

40 Feet Of Antlers In One Season!

For me, the 1993-94 whitetail season was the kind dreams are made of, as I shot three bucks averaging Boone and Crockett scores of almost 160 inches. And to make it even better, all three monsters came to rattling!

The summer of 1993 was progressing normally. Our research on nutrition, population structure and herd health at the Institute for White-Tailed Deer Management and Research demanded the usual 20-hour work days. I was as tired as I could be. Walking around our farm on a late-August Sunday, my wife Susie turned and asked: "Well, what kind of season do you think you'll have?"

To that very moment, what the coming season might have in store had never entered my mind. "To be quite honest," I confessed, "for the first time in many years, I don't have any expectations."

I stopped in my tracks; those words sounded familiar. When and where had I said them before? We stopped to admire some of my research deer, when suddenly it all came back. It was 1987, and just as in '93 I had been extremely busy — too busy to practice much of what I preach about preparing for deer season. In fact, I did not even get to hunt seriously until late in the year.

For over 20 years, I had conducted research on deer in the mixed pine-hardwood forests of East Texas, radio tracking and studying movements and behavior of wild bucks and does. Under my direction, North Boggy Slough Hunting and Fishing Club had been transformed from one of the worst managed deer herds in North America to a premier trophy management area, largely through selective harvest.

Because I had missed the prime rut for the Pineywoods of East Texas

by Dr. James C. Kroll



An afternoon rattling session in a northern Alberta staging area brought this 158 6/8-point buck to the author's gun in mid-November. Photo by Dave Bzawy.

(about the first of November), I decided to wait until mid-December to hunt Boggy Slough. I knew of some sanctuaries and travel corridors that might be productive, especially since we had found the shed antlers of a potential world-record buck! I had one of the biologists drop me off near a hastily selected spot just about sunrise. Waiting until I could see clearly, I slipped into a spot downwind from my target area.

Using a grunt call, I made a couple of tending grunts. No sooner had I made the first call sequence, than a monster buck roared out of the dense pines and stopped, glaring down at me from not more than 20 yards away. That was one of the finest days of my career. The buck scored in the 190s, Boone and Crockett as a non-typical, better than 8-inch bases and four drop tines.

Reality slowly returned as I relived sitting alone with my trophy buck in a pine plantation in East Texas. "On the other hand, it may be another 1987!" Susie smiled. She has more confidence in me than I deserve.

ALBERTA, MID-NOVEMBER

Dave Bzawy's ever-smiling face greeting me and my friend Kenneth Sutton at the Nisku Inn near Edmonton, Alberta. Dave and I go back a long way. Together we have had some great times over the years. Almost 20 years my junior, and an ex-motocross and hockey player, he often is difficult to keep up with, even for one who has spent his life in the woods. I probably have never known a better hunter than Dave. He and his partner, Terry Birkholz, operate Alberta Guide Service in the fringe habitat north of Edmonton. Unlike many other outfitters, they hunt whitetails the way I like to hunt them. They study and pattern deer all year, and during hunting season try to put hunters on to some of these Alberta giants.

On that particular day, my goal was not to take a big whitetail myself. Kenneth had been there the previous season and had not taken a



deer, though he passed up numerous mature bucks during his week of hunting. Once again, the idea of harvesting a memorable buck really never crossed my mind. I just wanted to get some rest and have some fun.

On the first morning, Kenneth realized his dream of taking an Alberta whitetail, a beautiful buck scoring in the 150s. My friend was sitting on a portable stand near a carefully researched travel corridor, just after daylight. Glancing aside, he spied a buck he describes to this day as being "as big as a Hereford bull," coming methodically through the aspen. "I thought he was going to walk right over me," volunteered the excited hunter, who dropped the buck in his tracks.

Meanwhile, I was sitting on a cutline overlooking a popular travel

corridor on a large drainage system. Over the four-hour morning hunt, I called in several bucks, but none big enough. Dave arrived around lunch to tell me about Kenneth's buck. We decided to go shoot some photographs.

It was late afternoon before we met up again for a hunt. This was my first day in Alberta, and there was no hurry. I had had good luck calling that morning, so we decided to try a rattling session. We drove over to an area we had hunted before. It is a classic staging area, made up of scrubby pines and sand hills above a feeding area. As we slipped into position, I glanced at my watch. Nearly 3 p.m.; it wouldn't long before dark.

Our setup was classic. Heavy rub marks and scars on several large

This buck, shot on the Diamond H Ranch in Dimmit County, Texas, on Dec. 21, walked to within 10 yards of the author after hearing his rattling sequence. Photo by Gordon Whittington.

pinus clearly indicated a serious staging area. We decided to use my favorite calling technique, with the rattler sitting about 20 yards upwind of the shooter. We carefully chose the right spot for using this method. If the buck responded, he would have to show himself to my right or left before getting downwind of Dave.

Just as the Boggy Slough non-typical had charged in on the very first call, one tickle of the antlers by Dave brought instant results.

Continued on page 78

Angling from my left, the buck came in so quickly I could not get into position to shoot. There, standing 10 yards in front of me was an incredibly beautiful buck with a twin row of tines on each side!

We stared at each other for a full 10 seconds. I didn't dare move and I knew he was not sure I posed a threat. With my back toward Dave, I had no way of knowing whether or not he also had seen the buck. He did, though, and reaching behind a tree, he rattled again. The buck jumped to his right and circled. Now was my chance.

Placing the crosshairs on the deer's shoulder, I waited for him to stop. A moving target, even at that distance, can produce sad results. He stopped to look toward Dave, and I squeezed the trigger on the Jarrett 7 mm Rem. Mag. The world turned to snow at that point. Looking through the 6X scope, I had not realized I was looking past a 6-inch-diameter tree! Bark, snow and recoil showered down on me. Needless to say, I lost sight of the buck.

Recovering my senses, I glanced hurriedly in the direction of the deer. There, not more than 5 yards away was the pine, with a neat 1/2-inch hole torn through it. Bark and lichen moss were splattered over the snow around the tree. It was a sick feeling I never care to experience again.

Dave and I quickly ran to the spot where the buck had stopped. On the snow was a large amount of lung blood. Somehow, perhaps by magic, the bullet had passed through the tree and had hit its mark on the buck!

That night we gathered for a festive dinner and the measuring of the bucks Kenneth and I had taken on our first day in Canada. In the process of running downhill, my buck had smacked into a tree, breaking off one of the those magnificent paired tines. He now was a 6x7, and with the missing tine left out of the calculation, he scored 158 6/8.

SOUTH TEXAS, DEC. 21

I wake up every morning and thank God I chose to be a whitetail biologist. What other profession would allow you the honor of sharing every day of the year with whitetails? But just as rewarding is

getting to work as I often do with landowners, helping them achieve their management goals for trophy whitetails.

One such landowner is not an individual, but rather, an estate. H.H. Coffield was a self-made man who built an empire in the traditional Texas fashion. His pride and joy was a 10,000-acre ranch near Catarina, which lies in the heart of the best whitetail country there is. The Diamond H Ranch, the San Roque marsh adjacent to the Nueces River, and the 50-mile radius around the site has produced more record-book bucks as anywhere else in the whitetail's range.

Angling from my left, the buck came in so quickly I could not get into position.

Upon his death, Mr. Coffield left all of his assets, including the ranch, to charity. But he thought so much of his hunting buddies, he stipulated in his will that the ranch could not be sold until around the turn of the century. He figured by then they all either would have passed on or become too old to hunt. In the interim, the ranch would be managed for whitetails. That is where I came in to the picture. My job is to see to it the Ranch maintains high-quality bucks and that its wildlife is managed in an ethical manner. Each December, after all of the friends have hunted, *North American WHITETAIL* editor Gordon Whittington, photographer Mike Biggs, biologist Mark Ellett and I have the opportunity to hunt the area.

It was a typical South Texas December — hot and dry. Talking with ranch foreman Jose Guerra and Mark, my worst fears were substantiated. The bucks just weren't moving. This was not going to be easy, even in an area with an abundance of quality bucks.

The next morning, several of us decided to hunt along the many drainages leading into the San Roque. Rattling and calling would be in order, as mid-December is time for the rut in South Texas. We each covered miles of dense brush. I must have rattled more than 100 times that day. The best I could muster, however, was a 3 1/2-year-old 8-

pointer. This was not going to be easy.

The next day was a repeat, only nature added something new — fog. I decided to sit on the upper end of a small pond until mid-morning, then regroup with the guys to plan a new strategy. I saw eight bucks come to water between 8 a.m. and noon, but the truly big boys failed to make appearances. I returned to the best house for a sandwich and a major pow-wow. Mike and Gordon were having the same problem.

For years, I have written about midday hunting. Frankly, I have taken more bucks during this time than any other. I had found a sanctuary on a small "island" in the dense wolfweed of the San Roque marsh three years earlier. Gordon and I had rattled up a nice buck the year before, and he had made a fine one-shot kill. Two hours later, I had shot an enormous, high-racked buck as he chased a doe near the sanctuary. Why not try it again?

I slipped into position about 12:30 p.m. on the north side of the marsh. The wind was blowing right from the area, so I knew if a buck appeared he would have to circle to get the wind on me. The type of buck I was after was not the kind to expose himself in wide-open country. This would have to be "up close and personal."

Backing into a motte of mesquite, I began my rattling sequence with an antler thump on a tree, followed by bark raking with the antler, a snort-wheeze call, grunt and then, finally, intense rattling. If I were to call any mature buck from the sanctuary, every trick in the book would have to be used.

I completed the calling sequence, put down the antlers and waited. My watch read 12:52 p.m. Five, 10, 15 minutes passed. The only sound was that of a Mexican green jay circling overhead. "Don't squirrel it by being impatient," I instructed myself. At 1:15, a movement caught my eye, followed by the distinctive rubbing and cracking sound of antler against tree limb. *Snap!* There he was, not more than 10 yards away, turning his head slowly from side to side. Although he should have been able to pinpoint my exact location, he was having trouble. He turned once more to look away — *boom!* The monster died in his tracks.

Walking out of the marsh, I could

hear Jose's truck coming toward me. "Un grande?" ("A big one?") he queried.

"Si."

We loaded the buck after another long drag, again uphill, and headed for camp. Gordon, who was due to arrive that evening, is my best hunting buddy, and I couldn't wait for him to see the deer. It had been a dry year, so the buck did not realize his true potential; yet, the 156 3/8 score was good enough!

SOUTHWEST TEXAS, DEC. 27

I was in a pretty good mood for Christmas. After all, having had absolutely no expectations for the 1993-94 season, I had taken two bucks most hunters only dream of. Shortly after I'd bagged the Diamond H buck, Susie harvested two bucks that exceeded her personal best by several inches. Both were one-shot kills, too. Yet, the season was not over.

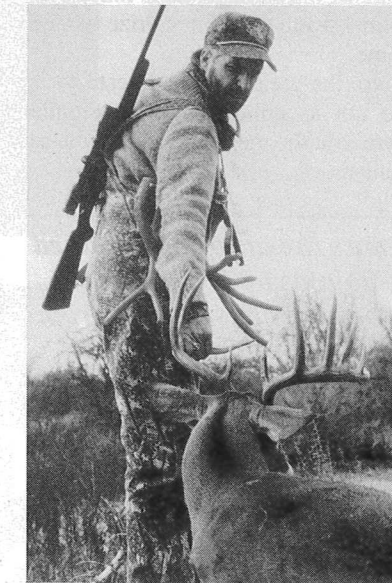
My annual hunting odyssey usually ends with a week at the Rockin' L Ranch near Eagle Pass. This is Texas desert country full of nasty vegetation; everything sticks you! Yet it probably is some of the best deer country around. Originally, the ranch had belonged to the Coffield estate, but Kenneth purchased it a couple of years ago. I have managed the ranch for the last six years. Although it is a much smaller ranch of about 2,500 acres, neighboring ranches practice sound management as well, improving the overall trophy prospects across the area. It is a real pleasure to work with folks dedicated to quality whitetails.

There is no square inch of the ranch I have not examined at one time or another. Over the six years I have worked there, I have accumulated a significant pile of notebooks, each detailing movements and observations of bucks and does. Although almost flat in terrain, the ranch has numerous small drainages that, as in many other places, serve as funneling features. The upper end of one such drainage is one of the densest areas I ever have hunted. That's where I have seen most of the mature bucks. I asked my wife to drop me off at the ranch on Dec. 26. Kenneth was already there, anxious to see if there was a buck to rival his Alberta monster on the ranch. We met up out

in the brush just before dark and headed for camp.

Over dinner that night we decided to split up the next morning and lunt the drainage leading into the sanctuary. Kenneth would hunt the west approach, and I would work around to the east. Because the wind was out of the north, we felt we had a good chance of seeing a buck.

It was a cold morning for southwest Texas, and daylight seemed to be too long in coming. Around 10:30 a.m., I reached my position near a waterhole. Dense whitebrush normally crowded the shoreline, but the drought had lowered the water level to provide access.



This fine buck was a 6x6 when the author shot. But as the deer ran, he hit a tree and became a 6x5! Photo courtesy of Dr. James C. Kroll.

My notes on the area indicated bucks tended to bed above the waterhole, using almost tunnel-like trails to reach the pond. If I could slip into the area, set up along the shore and rattle, I might just be able to call one of those brutes out. I decided to use the antler-rubbing technique, followed by light rattling. These deer did not seem to be in rut yet, so heavy rattling or grunting would have been inappropriate.

Strategically locating myself, I went through the sequence that had proven so successful at the Diamond H. I scooted back against a dead hackberry limb and waited. The cold morning had given way to a typically hot midday in west Texas. The sun

felt so good, I had to fight the desire to nod off. A snap brought me into full attention. Coming with head down to accommodate his antlers as he maneuvered along one of the tunnels was a gorgeous 12-pointer. He took a few steps, stopped, then remained motionless for the next 20 minutes!

It was a standoff. I dared not make a hasty move. At 20 yards, he surely would see even the slightest motion. Fearing he would sense my presence, even against the wind, I began to force myself to think about something else. Like Peter Pan, I thought "happy thoughts." He moved an ear — I had him! The buck was going to show himself, no doubt. One step forward, two. He lowered his head to negotiate the overhanging brush. Ten yards. He stopped and looked back. This was my chance! The 7mm bullet striking him in the point of his left shoulder. He wheeled and ran right into a tree, sending his left G-5 tine into the air! My 6x6 had turned into a 5x6. No matter though.

Once again I had a long drag on my hands. The buck did not weigh in at 300 pounds, but he did exceed 200 pounds. Kenneth arrived on the scene and helped me drag the deer the last 100 yards to the truck. After photographs and lunch, I scored the buck (minus his broken tine) at 159 2/8, bringing my one-season point total by rattling to an unofficial 474 3/8 B&C points.

The 1993-94 season will be remembered as one of the most successful in my hunting career. But was it the culminated scores of my bucks that made it so? Now that I have had time to ponder the year, the answer is NO. In looking back on the season, it is not the bucks I remember most, it is other events: my wife's exceeding her personal best; Kenneth taking a buck of a lifetime in the cold far north under fair-chase conditions; tracking a wounded buck with Dave across a frozen lake; hours at night talking strategy with Gordon and Mike at the Diamond H. And, most of all, it is the feeling of being responsible for the well-being of the deer on places like the Diamond H and Rockin' L. That's what I'll be thinking about in years to come, as I sit by the fire gazing up at those magnificent heads on my wall.