

A DIY SLAM PART 1

Although whitetails have been around for millennia, hunting these magnificent animals for recreation is a relatively new pursuit. And public interest in the various subspecies is an even more recent development.

The first half of the 20th century was devoted to restoring whitetail populations across much of North America, with little attention given to the origin of deer captured for release elsewhere. The focus was on returning these deer to huntable numbers. Unfortunately, a consequence of restoration efforts was that genetically distinct subspecies — of which there once might have been as many as 45 — ultimately became “genetically polluted.”

BY DR. JAMES C. KROLL

This was a case of unexpected consequences, and subspecies weren't the only casualties. Many regional hunting traditions and methods also were lost during those dark years when fewer than 500,000 whitetails inhabited North America. Fortunately, there was enough remaining “cultural memory” to let us keep some of these traditions and methods alive, but we no doubt lost others.

In this two-part series, I'll discuss what exactly constitutes a practical whitetail slam, why it was developed, the current status of slam subgroups and why the quest to complete the slam is well suited to an avid deer hunter's DIY goals.

DEVELOPING THE CONCEPT

Some hunters tend to focus more on antler score than on the hunting experience itself. And that can cause problems.

I remember years ago being at the Dixie Deer Classic, presenting seminars on whitetail hunting, when a young fellow came up to ask advice. “I'm not a very good hunter,” he told me. “I'd like to learn more about tactics that work.”

Through a bit of questioning, I found out the guy not only was a good hunter, but he'd also consistently been harvesting mature bucks for years. The mistake he'd made was thinking the ability of a hunter is measured by antler size of the bucks he or she harvests.

Following this encounter, I became somewhat obsessed with the idea of making hunters more aware of what *really* constitutes a great hunt. I wanted them to gain a deeper appreciation for the cultures, traditions and habitats related to whitetails.

You might have read some of my articles on various aspects of hunting across the species' range, as well as the unique traits of the various huntable subspecies (groups). Fortunately, my friend Tom Miranda was paying attention to this subject and became the driving force behind development of the “Whitetail Slam” recognition program, which eventually led to the TV program “Whitetail Slam.”

Several fellow professionals contributed to the idea of what constitutes this slam, and we eventually settled on the initial groups to include. The current slam doesn't faithfully follow recognized subspecies lines — rather, it encompasses groups of populations that provide the opportunity to hunt in unique habitats for deer that have different ways of surviving. With that in mind, we settled on these eight subgroups, alphabetically:

- **Dakota**
- **Desert**
- **Gulf Coast**
- **Northern Woodland**
- **Northwestern**
- **Seminole**
- **South-Central Plains**
- **Southeastern**

Note there are overlaps in traditional subspecies ranges. For instance, Kansas

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and Texas subspecies are included in the South-Central Plains subgroup. At present, these eight subgroups represent an achievable challenge to the average deer hunter, particularly if he doesn't get in a big hurry to complete a personal slam. And, in most cases, it's possible to take a buck from a given subgroup without spending a fortune.

The purpose of the slam isn't to provide "bragging rights" to hunters — it's to encourage them to immerse themselves in the habitats, terrains, traditions and even preferred weapons unique to hunting a given subgroup.

CURRENT STATUS OF THE SLAM

This concept is slowly gaining acceptance. However, in spite of a great deal of media coverage, the whitetail slam remains unknown to many hunters.

Perhaps this is because over the last 50 years of the best whitetail hunting in modern history, hunters have developed what I call "antler disease." I attend a number of hunting shows each year, and I've noticed an alarming trend. Whereas 20 years ago a 160-inch buck on display would have drawn a sizeable crowd, folks now walk right by 170-plus racks without paying them any attention.

We in the media are somewhat to blame for this — myself included. But there are other ways to measure a trophy, and the slam lends itself to that alternative way of thinking. With hunters aging and becoming a smaller part of our overall population, satisfaction in the hunt's outcome is starting to move in other directions.

GOING TO EXTREMES

To illustrate my point about how antler isn't everything, I'd like to tell you a story from the early days of *North American Whitetail*.

It came about as a result of articles I was writing on our institute's landmark research on mature buck behavior. As we made discoveries, I began to give certain habitat elements and deer behaviors names. Terms such as "travel corridor," "sanctuary" and "signpost" would later become part of the deer-hunting lexicon. My favorite topic has and will remain what I call "the art and science" of patterning whitetails. In fact, *NAW* editor in chief Gordon Whittington and I



The author has traveled widely to hunt whitetails. He took this mature buck in Nuevo Leon, Mexico. Also shown is Gabriel Serna of ANGADI, a landowner group helping to promote the region's hunting. Photo by Gordon Whittington

coauthored a book by that exact title just over 20 years ago.

By then I'd hunted in Canada for many years, beginning in those early years when the region's trophy whitetails were just coming into vogue with nonresidents. During these travels, I established a friendship with one of our readers, Dave Bzawy, owner and operator of Alberta Wilderness Guide Service.

When Alberta started to become a destination for Americans seeking big whitetails, the standard outfitting method was to ride backroads until a big buck was spotted. At that point, often the hunter would jump out of the truck and shoot. If the buck made it into nearby "bush," the typical approach was to have one or more guys on foot try to bump the animal out in front of a shooter. It was somewhat common in those days not to even acquire landowner permission before the shooting started.

Dave was a refreshing breeze in the frigid air of Alberta. He'd developed a hunting strategy based on my patterning articles, and in the process had become one of the most successful outfitters in the province. It was a joy to hunt

with him each November. Dave spent all year patterning bucks, so upon my annual arrival, he was instantly ready to act on a strategy.

Now, Alberta can be a pretty unforgiving place to hunt whitetails, especially the way Dave and I hunted: all-day sits on cutlines or trails, generally with the hunter perched atop an open tripod stand that offered great mobility if a setup tweak were needed. Adequate clothing for such conditions was scarce, so I was excited to discover King of the Mountain gear, which made those cold sits more tolerable.

One such hunt turned into one of the most difficult hunts of my career. We started hunting on Monday at minus 5 degrees F. — and each day it got colder. In Wednesday's predawn, a guide walked in at breakfast with a very strange look on his face. "Men," he said, "it is minus 27 . . . *your* temperature!"

OK, minus 27 F. is brisk — but he hadn't yet mentioned anything about the wind. It was blowing a sustained 20 mph, with gusts to 40!

Dave dropped me off at the intersection of a road and a cutline, which led a mile or so to a tripod placed the day before. For some reason, despite the wind I'd decided to bring my rattling antlers and grunt call (a new product back then).

Dave had patterned a large-bodied

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buck that daily emerged from his bed, traveled to a staging area adjacent to an alfalfa field five miles away, then returned to his bed by skirting a frozen beaver pond. The tripod was at a narrowing between the cutline and pond.

Arriving before daylight, I climbed the tripod to hang my antlers next to the seat. They immediately began rattling in the high wind, so I moved them apart. Climbing back up with my pack

and rifle, I sat down with my back to the wind, then reached down to loosen the nut holding the seat in place. And then, as I turned around into the wind, I immediately began to shiver.

As daylight approached, the wind of course increased. My face quickly became covered with ice, even though I had a scarf to protect myself. (It didn't do the job.) At one point, while trying to remove ice from my mustache, I actually

broke off a wad of hair with it!

Despite these horrible conditions, I was determined to stick it out. That is, until about 9:00 a.m. At that point, I just couldn't take it any more.

I'm a religious man and never apologize for being so. I decided it was time for prayer. "Lord," I said, "I can't take this any more. I need your help."

Now, you can believe me or not; it makes no difference to me. But the wind immediately died! For the first time all morning, it turned dead calm. Suddenly gathering my wits, I grabbed the antlers and started rattling.

In less than a minute, about 300 yards up the cutline a huge buck emerged from the timber to the right. In my binoculars he looked like a medieval monster, with ice inches thick on his head and shoulders. I grunted at him, and he started running toward me in a peculiar bucking fashion to help him negotiate the deep snow. Each time he hit the ground, steam blew out of his nostrils, completing the monster image.

At 175 yards the buck hung up; he'd come no closer. Now, I don't like straight-on chest shots, but I figured my Jarrett 7mm Rem. Mag. could do the job. I touched one off.

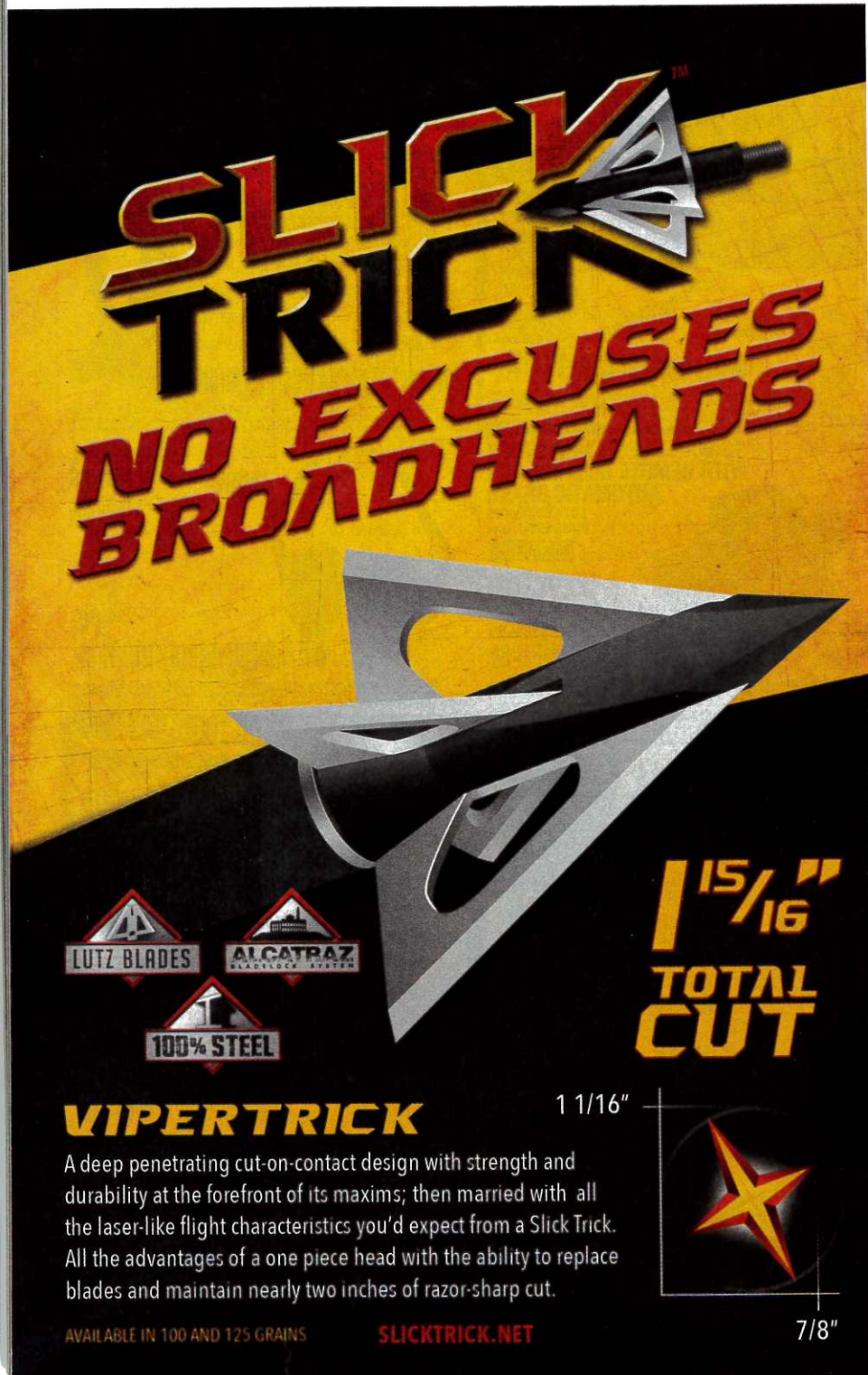
The roar of the rifle was deafening, and snow flew all around me. As I returned my eye to the scope, the buck was nowhere to be seen.

How could you have missed? I asked myself. Then, in an instant, a swooshing sound came from the spot where the deer had stood. To my amazement, he was sliding head first down the frozen cutline — right for my tripod! As I watched, he ultimately collided with its base, almost tipping it over!

Looking straight down on that buck, I found the whole sequence like something out of a strange dream. And at that moment, I promise you, the wind went right back to 40 mph.

I climbed down, spent a few quiet moments with my buck, then walked back to the road to leave a pre-arranged sign for Dave. Returning to the kill scene, I crawled into a small spruce thicket near my buck and waited.

In an hour or so Dave came running up, and together we admired the buck. It was so cold we had to build a fire and melt snow to wash out the carcass after



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field-dressing, so our hands wouldn't freeze. It was just Dave, my buck and me in the cold North Country woods: a memory I'll always cherish.

This buck was one of the lowest-scoring specimens I've shot in Alberta, yet I wouldn't trade him for one with a lot more antler. He was so old all of his molars were at the gum line; he probably couldn't have survived another year. That, to me, is what the slam is all about: experiencing the uniqueness of each place, its challenges and friendships, tempered by what can be difficult hunting conditions. There's far more to hunting deer than counting inches of bone.

STARTING YOUR SLAM

Unless you're stationed overseas, you almost certainly live and hunt within the range of one of the subgroups. So, the best place to start is right at home. Since there are no minimum scores to enter a buck, any hunter desiring to pursue the slam is already off to a good start.

We hear a lot about "bucket lists," and that concept certainly applies to the

whitetail slam. If you want to tackle it, the first step is to become familiar with the representative subgroups, by reading all you call about them and talking with other hunters who hunt within the range of a given subgroup. Some hunters are entering into swap programs in which they trade hunts with fellow hunters in other geographic areas. I've done this myself, with great success.

I'd urge you not to get caught up in the idea that it's a race or competition. There are several stages to the recreational experience. The first is making the decision to go somewhere and do something. The next is to decide where you want to go. That, in turn, is followed by studying the information needed to become familiar with the activity. Next comes acquiring and preparing the gear you'll need, then practicing to gain adequate proficiency.

The next step — and the shortest — is the actual hunt. Then come the last two steps, which I believe are the most important: returning home and then spending years reminiscing on the hunt. Put all of those steps together and

you have what I call a "quality" whitetail hunt.

Prioritize the hunts, each according to the ease and expense of traveling to a new place to experience the uniqueness of a particular subgroup. So what if it takes you 10 years or more to complete the slam? In this fast-paced society, let's try something different: taking our time!

Most regions have an adequate supply of inexpensive places and ways to hunt. Take advantage of opportunities that seem to arise out of nowhere. For all we know, your chance to hunt one of these subgroups could arise out of a casual conversation at a hunting show.

COMING NEXT MONTH

In the conclusion of this series, I'll present some unique information about each of the subgroups listed above. Some of this information might encourage you to get going on a slam of your own as soon as possible. In the meantime, I invite you to check out "Whitetail Slam," which airs on Sportsman Channel. For details, visit: thesportsmanchannel.com. **NAW**

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