'The Ghost' Of Boggy Slough

by Dr. James C. Kroll

The rain finally stopped at about 4 in the morning. It was not a night during which I got much sleep. I spent most of it worrying about the weather conditions that had taken a firm grip on the Pineywoods of East Texas. After all, this was my one big chance at "The Ghost," and I did not want to blow it! But, just about the time the alarm rocked my darkened room at North Boggy Slough Hunting and Fishing Club, a silence crept into the woods. What had been a 20- to 30-mph wind changed to a light breeze. Driving rain gave way to a star-filled sky, made even clearer by the crisp air. My chance had arrived, and I could not hope for better conditions. Years of work and planning now would be on the line.

My first encounter with "The Ghost" had occurred some five years before on a beautiful October day. But, before I get into that, let me provide some background. I have been studying the deer of Boggy Slough for some time now. One of these projects involved the monitoring of the impact of deer overpopulation on the forest itself. Prior to 1978, the Boggy Slough deer herd was one of the best *worst* examples I could find in Texas. The herd had undergone countless "boom-crash" (very high to very low) population cycles, resulting in a buck population in which a 10-inch 6-pointer was a real wallhanger! Most of the herd's problems lay in the fact that antlerless harvest then was taboo in that country. Boggy had been the "mother protector" of deer in East Texas. Years before, Captain Ray had fenced off a portion of Boggy to protect the herd from free-ranging hogs, poachers and dog-hunting. The herd quickly responded, and herd die-offs resulting from overprotection occurred as early as the '50s. Clearly, this was a challenge to me, an aspiring whitetail biologist.

In '78, Gene Samford, then director of wildlife for Temple-Eastex Forests, decided to make a dramatic move. Sitting on a bench at North Boggy, Gene and I discussed what had to be done to make the herd into a shining example of wildlife management. "Mr. Temple is committed to making this the best-managed deer herd in the state," Gene confided, "and so am I." I carefully laid out the blueprint to achieve this lofty goal. First, professional biologists would have to be hired to oversee the management program. Second, a dramatic herd-reduction program would have to be initiated. (During the previous year, we had lost 600 deer in a die-off.) And last, Gene and his biologists somehow would have to convince the hunters to pass up bucks. Now, because most of the hunters on North Boggy are guests, this would be a tall order. It would take nerve to carry out this plan! Nonetheless, Gene agreed that this was what had to be done.

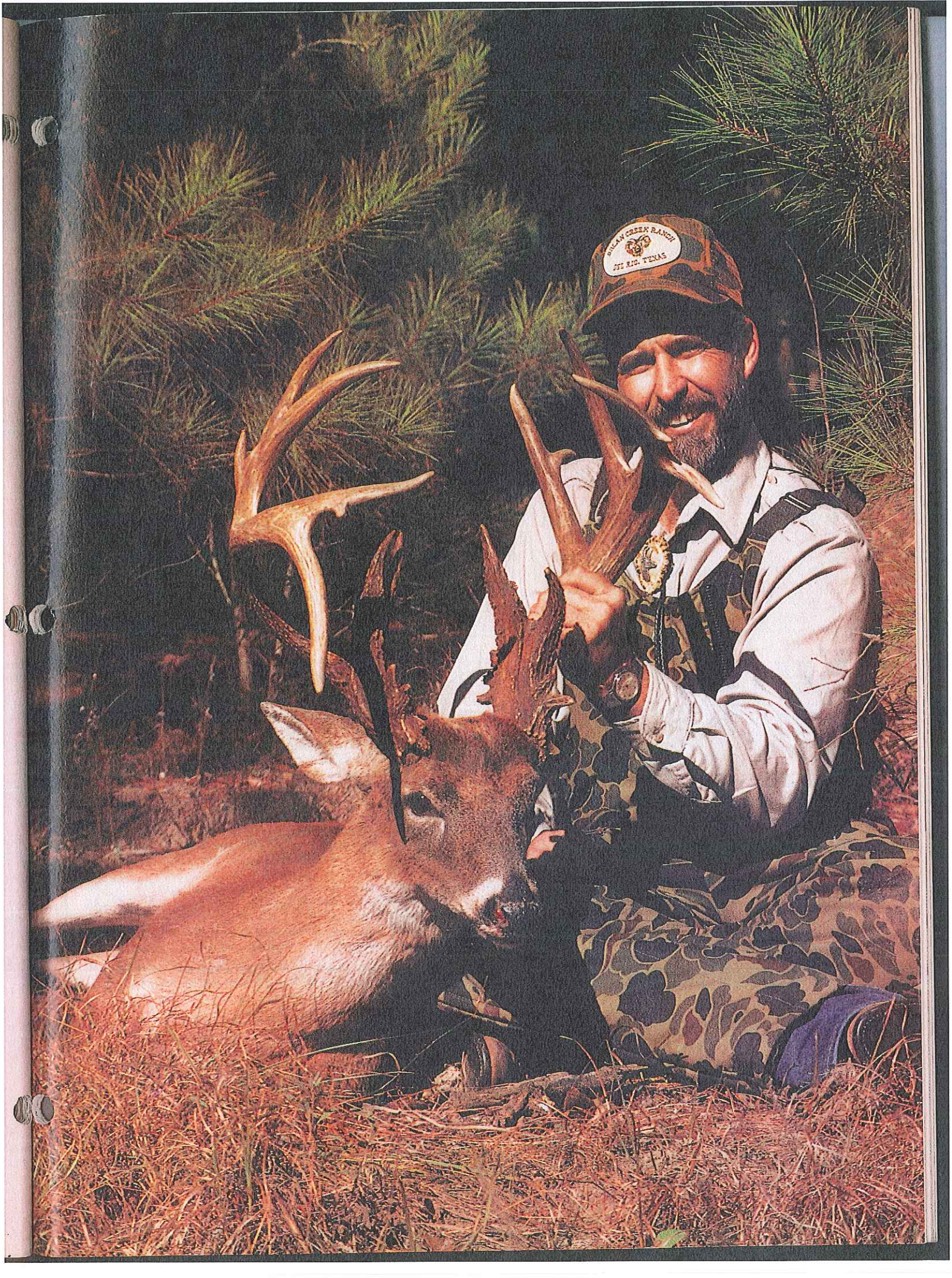
Some bucks you see only once, but this one had a habit of showing up again and again. Even so, when he charged in on the author last December, he was a pleasant surprise and a handsome reward for a management program well run.

In short succession, two biologists were hired to manage the northern and southern portions of Boggy. Bill Goodrum would manage North Boggy, where I would conduct my research, while Don Dietz would carry out management on South Boggy. Over the next few years, Don and Bill carried out the plan. In addition, major effort was expended to increase both the quantity and quality of forage produced on the range. Through a well-planned education program, hunter-guests were persuaded to go along with the ideas, and it is really these fellows who deserve the credit. Without hunter cooperation, no management program can be successful.

In '82 I was concentrating my efforts on documenting the impact of years of overpopulation on the deer herd and habitat. Some 25 years earlier, a local biologist named Dan Lay had had the good judgment to establish several fenced areas to monitor the impact of deer and cattle browsing on the forage. Although the study had long since been completed, most of the fenced enclosures were still in place. The result of so many years of overbrowsing was staggering. Inside these enclosures, the forest was completely different from that of the surrounding area, which was open to deer foraging. Clearly the deer had drastically altered their habitat, and that of such animals as squirrels and songbirds, as well.

During September of that year, a yearling buck made quite a nuisance of himself in my study area. To my frustration, young saplings within the study plots began dying from excessive rubbing. Each time I visited the plots, new damage had been done to the trees! One day I arrived at the study plots to find the culprit busily rubbing yet another tree. And, was he ugly! He had malformed antlers, yet a rather large body for his age. In most of the so-called buck "culling" programs now in operation throughout some regions, he surely would have been removed from the

Texas bucks aren't known for their massive racks, but "The Ghost," as whitetail expert James Kroll called his 190 3/8-point non-typical, was a serious exception to the rule. Each antler base measured a legitimate 8 inches! Photo by Matt Williams.


BULLAN CREEK RANCH
JIM REG. TEXAS

herd. Instead, I just cussed him and proceeded with my work.

The following year, he was right back in my plots, destroying a new set of saplings. It was during this time that my theories about buck sanctuaries began to take shape. My telemetry research clearly showed that bucks preferred areas hunters seldom frequented, traveling to and from such areas by travel corridors. As a matter of fact, I wrote about this particular buck in an earlier series on buck sanctuaries. (See the July-September 1985 issues.)

This particular buck had adopted a very successful strategy. He lived in a virtual "no-man's land" between North Boggy and South Boggy. By gentlemen's agreement, this area was not hunted, to avoid conflicts between the two clubs. The buck was to stay in his sanctuary for many years to come.

The buck's travel pattern was quite characteristic of the sanctuary/travel corridor concept. He spent the daylight hours in the swamps of the sanctuary, venturing into a nearby upland to feed at night. There was a stand located not more than a quarter-mile from his sanctuary, yet no hunter ever had reported seeing such a buck. Each year the buck's tell-tale rubs were right back in the same area. And, each year, I became more and more attached to this buck. Those pathetic antlers grew to enormous proportions, with prominent drop tines appearing by the fourth year. Each season, I secretly rooted for him to make it through the year, and each year my hopes were rewarded.

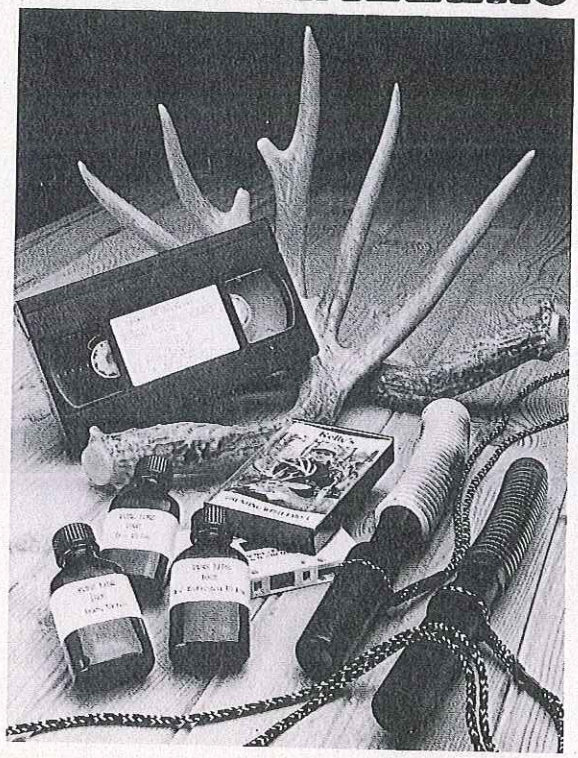
But, in '86 the area adjacent to his sanctuary was harvested for pine timber. Now, I am not an opponent to clearcutting. My research and that of others has shown that timber harvest is critical to whitetail management. However, the first year or so after a timber harvest finds most bucks avoiding clearcuts like the plague. That year, I could not find the buck I by then was calling "The Ghost." At 5 years of age, he either was dead or had moved to a new area.

Then came '87, and some exciting reports from Bill and Don. One of the foresters had found a shed antler about a mile to the west of "my" buck's sanctuary. The single right antler scored very high as a typical B&C buck. As a matter of fact, I felt that the buck in '87 certainly would be a new state, if not world, record. (The long-standing Texas typical record is 196 4/8, taken by Tom McCulloch in Maverick County in '65. The world record, of course, is James Jordan's 206 1/8, taken in Burnett County, Wisconsin, in '74.) Thoughts about "The Ghost" long since had faded, so I secretly hoped for a chance at this new monster.

Apparently, the buck had the same pattern as "The Ghost." The shed antler had been found in the Cochina Creek bottom, upstream from the old sanctuary. I knew that such a buck would not venture anywhere near one of the many permanent blinds located on the club. Bill long since had learned that hunting success increases greatly when he moves his stands. Each season the two biologists make a conscious effort to reposition their stands for this very reason. Most of the stands are located adjacent to drainages which serve most commonly as travel corridors for bucks.

The nearest possible sanctuary for this buck would be a 10- to 12-year-old pine plantation along the slopes rising from the Cochina bottom. Two lesser drainages rose steadily from the bottom and penetrated the plantation.

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In my mind, the big typical had to be using the plantation for a sanctuary, traveling into the bottom via one or both of the small drainages. It was a classic case. This certainly was the perfect condition, and there was no doubt about the buck! The stage was set — yet, I first would have to get an opportunity at the buck.

I was invited to hunt Boggy during the second week of December, well into the Texas gun season. But, this really did not concern me, as the rut had been terrible up to this point. The previous spring had been characterized by a late freeze which had destroyed much of the acorn crop. The spring and summer had been very dry, seriously reducing forage quality to the point at which deer were in poor shape when fall arrived. Luckily, the deer of Boggy Slough had suffered less than their counterparts beyond the clubs' boundaries. Yet, the poor weather did have its effect on our rut. We clearly were into a "trickle rut" situation, with the breeding period being longer than usual and without a clear peak. In addition, weather and moon conditions during this time were terrible. The first two weeks of the season, normally the best time to hunt, had produced little in the way of trophy-class bucks, so my anticipation was at a peak when I arrived late in the evening at Boggy.

As dinner came to an end, Bill presented a fine slide and video presentation on the management program at Boggy. Then, he ended the program by showing everyone the shed antler from the huge typical. The converstaion immediately switched to the big buck. Several hunts already had taken place this season, but none had produced the buck. Some specultated that he probably was dead of old age by now, while others asserted that such a buck likely was unkillable. I fell into the latter category.

The quiet morning air provided a welcome greeting as I eased out onto the porch with a hot cup of coffee in my hand. The air was completely calm. I could not have hoped for a better day. Surely, this weather would stimulate a visible secondary rut. But, one small obstacle still lay in my way.

Temple-Eastex goes out of its way to assure that all guests have an equal opportunity at the best hunting territories. However, there are few poor areas on Boggy. Most hunters have an excellent opportunity to harvest a good buck, and Boggy sports one of the best hunter success rates I ever have seen. Stand locations are assigned by a lottery system, in which hunters draw numbers from a hat. The lowest number gets first choice, while the highest receives the last. To my frustration, I drew one of the highest numbers, which meant that I would have to sit by while the vast majority of guests made their selections. I felt that only a couple of choices would be suitable for a chance at the big typical. To my surprise and delight, however, these choices remained untaken by the time my turn came. I swallowed hard and called out my stand preference. I had no intention of hunting the stand itself, but it did put me very close to where I knew the buck had to be located.

One of the guides, Oscar Rogers, kindly agreed to drop me off near the stand. I did not want the presence of a vehicle to spook the buck, so the plan was for him to drive quietly by the area and drop me off as he went. As we turned the corner along an old tram road, his headlights caught the

Continued on page 90

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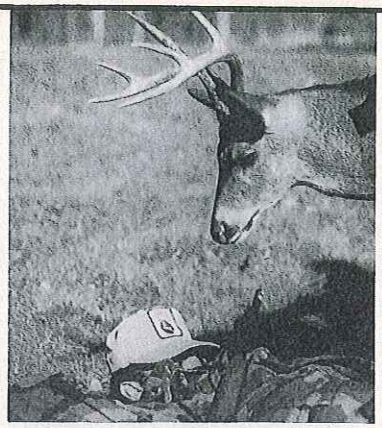


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'THE GHOST' ... *Continued*

reflection of the marker indicating the stand's presence. He quietly wished me good luck and disappeared into the darkness.

Stumbling through the dark woods was one thing I did not intend to do, so I waited nervously for enough daylight to find my way to my vantage point. I reasoned that the big buck probably would be bedded in the pine plantation. My only hope was that he did not have some lovely little lady with him, for if he did, no amount of coaxing would lure him out of his sanctuary. An earlier hunter had gotten a glimpse of a large buck near the intersection of one of the drainages with the bottom. Although this drainage was located upwind from the sanctuary, I decided to make my stand there. There are a lot of gimmicks on the market today, but the best gimmick is your own brain. Here was my thinking: The primary rut long since had taken place, so horn rattling was absolutely the wrong thing to do. One tickle of those antlers and all of my work would be down the drain.

It was possible that a secondary rut was about to take place, and hoping that the buck was without companionship, I decided to take a different approach. The plan was to simulate a rutting buck tending a receptive doe. Taking out two bottles of Hide-Out odor neutralizer, I completely covered myself with the concoction. I use a modified spray bottle borrowed from my wife's cosmetic cabinet to apply the liquid. Carefully, I rubbed the remaining contents of the bottle in my hair and beard.

I then proceeded up the steep slope adjacent to the drainage. I had gone only a short distance when I encountered a fresh rub line. Doubts began to enter my mind, as each rub was carefully constructed on rather small (less than 2 inches in diameter) saplings. Some researchers had reported that rub size indicated the size of the buck. I have found this to be only partly true. A large-diameter rubs does indicate a large buck, but a small rub only indicates the presence of a buck. He may be big or small.

Arriving at the best vantage point, I sat down to wait for good light. The tight cover made it mandatory to have good light. If he came in, I would have but a single opportunity to make a killing shot. I nervously fingered the safety on the Ruger 7mm magnum and waited.



The author poses with the mounted head of the great East Texas buck he took last season, using a grunt call and hunting in a thick pine sanctuary. Photo by Duncan Dobie.

At approximately 7 a.m. I prepared for my stand. Reaching into my pocket, I produced two critical ingredients of the deception about to take place. First, I got out a bottle of buck lure produced the previous season by my friends Bob Harris and Robert Marberry. I had hunted with these guys in Mexico and had observed them cutting the tarsal glands from big bucks. Through some process, they had bottled the glands to produce an excellent buck lure. This chemical would tell the buck that a really serious opponent had invaded his territory. Next, I pulled out a grunt call given to me by Eli Haydel. I had successfully used the call earlier in Canada to call in and harvest a nice 7-pointer. (See the July 1988 issue.) It was time to use it again on Texas bucks.

I quietly chambered a round into my 7mm. Pouring an entire bottle of the buck lure onto the ground in front of me, I raised the grunt call to my lips. I took a deep breath and issued two quick "Who, Who" grunts. I waited a few seconds and repeated the performance.

Suddenly, a monster buck roared out of the plantation and was on top of me before I could react. At 40 yards, there was no doubt about the quality of this buck. The mass was incredible, and points seemed to go everywhere! I gave little thought to the fact that this was *not* the typical buck. My cross hairs quickly found

the shoulder, and I squeezed off a round.

It seemed as though time was proceeding at a snail's pace. All of those hours of practice shooting with a small-caliber rifle now paid off. The 7mm shattered the morning air as the buck turned to escape. The bullet caught him squarely in the shoulder, breaking his leg and continuing on into the chest cavity. At that close range, I feared that much of the bullet's momentum would be lost due to high velocity.

In spite of the fact that the buck had a broken leg and a shattered heart, he managed to disappear into the protective cover of the thick pines. I decided not to push him and waited nervously for 30 minutes or so. Two hours later, I walked up on the monster, lying next to one of his own rubs. The interim had produced some anxious moments, certainly challenging my tracking ability. Incredibly, "The Ghost" had lived up to his name. Even with a lethal wound, he had managed to climb up the slope for several hundred yards before finally dying among the young pines that had provided sanctuary for so long.

As I approached him, I could not believe my eyes. The buck lying before me was the great buck who so long ago had caused problems in my study plots. Apparently, when the timber had been harvested he had moved his sanctuary to this new location. It was a sober moment as I stood gazing down at my old friend. I had mixed emotions; I did not know whether to jump for joy or cry. Our two lives had spanned years of hard work and commitment by so many people. Surely, this was a fitting end for a tremendous buck.

At first, we though this massive non-typical might be big enough to make Boone and Crockett, but after the mandatory 60-day drying period, he came up just a little short. Official B&C measurer Davie Whitehouse taped him at 190 3/8, scoring him as a basic 8-pointer. The bases are 8 inches in circumference, and the mass is held way out onto the beams and through the tines. He may not score the magic 195 points needed to make the book, but he still is a great trophy, one for which I always will be grateful. And who knows? Maybe that world-class typical is still out there!

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With the assistance of Wildlife Biologist Larry Richardson, Haydel's Game Calls, Inc., developed the first tube-type deer grunt call. While obtaining his Master's Degree at Mississippi State University, Richardson did his thesis on white-tail vocabulary, which has been recorded in the Library of Mammology. Over a three year period, Richardson gathered live recordings and meanings of deer vocalization and produced the "Acoustics of White-Tailed Deer" cassette tape (DT-87). From this tape Eli Haydel developed the first tube-type grunt call (DG-87), based on the thesiological makeup of a deer's larnyx. The calls were then sent to Richardson who tested them to be identical to white-tail sonograms.

The Haydel grunt call was released in 1986. Results were so awesome during white-tail pre-rut, rut and post-rut, along with reports of Mule Deer responding during rut, many manufacturers hurriedly began making grunt calls. Many have had to make design changes while Haydel's DG-87, based on sound research, remains unchanged. Haydel's DG-87 is endorsed by Wildlife Biologists Dr. James Kroll, Larry Weishuhn and Larry Richardson.



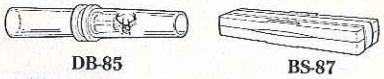
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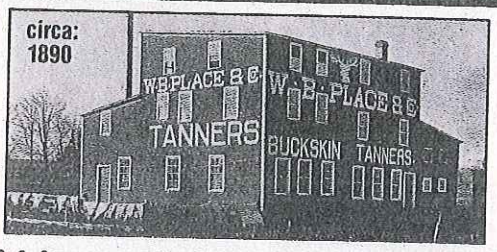


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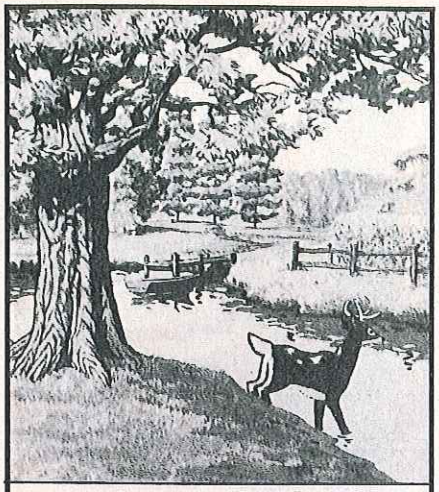
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same area, because spots full of big bucks aren't easy to find.

Gordon Whittington

Question: Last season I was using a very popular doe-in-heat urine in Taliaferro County, Georgia. I had poured 3/4 ounce of the lure into a 35mm film canister filled with seven cotton balls. Just before sunup a red fox walked by my stand and went straight to the lure. He didn't just smell it, he ate six of the seven cotton balls. Ten dollars' worth of buck lure gone with the fox — I couldn't believe it!

Was this just a hungry fox, or is there more to it? Since relating this experience to others, I've had two hunters tell me they have seen foxes urinate in scrapes.

B.P. Georgia

Answer: I often have proclaimed that testosterone is testosterone! Males of many mammal species will become agitated by the odor of urine. Wildlife biologists often census predators with a line of scent posts, comprised of raked areas treated with predator urine. I have run these scent-post lines and found everything from domestic dog tracks to deer tracks. Does even seem to be attracted on occasion to these areas. So, your observations do not come as a surprise to me. As for the fox eating your cotton balls, how many times have you seen your dog or that of a friend eat things that smelled to high heaven? Remember, a fox is also a canine, behaving in many instances as a dog would.

Dr. James C. Kroll

Question: Everything I read about slug guns seems to downgrade the 20 gauge for deer. I hunt with an old Mossberg bolt-action 20 gauge with a screw-in type of choke, and it has dropped deer in their tracks all over the state of Louisiana — some at just under 100 yards. I now have moved to West Texas, and have found it both accurate and lethal on running jack rabbits. The power, speed and accuracy of this gauge in my gun attest to its capabilities. Why the insults?

P.M., Texas

Answer: The power, speed and accuracy of this gauge in your gun attest to the power, speed and accuracy of this gauge *in your gun.* It also sounds as though the shooter is pretty good. (If you can hit running jack rabbits, use any gun you want.)

Heretofore, the use of slugs on deer has been rifle hunting's poor relation, seen as an inferior substitute where law or custom prohibited the use of rifles. Slugs were considered inaccurate (which they usually are in off-the-rack, conventional shotguns), and not able to deliver adequate power at long range. The hard ballistic facts bear out the latter. Slugs are short, fat and blunt. They lose their velocity and energy very quickly. Despite respectable velocity and astounding energy levels at the muzzle, slugs (all gauges) tend to lose 30 to 40 percent of their energy in the first 50 yards. Beyond that, the velocity and energy losses are even more pronounced and rapid. As a result, most authorities have taken a "git there fustest with the mostest" attitude regarding slugs. The 12 gauge is superior to the 20 in raw power.

However, the accuracy potential of slugs has been improved in recent years. This really began in 1959, when Ithaca introduced the Deerslayer. It was the proven Model 37 pump with its barrel bored specifically for shooting slugs. Also, it had open rifle-type sights. Remington soon followed suit with a similar slug gun.

The availability (both after-market and more recently, from the factory) of *rifled* barrels fitted to a shotgun frame has raised the accuracy level of slugs to the point at which the addition of a scope is worthwhile. Also, slugs have improved. Particularly interesting is the BRI Sabot Bullet, designed especially for rifled barrels. Unfortunately for those who shoot 20 gauges, most of these recent improvements have been focused on the 12 gauge.

The bottom line is that the 12 gauge always has been superior to the 20 in terms of power delivered to the target. And, with the many advances in slug shooting of late, that gap has widened. On the other hand, the 20 gauge's 3/4-ounce slug, with about 1,600 feet per second of muzzle velocity and 1,865 foot/pounds of muzzle energy (1,175 at 50 yards), is perfectly adequate for whitetails at ranges up to approximately 75 yards. Furthermore, as I see more 20-gauge "slug guns" being offered by the manufacturers, I predict that the efforts thus far directed at improving 12-gauge slug performance soon will filter down to the 20 as well.

Aaron Pass