



## An Amazing 25-Year Journey

Since we're now celebrating our 25th anniversary at *North American Whitetail*, a common cliché occurred to me: *Time passes fast!* In my case, it seems like only yesterday that I received a call from David Morris — then a co-owner of the magazine and a biologist in his own right — about writing for a brand-new trophy whitetail magazine. I had just returned from a meeting of a relatively new professional organization: The Southeast Deer Study Group.

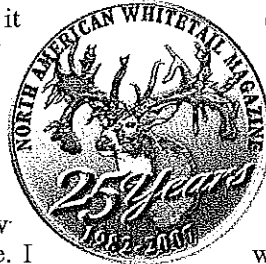
I was outside when my wife answered the phone. "A fellow named David Morris wants to talk with you," she said. "Apparently he was at the deer meeting."

The man on the other end of the phone had a deep Southern drawl, and I liked him immediately. He explained about the new magazine and that he wanted to publish some cutting-edge information from scientists about whitetails. I had done a little writing and I was interested. "What you guys are doing is unique," he added. "And we want to get this new information out to those who need it."

### A LONG TIME AGO

That was 25 years ago, and the whitetail world was quite different in those days. Very little was known about planting food plots for deer. Topics and concepts including such popular subjects as sanctuaries, travel corridors, staging areas, dominant and subordinate bucks, grunting, infrared-triggered cameras, landscaping for whitetails, patterning bucks, aging and judging bucks, and placing size limits on buck harvests were relatively unknown to the hunting public.

Dr. Kroll's extremely popular series "Building Your Own Deer Factory" began in July 1998. The cutting-edge information he provided helped thousands of hunters and *North American Whitetail* readers.



Now, a quarter of a century later, it occurs to me that in today's fast-paced world new hunters who are just becoming part of the whitetail community have no idea how many of the commonly used techniques and concepts that are now used on a daily basis came about. And since these newcomers often take for granted the words and language used in our trade, in the next few columns I'd like to reminisce a bit and talk about how some of these concepts involving what I call "institutional knowl-

edge" were developed.

I came to Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas, in 1973. My job was to develop a wildlife management program within that institution's School of Forestry. Although I've been a hunter all my life, my training and primary research interest involved non-game and endangered species. It was frustrating to me that no one was interested in managing for these animals. "Who cares about toads and frogs?" was the usual comment I heard.

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**BUILDING YOUR OWN DEER FACTORY**

### Growing Deer Food In The Cool Season

When the weather turns cold, whitetails undergo stress that affects their ability to rear fawns and even grow antlers. But with the information presented here, you can do something to help your herd through the tough times!

by Dr. James C. Kroll

No other recent topic has caused as much debate among landowners and hunters as the question of what to do about deer management with any of the hearing trees without hearing trees. What one plant variety should you plant? Whom should you believe? Do you separate fact from fiction? Through a decade of Penn Plantation deer research, a facility for deer research, a food source strategy that can help support higher numbers of healthier deer, if you'll year-round cover, the deer you can have on your land will depend largely on the right food you can plant. Very few deer habitats meet the species' dietary needs in heavily agricultural areas of the year. That's why the deer base. The land's forage base. The land's deer base.

**BUILDING YOUR OWN DEER FACTORY**

### Laying Out Your Whitetail Habitat

Providing deer with all of the habitat elements they need, and then tying those elements together in the right way, is a big part of success in management. Here's how to do it on your property.

by Dr. James C. Kroll

Doesn't mean that a deer spends its entire life on 20 acres, but it is possible to satisfy all of a deer's daily needs on that amount of land. This, by creating your land as 20-acre blocks — or even a portion of this land area — you can take steps to maximize the production of your deer factory.

**BUILDING YOUR OWN DEER FACTORY**

### Is Your Property Good Deer Habitat?

Turning your land into a real "deer factory" means providing the herd with the right blend of food, cover, water and space. Here's how to figure out if your habitat needs improving.

by Dr. James C. Kroll

all of the animal's daily needs. Your tract might not include such a place, thus seriously reducing your chances of either harvesting deer bucks regularly. But as we'll see, you can do something about that.

A DEER'S BASIC NEEDS

ago, I was honored to be named one of the top 100 most influential people in the world. I've spent nearly 30 years studying deer and how they utilize land. Starting in 1973, I used radio-collared deer to study their movements and behavior. I've helped private landowners improve their deer herds for over 30 years.

So I decided to make a dramatic shift in my career. I would study deer. Deer would be the door through which I could gain access to landowners. Non-game would have to wait. With that in mind, I put together a 20-year plan to develop a new institute for scientific study of the world's most popular big game animal.

I'll never forget being summoned to the office of Dan Lay, one of the first biologists hired by Texas Parks & Wildlife. Dan was and still is one of my heroes, and a role model.

"I understand you are switching your work to deer," he said with a frown.

I nodded.

"I'm really disappointed," he replied. "You have a great deal of potential, and we need more non-game biologists. Besides, everything is already known about deer."

### A DREAM AND A PLAN

I left my mentor's office knowing I had disappointed him, but it didn't take long to discover how much we really *did not* know about deer! Being trained as a natural history biologist, I decided to treat whitetails as if they were a newly discovered species. I realized that much of the outdoor writing at that time focused on ways to outwit other hunters, *not* deer. A lot was also written about various calibers and the merits of certain firearms for killing deer. My strategy was to learn as much as I could about what bucks were doing and why, with a strong emphasis on *mature* bucks.

The Institute's research program was logical and simple. First we would study the home ranges of bucks and how they compared to those of does. Most of the radio-telemetry work at that time had been done on buck fawns and yearlings, since capturing older bucks was quite difficult. In truth, there weren't many mature bucks out there, and those that were out there were too smart to be captured in a trap or dropnet. That's when I first learned that hunting with a tranquilizer gun from a tree stand was a very challenging sport!

Having grown up on a farm and ranch in central Texas, I already had some idea about the difficulty of killing a trophy buck, even with a rifle. From our studies, we planned to learn about home-range sizes of mature bucks, as well as about the activity pat-

terns of those bucks.

Next we would look at ways to obtain an accurate count of the number of deer on a property. At that time, techniques like track counts, pellet group counts and walking census lines were in common practice. However, they were greatly criticized by hunters and landowners alike. Somehow we would try to find a better way to obtain critical survey data.

### COULD DEER BE MANAGED?

Along with the above information, we

also wanted to determine what data should be collected and how to effectively manage deer. How accurate were aging techniques and what could be learned from aging whitetails? Could you accurately assess the age of a buck live in the field? How could we assess the productivity of the herd? Today, all of these concepts are commonly used in management, but they did not exist 30 years ago.

Information from some of the studies conducted before we started our research was quite useful. For example, my colleague and friend, Dr. John

Stransky, and his colleagues in the U.S. Forest Service had developed methods to estimate how much quality forage certain land held. Dr. Don Dietz, another friend and colleague, had done research on the nutritional composition of deer foods.

We decided to look into ways we could improve deer nutrition. One discovery we made while doing so was that deer would frequently eat dirt from various outcrops of certain soils! Why did they do this? Was it in response to some nutritional deficiency? If so, could the needs of deer be satisfied with a supplement?

As we accumulated more and more data about what deer were doing and why, we began to offer management assistance to landowners and hunting clubs. Drs. Harry Jacobson and David Guynn at Mississippi State University became trusted colleagues of mine during this time. They were developing ways to work with landowners and hunting clubs, primarily in relation to record keeping. For the first time ever, deer biologists were going out into the general hunting public and extending their knowledge. I

learned a great deal from these two friends, and I worked to spread deer management assistance programs (DMAPs) across the country.

### THE BEST MAGAZINE EVER!

All of this was taking place about the time David Morris made his phone call to me. Later while working with Steve Vaughn, another co-founder of *North American Whitetail*, and Gordon Whittington, the new editor (who happened to be a Texas boy like me), we would forge another long-term plan — one that would be aimed at teaching the hunting/landowner public that deer *could* indeed be managed.

Although this may be somewhat crude to say, I often have likened *North American Whitetail* magazine to *Playboy*. Each month, the magazine showed the hunting public something they always dreamed about but probably would never attain! Seriously, I cannot overstate the impact that *North American Whitetail* had on the future and where we are today. I'd also be remiss if I ignored the similar impact of *The Journal of the Texas Trophy*

*Hunter*, which came into existence shortly before *Whitetail*.

One of the primary impacts of these two publications — one national, one regional — was in showing hunters in various parts of the country that there were bucks out there far bigger than anything they were seeing on their own property. Of course, the reason behind the noticeable lack of trophy bucks in most places at that time was because of the way they were being mismanaged.

At that time, state agencies were operating on a "hunter opportunity model," in which the primary goal was to give as many hunters as possible access to harvesting a deer, no matter what its age. I've often said that the average hunter back then saw a buck for three seconds: deer, buck, boom!

One response to this problem was for those who could afford it to grab their checkbooks and head off to the "exotic" places being written about in *North American Whitetail* at that time — primarily Canada, Texas, Montana and Mexico. Another response involved an idea that was quite remarkable. We started telling our readers that trophy bucks could be produced at home!

### A WHITETAIL REVOLUTION

In early 1998 at a historic meeting at Ft. Perry, Georgia, site of the *North American Whitetail* research facility at the time, David, Steve, Gordon and I hatched a plan. We would introduce a new section in the magazine devoted to producing better bucks on almost any property. We called this new section "Building Your Own Deer Factory." The impact of this new information was incredible! "Deer management mania" spread like wildfire!

Back in the mid-70s, two well-known Texas biologists had written a trend-setting book titled *Producing Quality Whitetails*. Al Brothers and Murphy Ray certainly didn't invent quality deer management, but they were the first to write about the topic, and their now classic book helped to fuel the whitetail management fire. I'm proud to say that Al Brothers and I have been friends for most of my career, and on rare occasions (much too rare these days), we still get together and talk over new ideas and concepts. Any time spent with Al is time that I cherish!

Texas ranchers had been managing their deer for many years, some as early as the 1940s. When Al and Murphy went to work for Texas Parks & Wildlife, they saw the need for the department to work with ranchers to achieve common goals. It was a two-way street, and each learned from the other. By the 1980s, the foundation had been laid for ways to produce quality whitetails on private lands.

### NEW HORIZONS

In 1991 I was fortunate enough to publish a book in which both management and the harvesting of trophy bucks were covered under one title for the first time, *A Practical Guide to Producing and Harvesting White-tailed Deer* (about 700 pages long). I had learned how to assist landowners and hunters, and I had learned how to produce trophy bucks on a given property. But now I came to realize that the average hunter really did not know a great deal about his "prey." Producing big bucks was one thing; killing them was another!

By the time we had completed our first 20-year study plan, it was obvious that there was a need to educate hunters

about mature-buck behavior. Our telemetry research had taught us a great deal. The first thing I discovered was that bucks tend to find a place where hunting pressure is either limited or non-existent. This is true even in heavily pressured herds. We termed such areas *sanctuaries*, and the term stuck.

In spite of trying to hammer home the idea that a buck will never achieve his true genetic potential or reach trophy class if he is killed at a young age, the question of how to bring hunters over to the concept of letting young bucks walk still remained. Size limits on bucks (spread limits, and in some cases the number of points to a side) quickly became a popular management tool. Yet it was also a very controversial topic around the campfires of countless hunting camps. Today, there are various versions of these strategies in play in many areas.

### NO END IN SIGHT

Although size limits on bucks worked, we realized that this was only a stopgap measure. The real long-term solution was in educating hunters. We knew that the emphasis

would have to shift someday from the spread of a buck's antlers to his age. But teaching hunters how to determine the age of a live deer seemed like an impossible task.

In 1996, we decided to publish yet another book on that very topic. *Aging and Judging Trophy Whitetails* quickly became a bestseller that's now in its third printing. The book was followed by a one-hour video by the same name. To date, we have sold more than 50,000 copies of the video. (The money generated by this and the other publications by the Institute is used to support our research.)

Today, it's not at all uncommon for me to go to a meeting of deer hunters and hear someone refer to a buck he saw on his property by stating the age of the deer along with a description of its antlers. You have no idea how gratifying that is!

(Editor's Note: In the next few columns, Dr. Deer will continue to talk about many of the historical breakthroughs and milestones that have taken place in deer management during *North American Whitetail's* exciting 25-year history. Be sure to stay tuned!) ■