

Fair Chase

Whitetails

Defining “fair chase” as it applies to whitetails sounds easy. Most of us might say something along the lines of, “Fair chase is giving a deer a reasonable chance to escape a hunter.” Now, how hard was that?

Not hard at all . . . until we get to those pesky details. What’s a “reasonable” chance of escape? Fifty percent? Ninety? Ten? Do we mean the odds of a particular deer getting away on a given day? All season long? Does it matter if we’re talking bow vs. gun? Compound or cross-bow? In-line or traditional muzzle-loader? Open sights or scope?

The above would be enough questions to ponder — but there are many more. As David Morris noted in his January 2001 feature, “Managing Whitetail Management,” there’s now concern that intensive manipulation of herds might threaten fair chase. Can bringing in non-native genetics ruin deer hunting? Is supplemental feeding evil? What about the recent boom in high fencing?

If we at *WHITETAIL* didn’t already think defining the details of fair chase was tough, we do now. That’s because, along with David’s feature in the January issue, we ran a reader survey on how various management and hunting methods affect fair chase, and we’re happy to report that many of you sent it in. In fact, so many of you shared your thoughts that it took us weeks to read them all. But read them we did — every last one.

As a result of our survey, for the first time ever we have numbers to show how at least some of you feel about the issue of fair chase. While hardly scientific, this survey at least

Where do we draw the line on “ethical” ways to hunt and manage deer? The answer depends on whom you ask.

by Gordon Whittington

provides a platform for discussions that could shape the future of deer hunting and management.

We’ll detail the survey results in this series, starting with our September issue. In the meantime, let’s look at the origins of this elusive concept known as “fair chase.”

A MODERN IDEA?

Man presumably is the only predator that intentionally limits his own ability to kill prey. He does so to ensure the survival of the hunted species, to protect human lives and property, and to challenge his own hunting skills and strategies.

In the not-so-good old days, human sensibilities concerning animals were dictated by how full or empty a person’s stomach was. Only recently have enough folks been sufficiently well fed and clothed to care

how deer feel about not being at the top of the food chain.

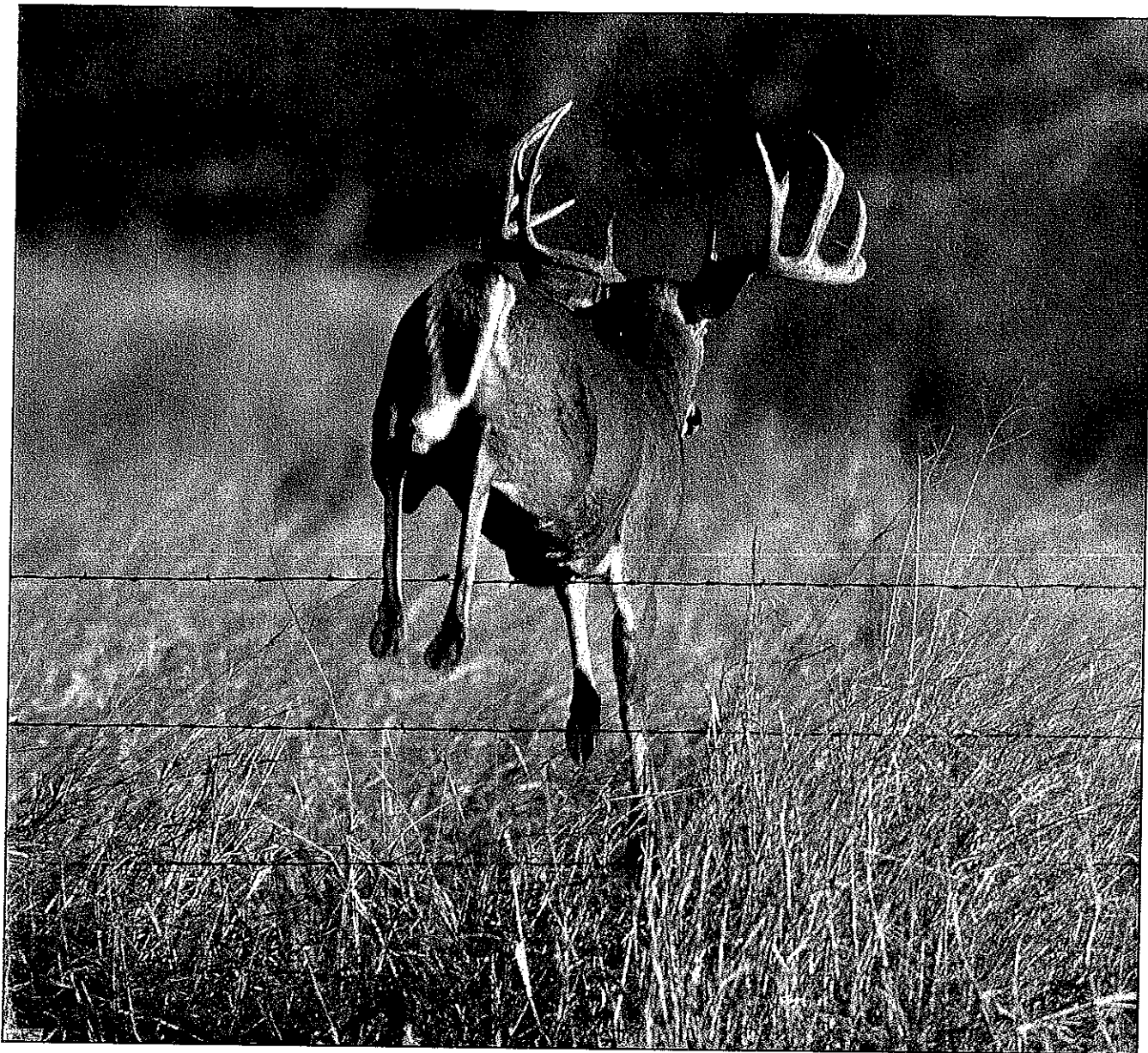
For most of us, whitetail hunting has evolved into a complex blend of recreation, social bonding and herd control, with varying degrees of grocery shopping thrown in. Regulations are in place to strike a balance between taking too many animals and taking too few, with an eye toward public perception of how ethically animals are treated in the process. And at the heart of that treatment is the concept of “fair chase.”

The term was introduced during the early days of the Boone and Crockett Club, which was founded by Theodore Roosevelt and friends in 1887. The club took a stance against some common hunting practices of the era, including burning animals out of their dens and “crusting” (running them down in deep snow). This was the first effort to draw the line on methods that, in the minds of members, violated fair chase.

With no hunting regulations in those days, such a stance was particularly bold. But that doesn’t mean the early leaders of this campaign were all that pure in their own methods. Indeed, by today’s standards some would be viewed as unethical slobs, not champions of wildlife.

Even some of Roosevelt’s hunting tactics would be viewed as offensive today. Although clearly among the most conservation-minded leaders in world history, he engaged in many hunts that would strike modern observers as unsporting.

For example, he wrote of the joy he felt in using horses to run down all manner of game on the North Dakota plains. He also was a fan of



turning loose the dogs on virtually any critter that would flee them across the prairie. And in the Badlands he once shot a bison, despite being aware that the beast was among the last of its kind.

Roosevelt wasn't bashful about presenting his views on what made a game animal worthy of praise. In that regard, he criticized the whitetail for its tendency to skulk in thick cover, rather than come out into the open and take it like a . . . well, like a mule deer. In this man's opinion, part of what made the mulie nobler than the whitetail was that it liked open terrain and had to be shot — or, more often, shot *at* — from a long way off.

In general, you could summarize Roosevelt's hunting philosophy as follows: The longer the shots, the

less hospitable the terrain and the more daring the horsemanship and/or dog work required in getting his game, the better. The man's writings are replete with tales of game for which many follow-up shots were needed or which ultimately went unrecovered, and he expressed few regrets about those losses.

Such events would seem to contradict Roosevelt's professed views. "In a civilized and cultivated country," he wrote, "wild animals only continue to exist at all when preserved by sportsmen . . . the genuine sportsman is, by all odds, the most important factor in keeping the larger and more valuable wild creatures from total extermination."

This isn't meant to bash the man viewed as the greatest friend of hunting ever to occupy the White House.

Most hunters might agree with the general idea that "fair chase" means giving game a reasonable means to escape hunting pressure. But our survey results suggest the details of that definition are tricky to pin down. Photo by Mike Biggs.

It's only to illustrate that standards vary over time. Were we able to ask Roosevelt if his methods were consistent with fair chase, he surely would have claimed they were. And perhaps his quarry did have a "reasonable" chance of escape, given that the man was hunting in wild country and had at his disposal few of the hunting aids now widely used.

B&C's DEFINITION

B&C added to its list of unsporting hunting methods as various situations arose, ultimately coming up

with its "Fair Chase Statement for all Hunter-Taken Trophies." This list of rules applies to all animals entered into the record book as hunter kills. (Those found dead or otherwise not entered as hunter kills aren't held to "fair chase" standards.)

In addition to mandating that the kill have been made in compliance with all applicable game laws and regulations in the area where the kill occurs, current B&C rules disallow the following:

- (1) spotting or herding game from the air, followed by landing in its vicinity for pursuit;
- (2) herding or pursuing game with motor-powered vehicles;
- (3) use of electronic communications for attracting, locating or observing game, or guiding the hunter to such game; and
- (4) hunting game confined by artificial barriers, including escape-proof fencing; or hunting game transplanted solely for the purpose of commercial shooting.

Of these, the rule on high fences has caused the most debate. For this reason, on our survey we asked sev-

eral questions about the role of high fences in the whitetail world.

P&Y's DEFINITION

The Pope and Young Club, which accepts only bowhunting trophies, later adopted a similar stance with its "Fair Chase Affidavit." But P&Y rules are more detailed than those of B&C, as they set guidelines for eligible archery gear. In addition to trophies taken with high-let-off bows, lighted sight pins, etc., the club's record book excludes animals taken under the following circumstances:

- (1) helpless in a trap, deep snow or water, or on ice;
- (2) by "jacklighting" or shining at night;
- (3) any other conditions considered by the Board of Directors as unsportsmanlike.

By the way, the club recently voted to keep its rule against high-let-off bows, thus turning down the entry of Mike Beatty's potential world-record Ohio non-typical. On our survey, we asked how you felt about the rule.

LONGHUNTER'S DEFINITION

The Longhunter Society maintains

the record book on North American muzzleloader trophies. This is the youngest of the three major record-keeping groups, having been formed in the 1980s.

With the exception of substituting muzzleloaders for bows, Longhunter rules on fair chase are quite similar to those of P&Y. But there's one more, and it pertains to management: "the herd from which the trophy is taken must be self-propagating, self-sustaining, and not artificially fed except for occasional emergency reasons."

On our survey, we asked how you feel about the stocking and handling of deer, supplemental feeding, baiting and food plots.

BEYOND THE BOOK

Legally, the rules determining "proper" hunting and management methods — and thus, fair chase — are those enforced by state and provincial wildlife agencies. These vary widely, which makes finding common ground on fair chase even more of a challenge.

This certainly isn't an effort to divide the whitetail fraternity into "us" vs. "them." It's meant to help all of us better understand opposing views on tough issues.

Deer hunters and managers all over North America have for years been getting legal reinforcement as to which methods are "good" and which are "bad." Fortunately, many of you responded to our survey in a way that suggested you tried to put any such biases aside and address these issues on a broader scale.

Starting next month, we'll get into an analysis of your views on fair chase, trying in the process to find a basic definition that could apply to all hunters and managers. We'll go over each survey question, showing not only how you voted on various hunting methods or management practices but also letting some of you say *why* you voted as you did.

This certainly isn't an effort to divide the hunting fraternity into "us" vs. "them." It's to help all of us better understand opposing views on tough issues. So stay tuned. What's coming could be the most important series we've ever published.

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