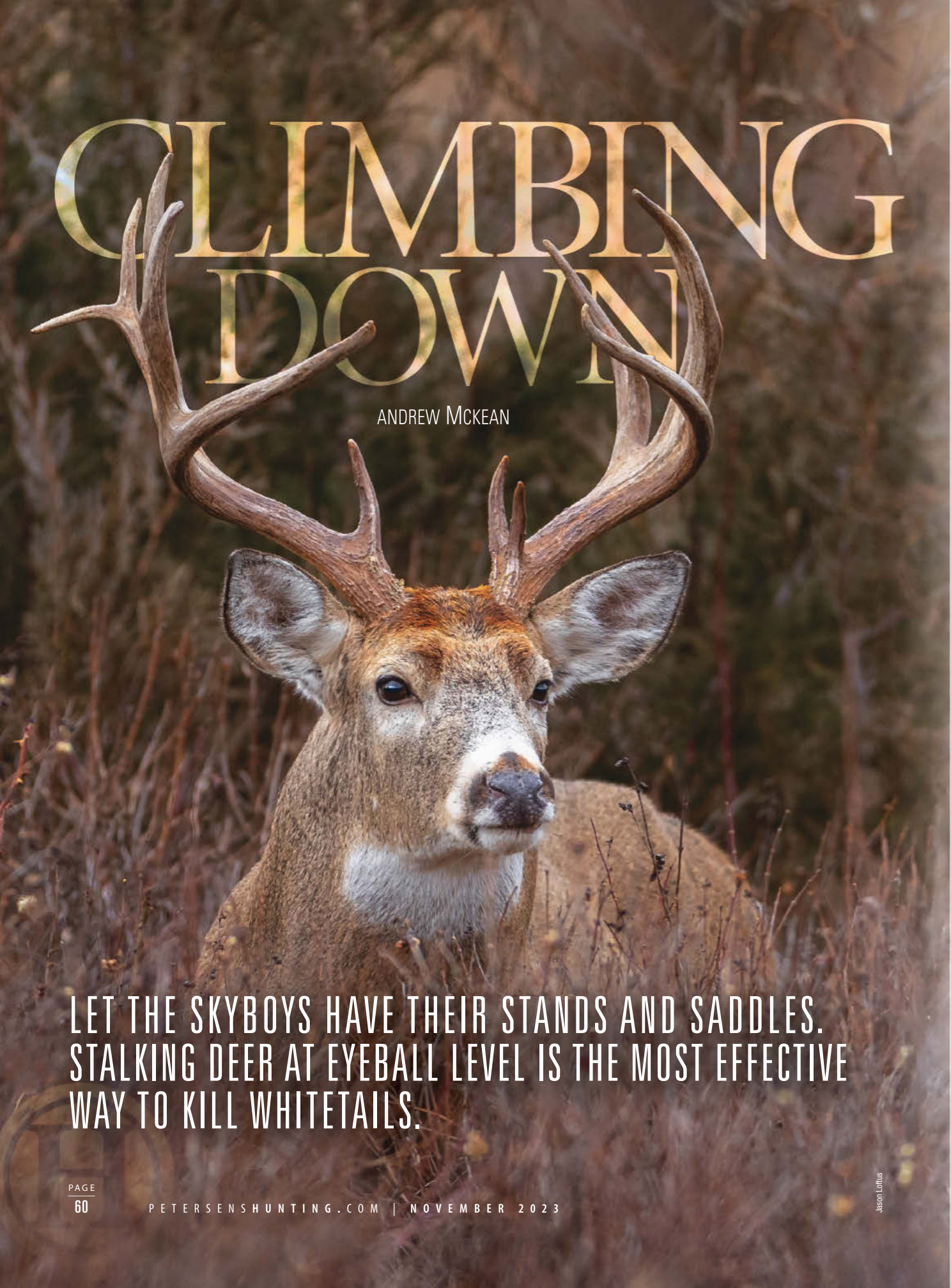


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CLIMBING DOWN



ANDREW MCKEAN

LET THE SKYBOYS HAVE THEIR STANDS AND SADDLES.
STALKING DEER AT EYEBALL LEVEL IS THE MOST EFFECTIVE
WAY TO KILL WHITETAILS.

MOST PENITENTIARIES rely on metal bars and razor wire, but my personal prison has neither locks nor walls. It's about 15 feet high and ratchet-strapped to the trunk of a handsome straight-grained tree.

I've served years of involuntary custody in treestands over the course of a few days in October, and when confined to a climbing stand in the cold winds of December, I've endured multiple life sentences in a single numbing weekend.

My incarceration has nothing to do with the stand and everything to do with my disposition. I'm a wide-roamer, and in nearly every aspect of life, would prefer to make my own luck than wait for it to arrive. When stranded in a treestand, I'm distracted by the reality that it's a tiny stationary point in an ocean of possibility, and I want nothing more than to sail that sea, to find the deer that aren't moving past my island in the sky.

I hear the counter that treestanding is a more effective hunting tactic, but my evidence disputes that. Sure, in some places and situations, there's no alternative. On small parcels of public land, where you don't want to blunder into fellow hunters or blow deer out of the country, or over curated food plots, and in terrain where deer habitually use the same trail from bed to food, stands have their place.

Stands are wonderful when conditions are correct and unchanging. But when the wind switches, or the farmer cuts that cornfield or a coyote blows through the timber, stands leave hunters hanging, literally, and unable to adjust.

HIGHER GROUND

Ground hunting lets you adapt to hyperlocal conditions and to move on deer that would otherwise drift out of consideration. Stalking allows you to select specific bucks, and when things go well, to make a more certain and ethical shot. Of course, the downside is that a blown stalk

will alarm every deer in the township, and the reality is that stalking twitchy white-tails fails more often than it succeeds.

Let's say you think I'm a closed-minded acrophobe, I've had my own flirtation with both treestands and ground blinds, enough to recognize that calculating all the variables of placement—prevailing winds, game trails, local hunting pressure, even angle of the setting sun—is more rewarding and pleasurable than actually sitting on and in one. I've even experimented with tree saddles—those flexible seats that hang precariously from ropes and carabiners—the way a college kid experiments with tattoos or piercings, enough to recognize they're painful and trendy. And mainly ornamental. I'm convinced I'm a more deadly and successful hunter from the ground than hanging like a camouflaged piñata.

My aversion to sitting came early and naturally. I was a restless kid, strung a little tight for Sunday mornings on a pew. But my complaint with pastors has never been their message so much as their delivery. I'm less inclined to wait for the arrival of rapture—or tall-tined bucks—than

I can from the sky. In deer hunting, as in poker, belief collects a lot of bucks.

I further believe that over the past 40 years that we've been hunting from elevated stands, deer have come to associate trees with danger. They might not walk around with kinks in their necks from looking up, but they have learned to avoid sites with permanent stands.

Once, as the guest of an outfitter in celebrated Pike County, Illinois, I was told that if I came out of my treestand for any reason, even to jettison a portion of his magnum breakfast burrito, remote cameras would document my transgression and I'd be subject to both fine and ridicule. The only deer I saw were from a distance, and they were all staring right at my tree, conditioned to expect danger, and probably signs of intestinal distress, from that particular oak.

GROUND SCHOOL

Like our wide-eyed ape ancestors, you can't come out of a tree and expect to make meat right away. If you are a confirmed sitter, you'll have to learn to hunt



Climbing down out of a treestand and taking the game to the game is great way to hone your skills as a woodsman.

I am to find them myself. Blame me, if you will, for a failure in belief, but for both godliness and whitetails, I've found that I learn more about myself, the deer I'm hunting and divine possibility when I hunt from the ground, with the freedom to respond to changing conditions.

But we're talking about belief, among other things, and for nearly every other situation, I believe I can kill more and better whitetails from the ground than

all over again, to slow down, adjust to conditions, respond to cues and read whitetail behavior. But the high-stakes, heart-pounding approach to get into range of a hyper-aware whitetail, or moving unobserved so that a deer will walk right past you, is the pinnacle of big-game hunting in my book. It will awaken pred-

Once you've got a deer spotted, be prepared to move into position quickly and quietly.



atory instincts and teach you more about deer action and reaction than you can get in a lifetime aloft, watching the same acre of unchanging woods.

Here are four chapters of your ground-hunting tutorial. Expect to blow most of them, but each failed attempt will teach you something that will make you a better hunter, and hopefully more devout believer.

READ THE COVER

Not every property lends itself to ground-hunting. A wide-open wheat field doesn't have enough cover, just as a densely timbered hardwoods littered with crunchy leaves can make any movement futile. But whitetails love edges, and property that has a diversity of fences and fields, maybe a woodlot or some ratty cover, or a small brushy waterway, is perfect for ground-hunting.

Wind is everything in this game, and you're going to want to keep the wind in your face or on either cheek. Get a good satellite map of the property and plan an approach remotely, considering prevailing winds. But when you get on the ground, understand that you'll have to adjust your strategy to local wind condi-

tions. A scentless wind-checker is an invaluable aid in ground stalking.

Damp conditions will muffle the sounds of your movement but, when accompanied by low atmospheric pressure, will also drive your scent into the ground. The worst conditions for stalking are swirling winds.

When you get on the ground, tuck into cover. Stay in cover, and consider cover for every move you'll make. You'll develop an expansive definition of cover, from tall grass to a stout corner post to a shallow depression in the ground from long-gone oak or homestead. Sometimes it's a dense tangle of thorny raspberry or the rattling branches of willows or honeysuckle. Your specific property will reveal these little shreds of obscuring cover, and you'll be surprised at how little you need once you get good at stalking.

WATCH THE DEER

You can go in blind to a property and kill a deer, but by far the better approach is to sit (in a stand, if you must) and watch how deer use the place. Do they move inside cover before coming into the open to feed? Are they marching through your property on their way somewhere else?



Just like when hunting from on high, stalking deer on the ground requires a keen knowledge of their behavior and country they call home.

Is there some key feature, like a rub or a licking branch or a particularly succulent plant, that attracts them? The best ground hunters anticipate deer behavior, so having an idea where they're headed will put more bucks in range.

Seasonality drives everything. Deer movement will be vastly different in early September, when trees are leafed and fields are cropped, than in mid-



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Deer often use field edges as travel corridors, and you should too.



The author shot this buck from the ground on his property in Montana.

November, when groceries are limited and the rut changes deer behavior.

Try not to look close-quarters deer in the eye. This probably sounds like witchcraft, but I believe that most prey species have a sixth sense about when they're being observed by a predator, and I've found that by looking at a nearby deer's feet, or the ground in front of it, that after a tense standoff, that deer will calm down and go about his or her business.

Use your optics. Especially in tight cover, a binocular that can focus to infinity is actually less useful than one that sharply focuses at middle distances, enabling you to parse antler beams from branches. And watch deer behavior. I've been alerted to a buck within spitting range because I realized that a hard-eyed doe wasn't watching me, but rather the buck just beyond me.

LEARN TO MOVE UNDETECTED

You're going to get dirty if you're stalking correctly. You'll be on your hands and knees most of the time, and on your belly with your face planted in the mud at least some of the time. You want to become as small and insignificant as possible, using every shred of cover to hide your presence. Second to scent, movement blows most stalks, so you'll learn to read deer, understanding when you can move, when you must freeze and how to sink out of sight.

This is a minimalist game. You don't need a backpack to poke up when you're crawling. Put everything you need in your pockets, and invest in a tight-fitting binocular harness that won't flop around. Camouflage is useful to break up your outline. Handwarmers and clothes that will keep you comfortable when you're sitting in the open will make you less fidgety. Cinch down all your wind-flapping straps and make yourself small. Calls—either grunt tubes or bleat cans—can work to bring deer to your location, so carry them in a handy pocket.

In my homeland, eastern Montana's Milk River, crops are flood-irrigated, which means water is delivered by a series of ditches. I've learned to drop into these dry ditches, stay low and move right into bow-range of deer feeding on irrigated alfalfa. Use brushy fencelines the same way, or banks of streams and rivers, or even human developments like grain bins or parked equipment.

This game isn't always played before an audience of hyper-aware deer. If you know where deer are headed from your scouting, and you can tuck yourself in a clump of cover hours before they move, then you win. Sure, it's a lot like stand hunting from a tree, but using natural cover for a blind has been effective as long as humans have hunted from the ground.

MAKE THE SHOT

There's a world of difference between getting in range undetected and making a shot on deer from the ground. Shooting requires some movement, whether drawing a bow or raising a rifle, and that final act often unravels your hours of tedious and careful approach. For rifle hunters, a bipod or shooting support is critical and deploying your crutch long before deer are in range is key to making meat. Bowhunters are doubly cursed by their in-your-face range and the physical act of drawing a bow. Take whatever range readings you need well before the shot, then wait until deer are distracted, moving or have their tails pointed your direction, which means their eyes are not pointed at you.

Bowhunters sometimes have to wait at full draw for several minutes for a whitetail to turn broadside or move into range. Easy-drawing compounds with big let-offs will kill more deer on the ground than those bows with monster draw weights that require contortions to pull and seasons of powerlifting to hold at draw.

When it works, when you can kill a whitetail from the ground at close range, then you'll have done something that ties you back to our ancestors, long before we had lock-on ladders, full-body harnesses and climbing stands. The experience will liberate you from your 4-square-foot arboreal prison. But mainly, it will restore your belief in hunting as a fully participatory activity, accomplished under the sharp eyes and keen noses of trip-wire whitetails. ⓘ

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September
1981



Treat Them Like TREE-DWELLING WHITETAILS

JOHN WOOTTERS

IF I STARTED this piece with the words, "The old buck gathered himself to go..." regular readers would doubtless yawn and say to themselves, well, the whitetail freak is at it again! But they might do a double-take if I finished the sentence, "and, chattering shrilly, dived into a hollow in the big oak's trunk."

I'd be talking, of course, about an old "buck" fox squirrel, but I still wouldn't be out of character as a white-tail deer fanatic. The reason is simple; if there's any outdoor pursuit that qualifies as "practice" for hunting whitetails, squirrel hunting is it. In most of America's woods, the man who can regularly take a .22 rimfire rifle in hand and return in a few hours with a limit of bushytails will have little difficulty extracting a buck deer from those same woods. The skills required are exactly the same.

Oh, there may be some areas where squirrels are abundant and unmolested, where it is not that great a trick to bag the mulligan-makin's . . . but, then, there are also places where cracking down on a freezerful of venison is—if not exactly “child’s play”—something very close to it. With both species, however, such honey holes are fairly few and far between these days, and these remarks may be assumed to deal with the much more normal situation wherein both deer and squirrels are hunted pretty hard and are hunter-wise. In such places, the parallels between the techniques needed for consistent success on both are quite striking. Nor is there any other species of American game animal with which I am familiar which is usually hunted on foot with a rifle and which demands so much of the hunter in woodcraft, know-how, and exacting marksmanship.

I know that last statement will elicit a few howls of outrage from readers who enjoy the challenge of hunting any of a dozen other species, and would apologize in advance (especially to the elk hunters), except that the statement remains true in my experience. And there are very few legal forms of hunting on this continent with which I haven’t some experience.

Please bear in mind that I *didn’t* say that squirrel and deer hunting are harder work than sheep hunting or require more long-range riflery skill than pronghorns or woodchucks, or more woods-manship than His Majesty, the wild

turkey, or more cunning than His Craftiness, the coyote. I merely said that the bannertails and whitetails demand more of us in the overall application of a wide variety of different skills.

To name a few, these include the ability to see and interpret sign, the ability to move silently and to be inconspicuous (I almost said “invisible”) in the forest, the trained eye and keen ear to observe the minutest movement, a profound understanding of the habits and temperament of the game, intense and sustained concentration on the business at hand, and the ability to hit very small targets with a bullet at odd angles and under difficult circumstances. Those are for openers; there are more.

The method of choice of squirrel hunting is basically the same as that of the expert deer hunter: a combination of still-hunting and sitting, judiciously mixed to suit the terrain and conditions. This really begins when the hunter dresses for the outing, before dawn. I believe in camouflage, which means *total* camouflage, head to toe, especially including the face and hands. If you think the Caucasian face shines like a beacon on a dark and stormy night from a deer’s eye level, under the bill of a cap, you ought to see what it looks like to a squirrel in a tall tree when the owner has it tilted upward in the morning sunlight! Some hunters prefer camouflage make-up on the skin; I use a headnet. Others don’t bother and still get squirrels (or deer), but they’d get more—especially in hard-hunted areas—if they did something about that gleaming physiognomy!

Speaking of gleaming, I haven’t yet camouflaged a .22 rifle for squirrels as I have for whitetails, but I do take some pains to carry a dull-finished one, of which more later.

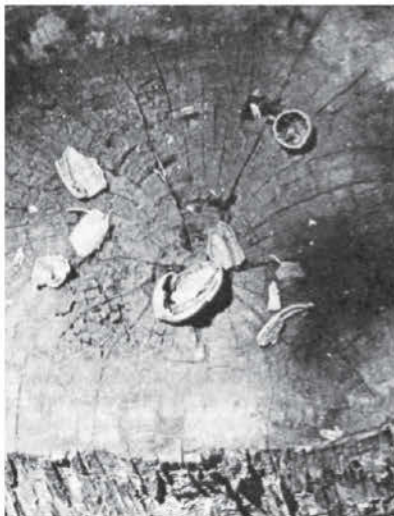
Footgear is important, as always. Lightweight, soft-soled boots with enough water resistance to keep out a heavy dew have much merit; one can walk almost as quietly in them as in a pair of tennis shoes, feeling brittle sticks before they snap. Depending upon the region, squirrels may be hunted in autumn, springtime, or both, and nine-inch boots do offer protection from the occasional copperhead that may *not* be felt before he snaps!

It’s a profound truth that being *dressed* inconspicuously is not exactly the same as being inconspicuous in the woods. An expert still-hunter would be noticed by fewer animals even if he went hunting buck naked than would the most completely camouflaged beginner who went plunging through the forest, stumbling through dry brush and caroming off tree trunks!

With camouflage, it’s relatively easy to be inconspicuous while sitting still, which is why more squirrels and deer are collected by hunters “on stand,” as it were, than in any other way. The catch is that sitting or standing really



Still-hunting squirrels as you would deer is very effective. To eliminate skin glare, camo clothing, headnet and gloves help.



Squirrels leave a surprising amount of sign in the woods. Most conspicuous are often cuttings like these pecan hulls.

motionless isn’t so easy for most people. Oddly enough, it takes both concentration and practice, and is an art acquired only through experience. Doing nothing, in fact, turns out to be more difficult sometimes than doing something, or so it seems. The stand-hunter, however, is actually not doing nothing; it only looks that way to an uninitiated observer. He is actively engaged in ignoring, through sheer force of will, a host of itches; cramps; pokings and proddings by pebbles and sticks; urges to sneeze, twitch, or cough; boredom and impatience; cold; his foot

TREE-DWELLING WHITETAILS

going to sleep; and mosquitos. He is actively *not* snapping his head around at an unidentified sound behind him. He *is* actively not squirming, scratching, sighing, or shifting the rifle in his hands. He *is* actively using his eyes and ears with an intensity unknown to the city-bred nonhunter. He is being aware of his surroundings, in minutest detail. It is, as I said, an art.

Years ago, I would occasionally allow my mother, who is not a hunter, but who loves to see wildlife, to sit with me on a deer crossing when I wasn't too serious about shooting something. She has a wonderful eye for game and was pretty good at sitting still, but she used to say that I made her nervous; she couldn't concentrate on looking for game for checking to see if I was still breathing! *That's* creative still-sitting!

I was younger in those days, and my muscles didn't get stiff so quickly. I can still be that still, but not for hours at a stretch, which is why I do a lot more of my hunting by moving—"drifting" is a better word—through the thickets.

In some ways, this is even more difficult than sitting still, requiring all the same discipline, plus the necessity for *controlled* movement. It's also much more tiring, especially of the muscles around the hips and upper thighs which are not accustomed to carrying the weight of the body for as long during each step as they must when the strides are as slow and infrequent as they are during still-hunting. But all the principles still apply; the hunter must be as nearly invisible and soundless as humanly possible, which is, in the best of us, not very.



Wootters likes bolt-action .22-caliber rifles for squirrel hunting. By using a rifle, it helps him tune up for deer season. The most popular cartridge is the .22 LR, but special centerfire handloads can work.

One difference between squirrel and deer hunting is that the deer are more mobile. One can choose to sit all day in a good place and expect to have one or more wander by, and he's only looking for one. There are no flies on just one squirrel, of course, but most of us are hoping for several in a day's hunt. I have taken as many as four red squirrels out of the same tree just by sitting quietly and waiting, but mostly the hunter must expect to move along after each shot; he can hardly expect a herd of bushytails to trot by his well-chosen stand if only he waits long enough.

His movement should not be a random, any more than still-hunting whitetails should be at random. He should go wherever he goes for a reason, because he has seen "cuttings" in the next grove, or because he has heard a squirrel bark in that direction, or simply because the next stand of mast trees or a den tree is yonder. And he must stalk his objective as though it were the biggest whitetail buck he ever hoped to see, using the available cover, gliding silently across the openings if

necessary, his senses alert to the possibility of game and his hands ready to move the rifle quickly if he has to, slowly if he can afford to.

It is inevitable that a good many squirrels will see you, no matter how you go about it, and that fact must be accepted. However, whether their reaction to you is fearful flight or mere suspicion depends upon how much disturbance has been created by your approach. If you drift into the area and lean motionless against a tree trunk without undue crashing and thrashing, chances are the little brute will flatten himself out on a limb and watch you with curiosity. You may even spot him and manage to pick him off. If not, he will grow bored with your inactivity and probably go on about his business within a few minutes, keeping an eye on you, but offering your choice of shots.

If, on the other hand, your arrival is excessively heralded, you may have to wait an hour or more to get a glimpse of him, if you do at all.

Exactly the same idea works in still hunting whitetails. There are degrees of

fear, and if you manage not to terrify the does, you have a far better chance of at least seeing the buck.

Where spring hunting is legal, I prefer to get out after a squirrel stew before the trees leaf out entirely, just as I'd like to be able to do all my deer hunting after leaf-fall when the understory of brush is bare. I'll settle for being seen more easily in return for seeing my game farther.

Neither squirrel nor deer hunting is at its best on windy days, for the same reason; the game is spookier and squirrels may not move at all. Furthermore, a squirrel hunter depends upon his ears almost as much as on his eyes, and a strong wind defeats him. However, some breeze isn't all that bad in either sport, since it imparts enough movement to the woods themselves to partially conceal the hunter's movements. I prefer dead-calm conditions for squirrels, and a steady breeze for deer hunting.

The management of a hunter's own scent may not be quite as important in squirrel hunting as in hunting whitetails, but it is not to be ignored completely by an intelligent hunter. Squirrels may not

rely upon their noses for survival to the degree to which an old buck does, but that doesn't mean they can't detect and identify man scent with danger. It's a point that isn't considered very often by squirrel hunters (or squirrel-hunting writers) and is misunderstood to an astonishing degree by many deer hunters. Scent management is a vital necessity to the latter, and perhaps no more than a subtle refinement of technique by the seekers of nut-chiselers; in any case, it should be heeded in both sports.

As to the matter of armament, I confess to a certain inflexibility. An argument can be made for a rimfire rifle for squirrels of the same action-type as the hunter's standard big-game firearm, but a squirrel rifle really needs only two virtues—accuracy and fine sights. A still hunter rarely walks as much as a mile in a morning's hunt, so weight is of less than paramount importance, nor does he have to handle his rifle like a whitetail hunter, trying to get on a brush-busting buck. One of the better squirrel hunters I've known used to carry an old Remington Model 37 target rifle, unmodified, with

a 10X target scope. The whole rig must have weighed around nine pounds, but this fellow could stick a Long Rifle bullet in a squirrel's ear in the top of the tallest red oak in east Texas, even if that was all he could see of the animal.

Nobody—well, almost nobody—tries running shots on squirrels in trees with a rifle, so precision counts a lot more than handiness.

My own current favorite squirrel rifle is a Kimber Model 82 bolt-action .22 LR with a 4X Leupold Compact scope. It is neither lighter nor more accurate than my Savage-Anschutz Model 54 Sporter (both group like premium-grade target rifles), but the Kimber sports a handsome low-luster, oil-type finish, whereas the Savage shines. Shiny rifles turn me off, in hunting either squirrels or deer, so the cleanlined, classic little Kimber has earned its place in the squirrel woods very quickly.

Both of these guns are expensive, but I do not mean to suggest that a moderately priced .22 will not do the job on bushytails; in fact, any .22 with sufficient accuracy will serve, regardless of action type or price. I have owned several semi-

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autos—Brownings, Remingtons and Rugers—which grouped well enough for squirrels with a little experimenting with different brands and velocities of ammunition. A squirrel rifle, in my eyes, must be capable of groups around a half-inch for five shots at 35 yards to qualify, preferably groups of that size at 50 yards or better. Being “good enough to hit a squirrel’s head every time” is not quite good enough; very often, half of a squirrel’s head is all that’s visible, and that’s what the rifle should be able to hit, from a solid position, every time.

As to sights, a scope—preferably a high-quality, big-game scope—is the only option. Four-power magnification is enough, 6X is close to optimum, more is okay if you like it. Target definition is the objective here, rather than close holding. Watch out for parallax; most big-game scopes will have some at squirrel ranges. Solid-nose ammo is fine, having the advantage of better accuracy in most rifles (as a general rule; there may be exceptions) and less wind drift. On the gray, or “cat,” squirrels, such ammo works well enough with body shots as well, but on

the much larger red, or “fox,” squirrel, a high-speed hollow-point offers slightly more positive effect. The ultra-velocity numbers—submagnums such as the CCI “Stinger,” Winchester “Expediter,” or Remington “Yellowjacket”—are much too destructive, even if they exhibit the necessary accuracy in your rifle.

It has been said before, but needs saying again, that if you take the trouble to test 10 different .22 ammunitions in your own gun, you will not only be surprised at the variation in grouping ability but you will possibly discover one which cuts the average group literally in half. It can’t be predicted, either, but must be proved in bench testing and may have to be returned to the factory for adjustment.

All this is analogous, of course, to deer rifles and ammunition, whether you use handloads or factory stuff. The requirement for pinpoint accuracy is not so severe in a rifle made for the whitetail woods, but accuracy is something of which you can’t have too much, in any rifle.

It should be noted, too, that many deer rifles make excellent squirrel shoot-

ers with reduced-velocity handloads, usually featuring a cast bullet. This is another whole subject for which there isn’t room here, but velocities should be held to about 900 to 1,200 feet per second, maximum, with 35-yard accuracy as the final criterion. I’ve taken a lot of squirrels with rifles chambered to such cartridges as .257 Roberts, .300 Savage, 7mm Mauser, .308 WCF, .30-06, and even the .45-70 (using round lead balls). Use of such loads in one’s regular big-game rifle, needless to say, offers another off-season opportunity to familiarize oneself with the sights, trigger, safety, mechanisms and general feel, all of which adds up to a plus when deer season rolls around and reinforces my contention that squirrel hunting is the best possible practice for the deer hunter.

Not that squirrels are not worthy game in their own right, for they certainly are. In fact, the case may be made that deer hunting is a fine way to hone one’s hunting skills for squirrels, instead of the other way around.

I wouldn’t argue that point for a moment! 🍷

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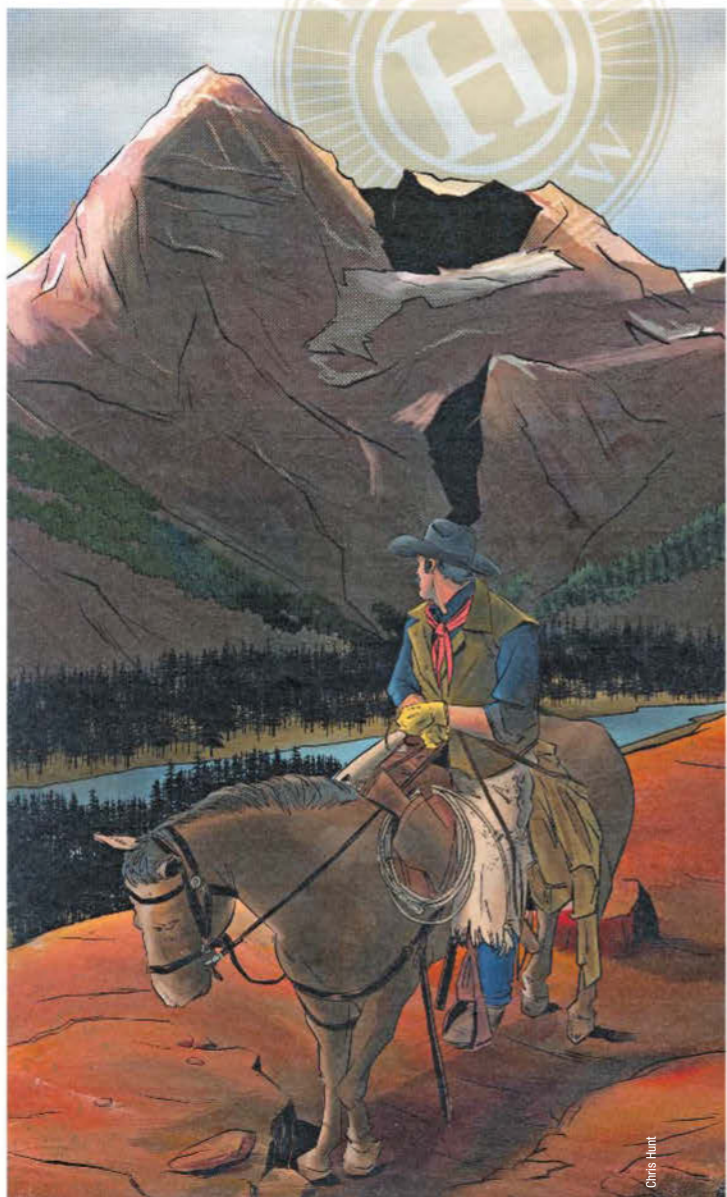
"HUNTING isn't supposed to just be about the kill," they say. We often hear that lament when the hunt is unsuccessful. Those words are supposed to be comforting and conciliatory, but often they fall short of the mark. Fact is, hunting indeed involves all the facets of the outdoors. Seeing trees and brush slowly appearing in the new morning light, hearing the woods come alive, eagerly anticipating a buck suddenly appearing or hearing a bull elk bugling—all of these scenarios and more are the nonconsumptive rewards of the hunt. Just being outdoors and away from the world's problems especially during these days of tension and turmoil is a perfect way to temporarily abandon those troublesome issues.

All well and good. Hunting certainly captures all those moments, but let's look at reality. Most hunters aren't out there just to smell the roses or hear a wren, but to bring home a deer, elk, antelope or other quarry. They're profoundly serious. They want meat. Failing to get one's hands bloody is depressing. Then there are those who don't care if they squeeze the trigger or not, but are perfectly content to be "out there."

I once had a tent mate on an Idaho wilderness hunt who was enormously enchanted with the Rocky Mountains. As he tossed a chunk of wood in the stove, he said: "You know, it doesn't matter if I squeeze the trigger or not. I'm just so happy to be in this magnificent place."

I'm reminded of my first horseback wilderness elk hunt many years ago. I was so confident I'd get an elk I removed the back seat from my SUV so I'd have room for a big, dead bull. I had clean tarps to wrap the chilled quarters and reorganized my freezer to accommodate all the elk meat. I didn't score on the hunt. If I said I was happy, I'd be lying. I sat on the cot the last night and pulled out my unpunched elk tag. I figured I might frame it because it was the only thing going up on my wall. And nothing was going in my freezer. But I had memories of a grueling hunt in spectacular country, memories never to be forgotten.

Hunters who live in rural areas are more apt to be complacent about the outdoors because they see it all the time. The kill means everything, and many hunters depend on that meat to feed their families, whether they're residents in an Appalachian hollow or a small town in Montana. The argument can be made that one can buy meat in a grocery store and save money when compared to the expense of getting a deer or elk. That's true in many cases, but there are many hunters who buy a license, grab a few shells, hunt the back 40 and bring a deer home at minimal cost. And the cellophane-wrapped meat in the grocery store, by the way, tastes nothing like the real deal from the marshes, fields and forests.



Many hunters who live in cities and urban areas see an elk hunt "out West" as a big deal. Just getting a nonresident tag in a lottery draw is reason to celebrate. The cost of the hunt is not cheap, given the license and travel expenses, whether it's a DIY hunt or one with an outfitter. Some hunters save for years to make a Western hunt, and there's a high expectation of bringing home a trophy.

The same can be said for the hunter who lives in Pennsylvania and can't wait for deer season to open so he or she can join pals in deer camp and finally make the long awaited climb into the favorite treestand. Hopefully they'll bring home some venison, too. That hunt might not be in a strange or unfamiliar place a thousand miles away, but it's nonetheless a profound priority for all the reasons that only hunters can know.

And if hunters fail to score, we can all empathize. To them we say: "That's why they call it hunting." 📌

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