

Guided Hunts For WHITE GETTING YOUR MONEY'S WORTH

Fee hunting is relatively new to most whitetail hunters, but it's been proven to provide many sportsmen with their best chance to bag a really big deer. Here's how to make your guided hunt a trip to remember.

The aging wildlife biologist took a long sip of coffee, leaned slowly back in his chair, and began to speak with unquestionable authority. "The American hunter is not ready for trophy hunting," he said, "and our hunters will never be willing to pay the kind of fees they pay in Europe!"

Such disdain was being aimed at a comment made by a Hungarian-born wildlife manager who had just predicted that the American hunter soon would be

facing: (1) a smaller land base on which to hunt; (2) higher license fees; and (3) higher fees for hunting rights. The argument ended right there; neither man wished to carry it further, but each deeply felt he was right.

At about this same time, I was in the Hill Country of Texas on my first "pay hunt" for whitetails. For some reason or another, I had failed to get onto a hunting lease that year, and because virtually no public hunting was available in Texas at that time, I had decided to try one of those new day-hunting deals.

Upon arrival, we were told that all hunters would meet at 3:30 a.m. the following morning for general orientation and guide assignments. That all seemed pretty peculiar to me, because I knew good and well that it did not get daylight until around 6:30. What in the world could take so long?

The answer was to come with harsh reality. Upon arriving on time at the designated area, I discovered (to my horror) that there were about 350 to 400 hunters clustered around a large platform. It looked

more like a rock concert than a deer hunt! A man soon appeared and climbed atop the platform with a great deal of authority. "Now, listen up men," he said. "When I call out your name, you are to go with your guide." For the next hour, I listened patiently as name after name was called. The longer it went on, the more it sounded like mail call at a military camp.

My name finally was called, and I dutifully followed a "guide" to his pickup truck. In the back were two rows of wooden benches. Six men sat on each side of the truck, guns between their legs and eyes staring into those of the opposite hunters. *This truly must have been what D-day was like*, I thought to myself. We each hung on as the truck lurched into the darkness.

On arriving at my stand, the "guide" showed me a reflector-lined path. "Whatever you do, don't leave the stand!" he admonished. I nodded and meekly followed the path to the enclosed tower blind. Climbing up into it in the darkness, I settled down to wait the coming dawn — and hopefully, a good buck. However, at

a magazine such as this scarcely would have made it at that time. Today, deer-specialty magazines are sold out before I can find them on the newsstand. And, the old Hungarian just sits there, drawing quietly on his pipe, with one of those "I-told-you-so" looks on his face. American hunters are being faced with a decreasing land base on which to hunt; license fees have increased substantially; hunters are intensely interested in trophy hunting; and they are willing to pay higher fees for a quality experience. Because more hunters are turning to fee hunting for whitetails, I would like to outline some of the basics in selecting a pay hunt and maybe help you avoid some of the pitfalls.

Why A Pay Hunt?

Twenty years ago, you hardly could find a whitetail hunter who did not have a place to go hunting. The average hunter at that time not only had access to quality hunting experiences, but also had a reasonable expectation of harvesting a trophy or quality buck in many areas. Most of the deer herds were in a recovery phase, following some 75 years of declining numbers. State game departments, using Pittman-Robertson funds, had done an excellent job of restoring the whitetail over much of its original range — in some cases, even *expanding* the range. These booming herds provided some of the top trophy-class bucks you read about in today's outdoor articles and record books.

Today, however, most whitetail populations have peaked out under a system that provides *too much* protection for the overall herd. A true trophy buck now is almost a mythical creature unattainable by many hunters in many places. I feel sorry for many of the hunters with whom I talk deer hunting. Each and every one of them is thoroughly convinced that there is a trophy buck on his hunting club or public hunting ground. Sadly, this often is not the case, because overpopulation of deer and overshooting of bucks eliminated most prospective trophies years ago.

The average deer hunter has changed, as well. Hunters certainly are more affluent than before, but they have little free time in which to scout for, locate, and harvest a trophy buck. Finding a good hunting territory also is a time-consuming and frustrating business. The solution to this dilemma is a pay hunt, utilizing the services of a professional. If this tends to turn you off, remember that elk hunters and many other big-game hunters have been doing it for years.

Some Basic Decisions

Once you decide you are interested in pay whitetail hunting, some basic decisions have to be made. Ask yourself early on whether or not the quality of the experience is tied to actually harvesting a trophy buck. Are you seeking a memorable hunting

experience, a head for your wall, or both? These are very important questions, as their answers will dictate the type of hunt you need to select.

Because the whitetail is spread across most of North America, from Canada south to Mexico, it is a pretty good idea to decide on one or two geographic locations from the outset. A good friend of mine owns some 7,000 acres in the Pineywoods of East Texas, with some pretty good bucks living on his land. Yet, when it comes time to hunt a trophy buck, he always goes somewhere else. One day I asked him why he does this. The answer was simple: To him, part of the whitetail-hunting experience was traveling to new and interesting places. You might give this some thought when you select your hunting spot.

Hunters usually pick a particular geographic area because they either have visited the area in the past or have read about it in some hunting article. You can use either method, but I would suggest that you try talking with several recognized experts in trophy whitetail hunting, too. There really are not that many true experts. You probably have seen most of their names crop up in magazine articles, or you've heard them speak at outdoor shows. Most of them are quite willing to give you sound advice about picking an area.

Once you have decided on a geographic area, you need to think about the type of hunt you want. There are two basic types available. First, there is the day-hunting operation. Now, I am *not* talking about the type of hunt discussed at the beginning of this article. Such operations as that one still may exist, but most of them have fallen by the wayside. (The whitetail hunters of today did not just come in from the farm!) Per-day hunting services are called day-hunting operations. You usually are charged by the day, with a minimum number of days hunted. Minimum number of days ranges from two to three. For a fee, you are provided with a guide (usually not more than three hunters per guide) and the opportunity to harvest a quality animal.

Next comes the package hunt. For a predetermined fee, the hunter may spend three or more days hunting with a personal guide. The hunter-to-guide ratio usually is two to one. Such hunts provide more personalized hunting experience than do day hunts. Package hunts often include such features as transportation while on the property, meals, lodging, and other amenities.

You should decide whether or not guaranteed success is important to you. You would be surprised at the number of hunters attracted by the advertisement, "Guaranteed Kill." Day-hunting operations seldom guarantee success, while package hunts commonly do so. However, it has been my experience that your chances of harvesting a *Continued on next page*

Photo by Russell Thornberry

TAILS

by Dr. James C. Kroll

this point I was beginning to have my doubts.

As dawn began to break, I was shocked by the sight of dozens of similar stands scattered across the landscape. I literally was looking into the eyes of another hunter some 600 yards away. I was stuck there, because the guide's warning and the sight of so many hunters convinced me that my life was in jeopardy if I got down from the stand. I resigned myself to wait until noon and the guide's return. On arriving back at camp, I packed my belongings, as did many other terrified hunters, and left for home. *No one ever will be able to convince me that pay hunting is the way to go*, I thought as I drove off.

Some 20 years have passed since these two events took place, but things have changed substantially since then. The old biologist and I have been proved wrong. Many then-unforeseen things have taken place in the world of whitetail hunting. Twenty years ago, there were many deer hunters, but there was not the avid, widespread interest of today. I dare say that

true trophy buck lie more in your choice of area and outfitter than in the exact type of hunt structure.

Now, let's turn to the all-important question: How much should you expect to pay? *Ironically, the average hunter will pay about the same amount per trophy buck harvested, no matter which type of operation is selected.* Remember from the outset that trophy whitetail bucks are not produced cheaply. Most pay-hunting operations are under intensive management programs, and such programs do not come cheap. As a whitetail manager, I am well aware of what it costs to produce a trophy buck, both economically and ecologically. It takes a lot of land, often expensive deer-proof fences, and always expensive habitat management to

produce a big buck.

On the average, you can expect to pay from \$1,250 to \$3,000 U.S. for a trophy buck. Now, get up off the floor and think about it a minute! How many trophy bucks have you killed in the past 10 years? I am not talking about some 5-pointer with a 10-inch spread; I mean a real, honest-to-goodness trophy buck. Also, how much money have you spent on deer hunting in the last 10 years to harvest that 5-pointer? An honest answer might surprise you. The average hunter in much of North America pays about \$400 per year in license and hunting-privilege fees. On your own, you normally can expect to harvest a trophy every 3 to 5 years. So, you see, you probably already are paying those kinds of prices without really knowing it. Furthermore, have your past

hunting experiences been of such high quality that you hope to relive them in your last moments of life? Your answer probably is "no." The fact is that many hunters could afford a quality pay hunt every two or three years.

Questions To Ask

If you decide to lay out the kind of money it takes to book a trophy hunt, you surely do not want to end up in the same sad state I did on my first hunt-for-pay experience. There are some definite pitfalls, but they can be avoided. In researching this article, I asked some of the most notable trophy-whitetail hunters and guides which questions they would ask if they were picking a pay hunt. Their answers were remarkably similar.

Bill Carter of Houston is a well-known sporting-goods dealer, trophy-whitetail hunter, and trophy-whitetail guide. He owns the Sombrero Ranch near Laredo, Texas. "In considering a pay hunt," Bill says, "be sure to get as many references as possible. Make sure that the references are from the last hunting season, not 5 or 10 years ago." That is a very good point. Some outfitters acquire a piece of property that literally is crawling with trophy bucks, then shoot it out over a few seasons. The hunters who bought hunts early on are very pleased, while later hunters might give less-than-glowing reports.

But, references often are deceiving. You certainly would not expect an outfitter to provide names of people who had bad hunts, even in well-run operations. Harvest records, however, are not deceiving. I would be very wary of any operation that could *not* provide harvest records for all bucks taken from the property. The old line, "statistics don't lie, only statisticians," never has been more appropriate. Average number of points, spread, and beam circumference of bucks harvested quickly will tell you what your prospects are for harvesting a trophy buck on that place. In picking a pay hunt, I often recommend asking for: a list of hunters who have hunted for more than one season; pictures of bucks harvested; harvest records for *all* bucks to date; and then, what I call little "giveaway" questions.

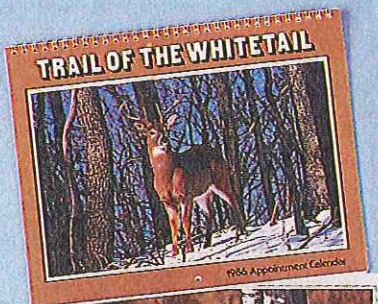
The best giveaway question I have found is, "How will we hunt?" The best answer is, "Whatever it takes to help you legally harvest a quality buck."

This tells me right off the mark that the outfitter is willing to work himself to death to help you be successful. Another giveaway question is, "How big a buck can I expect to harvest?" If the outfitter hedges or makes exorbitant claims, watch out! The best answer is "We average bucks with X qualities, and the biggest buck harvested last year was Y big." Your chances of harvesting such a buck will depend on many factors, but he will do his best to get you the best animal possible. Finally, ask, "How long will it take to harvest a good buck?" Without hesitation, the outfitter should be able to tell exactly how long the average hunter can expect to hunt before being successful. It is an important question, especially if you are paying by the

Continued on page 58

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GUIDED HUNTS

Continued from page 20

day. I talked recently with Elbert Barthlett of Burnt Corn Lodge in Alabama, and he did not even hesitate to answer my question. "We kill 1 trophy buck to each 8.5 man-days of hunting," Elbert said in a straight-to-the-point manner.

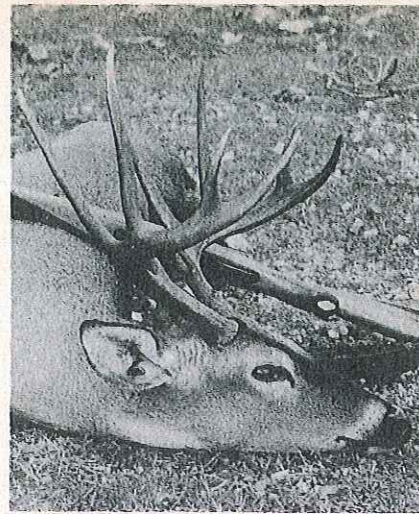
Now, we return to the every-present discussion of price. I have found that there is no consistent pricing structure for trophy-whitetail hunts. For this reason, you need to be very careful to find out exactly what such a hunt will cost you. Package hunts often are better, in that everything provided is laid out in black and white; you know exactly what you are paying for, and how much it will cost. Day-hunting operations clearly should state what services are provided with the daily hunting fee, plus what extras are available. On the average, you can expect to pay \$200 to \$350 per day.

If you are not careful, you can have some pretty shocking surprises. I visited one operation that advertised trophy bucks for a moderate fee of \$800 per buck harvested. It sounded pretty good on the surface, especially when I viewed some impressive harvest records. On closer examination, however, I discovered that the fee did *not* include guide fees, lodging, or meals. There also was a game-cleaning fee. Because the property was miles from the nearest sizable town, the hunter almost would be forced to stay with the outfitter. My calculations indicated that in order to harvest a trophy buck, the hunter

would have to spend around \$2,000. The "bargain" hunt was no bargain after all.

There are some elaborate pricing schemes in operation for trophy bucks, most of which are tied to the quality of the buck harvested. It is my advice to shy away from such operations unless you can have *in writing* the maximum amount you can expect to pay. The most common system now in use revolves around antler points and spread. The average trophy-hunting operation using such schemes charges \$50 per measurable point (tine) and \$50 per inch of antler spread. Thus, a 20-inch-wide 10-pointer will cost you \$500 (points) plus \$1,000 (spread), or \$1,500. Be sure to ask whether or not spread is measured outside the main beams or inside the main beams. For example, an 18-inch-inside-spread buck probably will have a 10-inch-plus outside spread, a difference of about \$100. Because you no doubt are after the biggest buck you and your guide can find, be prepared to pay for the largest buck possible.

These pricing schemes can be rather bizarre. One operation charges \$75 per antler point, \$75 per inch of outside spread, and 75 cents per pound of dressed weight! In considering such a pricing scheme, I was amused by the thought of a guide, trusty calculator in hand, telling a hunter that the buck rapidly disappearing in front of him would cost \$1,587.75 to shoot. That (the idea, not the price) is a bit much for me. I would recommend going with a fixed daily rate or package price, no matter how big the buck killed.



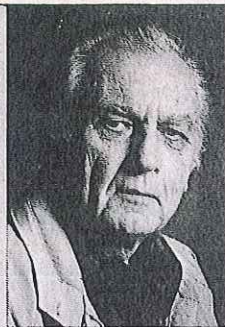
The author dropped this superb buck on a guided hunt in Texas last fall, showing that big bucks can be the reward for those who do their "homework." Photo by Dr. James C. Kroll.

Making The Most Of Your Dollar

The hunting experience takes in more than just shooting a big buck. Scientists tell us that the recreational experience involves several phases. First, there is the decision to have the experience, followed by planning, realization, and recollection phases. The actual realization phase involves less time than the other phases. Who has not spent many a reflective hour recalling a quality hunt that may have lasted only a few days? Because you have decided to invest a great deal of money in a trophy-whitetail hunt, why not make the most of it?

Bill Carter, who has hunted trophy whitetails as well as other big game all over the world, recommends that you begin your "hunting experience" months in advance of the booked dates. Even the selection of the rifle can be a pleasurable and memorable experience. Bill recommends regular practice sessions with a light-caliber rifle for at least six months prior to the hunt. In so doing, you not only extend the planning and anticipation phases of the hunt, but also improve your proficiency with a firearm. The fact that you will be paying for a trophy hunt does not guarantee you that you indeed will *kill* that big buck. The guide can find you the animal, but you are the one who will have to shoot it. Russell Thornberry, noted Canadian whitetail outfitter, points out that on the average, his clients have about three seconds in which to make a killing shot on a trophy deer. My experience has been that the average hunter is not prepared to make such a shot. Why spend a great deal of money and time trying to harvest a trophy buck, only to blow it at the big moment, due to lack of preparation?

I might inject here an admonishment to the prospective client. You are paying for the experience of the guide as well as a trophy buck. One of the advantages of pay-hunting is that the guide is out there for you all year, studying the movements and behavior of "his" bucks. Therefore, listen to your guide.



"Consistency, shot after shot."

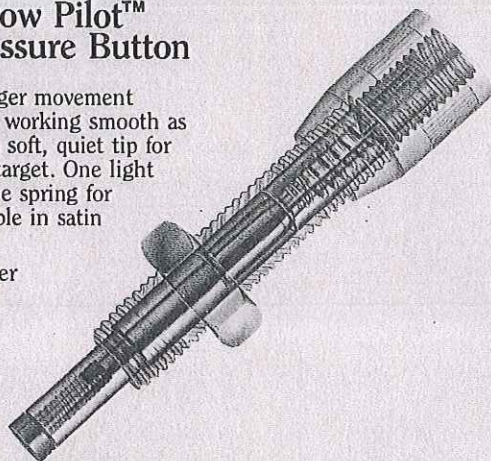
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Elbert Barthlett tells me his No. 1 problem in getting clients good bucks lies in the unwillingness of hunters to do what they are told. This is especially true if the client has hunted the area before; repeat hunters often make the mistake of thinking that because something worked there before, it will work again.

1985 Experiences

In conducting research on this article, I decided to become a member of the trophy-hunting public. Now, as a trophy-whitetail manager, I have more than enough opportunities to shoot quality bucks. But, if you are going to write about something, you need first-hand experience. So, I booked two hunts, using the criteria outlined in this article.

As far as my outfitters were concerned, I was just "John Q. Deerhunter." I felt it would be more realistic that way, as outdoor writers have been fooled in the past (because of preferential treatment).

My time is at a premium, so I decided to limit my 1985 hunting to my home state of Texas. The Hill Country and South Texas always have intrigued me, so I decided to hunt in those two regions. My first hunt took place on the Horn, Hoof and Feather Ranch west of Kerrville, a well-known resort and retirement community in the Hill Country. Bob Harris, the outfitter, was to be my guide.

I arrived at the ranch about 6 a.m. — a more realistic arrival time, considering my earlier experience. There already were four other hunters waiting at the gate when I

arrived. I could tell from their accents that they definitely were not from Texas. It turns out that these fellows had flown down from Pennsylvania for the hunt. They were repeat hunters and obviously were very high on Bob.

The guides met us at the gate right on time. Bob was friendly and personable — a scraggly guy dressed in blue jeans and jogging shoes! His face showed the wear and tear of years in the outdoors. We hit it off well from the start.

I never have seen a man work so hard to get another man a trophy buck as he did in those three days. Bob had no idea that I well could appreciate what he was doing. He was there before daylight and seldom went to bed before midnight. The other hunters all killed fine bucks, and each animal carefully was field dressed by Bob or another guide and taken back to camp for all to see and admire. In spite of the hard work by all, there was a general feeling of relaxation in the camp. I work with thousands of deer hunters each year, and I have noticed that most of them remain pretty tense when they are hunting. But, this was not the case here. I began to realize that the fact that someone was working with each hunter had produced a more sportsmanlike atmosphere.

One of the articles I hate most in magazines is something along the line of "Eleventh-Hour Bucks." It strikes me as funny that so many hunts go down to the wire. But — wouldn't you know it? — mind did. Bob had tried everything possible to get me and a good buck together. He had put me on movable tripod stands. We stalked. We tried silent drives. Finally, we even tried driving around "safari style," which is legal on private land in Texas. On the last day, Bob and the other guides huddled for a pow-wow. It was do or die. *I'll bet that guy will be glad to see me go*, I thought.

The guides decided to set up a tripod stand along a travel corridor where one of them had seen a great buck. The buck had traveled the corridor regularly at about 5:45 p.m. — almost dark. I climbed up onto the stand and waited. Over the course of several hours, I saw several small to intermediate-sized bucks traveling along the corridor. As the light began to fade and shooting became more difficult, the big buck finally made his appearance. I glanced at my watch and noted the time: 5:50 p.m.

The buck was moving in a slow, foot-dragging gait just below a ridge, but I could not get a good shot. I was shooting off-handed at about 125 yards, and the buck was quartering away from me. This was too good a deer to make a hasty shot on. He turned and stopped to survey his domain: a fatal move. The .243 bullet broke his backbone, and he fell cleanly in his tracks.

I never have seen a man more relieved than Bob was when he arrived to help me load up my buck. He was sincerely thrilled with the buck, and he could not wait to get back to camp to show the other guides and hunters. It was a matter of pride with him.

Later in the season, I traveled to Del Rio to hunt with Dolan Creek Ranches. Everything



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was the same as before; I was just another hunter to them. Dolan Creek charges a flat rate and makes no promises for a successful kill; i.e., you pay your money, and you take your chances.

My guide, Larry Coleman, met me at my hotel the evening before the hunt. Again, he was an amiable fellow. We had a drink and agreed to meet at 5 a.m., because the ranch was some 50 miles away.

The next morning, everything fell apart. Larry arrived on time and picked up me and two other hunters. Just outside of town, his Blazer began to fill up with smoke. It gave a chug and died right there on the highway, transmission blazing. I would have fallen apart in such a situation. Here was Larry with three paying hunters, miles from the ranch, with a vehicle that was not going anywhere. Larry obviously was worried, but he quickly got control of the situation. He made sure we were comfortable and then took off down the road in search of help.

Just as the sky was beginning to get rosy in the east, another Blazer roared up beside us. Help had arrived in the nick of time.

We arrived at the ranch in plenty of time to hunt, but the bucks just were not moving. We were facing a full moon and mild weather, a situation difficult to fight. However, Larry remained unshaken. Over the next two days, we tried every trick he knew. *How different, yet how alike, Larry and Bob are*, I thought. *I wouldn't have their job for anything!*

We finally decided to try rattling one more time in an area where Larry had seen a pretty good mature buck. On our very first rattle, the buck came roaring in on us, and I dropped it with a shot to the neck. As with Bob, I was amazed at the obvious excitement Larry felt when I killed the buck. Later, my guide confided in me that he had been extremely tense ever since the vehicle breakdown. An unhappy and unsuccessful hunter meant failure, and he very much disliked failure.

Much of the pressure faced by trophy-whitetail guides comes from the expectations of the hunter. Many hunters feel they are paying more for a trophy animal than for a trophy-hunting experience. "The very best you can do with a client is go away friends," Bob laments. "If you get a man a 20-incher this year, he will want a 21-incher next year! Sooner or later, you aren't going to be able to satisfy him."

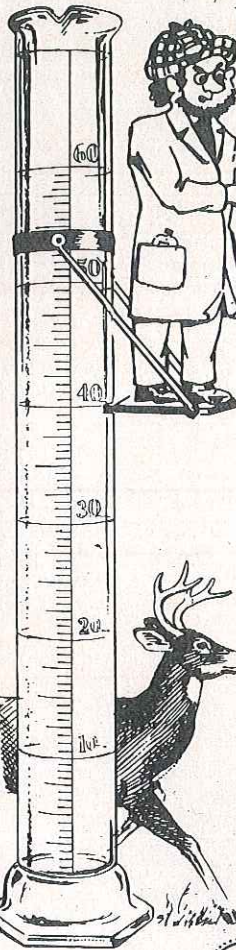
Pay-hunting may not be for every hunter. You may object to attaching a dollar value to game, or you may not be able to afford the cost of such hunts. But one thing is for sure, pay hunts *can* provide some hunters with the kind of quality trophy-hunting experiences only dreamed about by others.

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Bob Harris of Horn, Hoof and Feather Ranch can be reached at (512) 634-2660; John Finegan of Dolan Creek Ranches at (512) 775-3129; Elmer Barthlett of Burnt Corn Lodge at (205) 564-2634; and Bill Carter of Sombbrero Ranch at (713) 443-8393.

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