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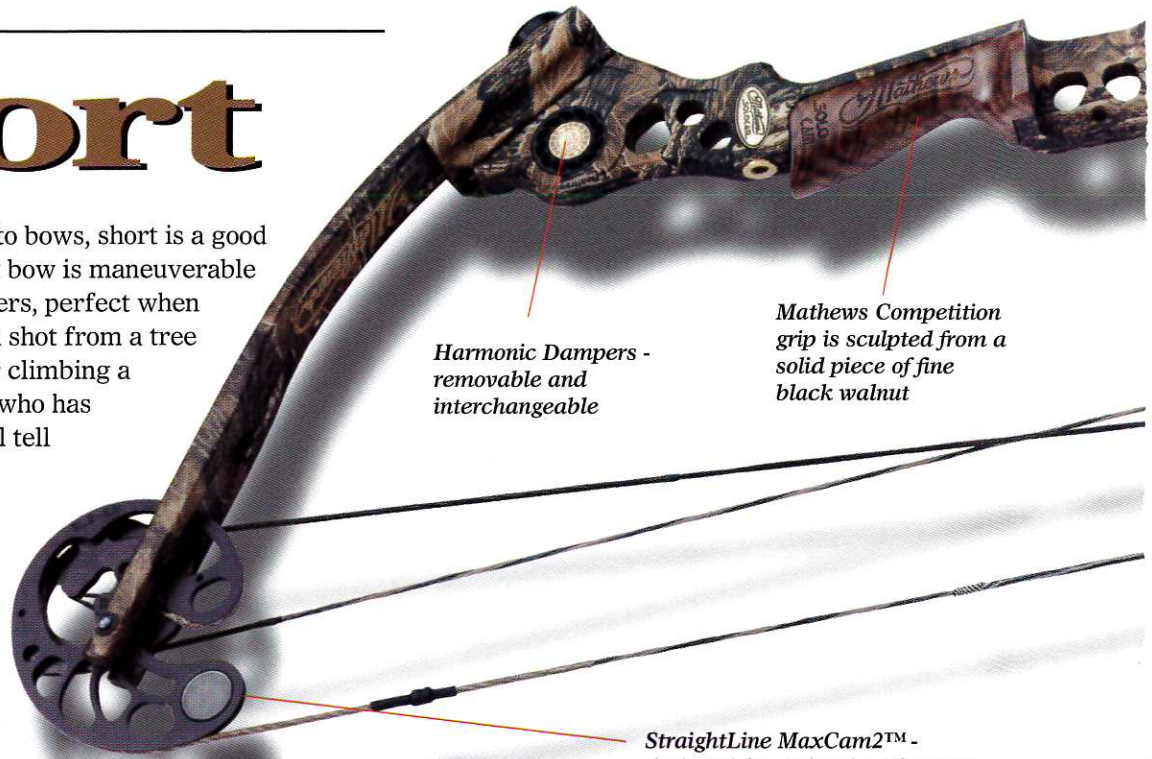
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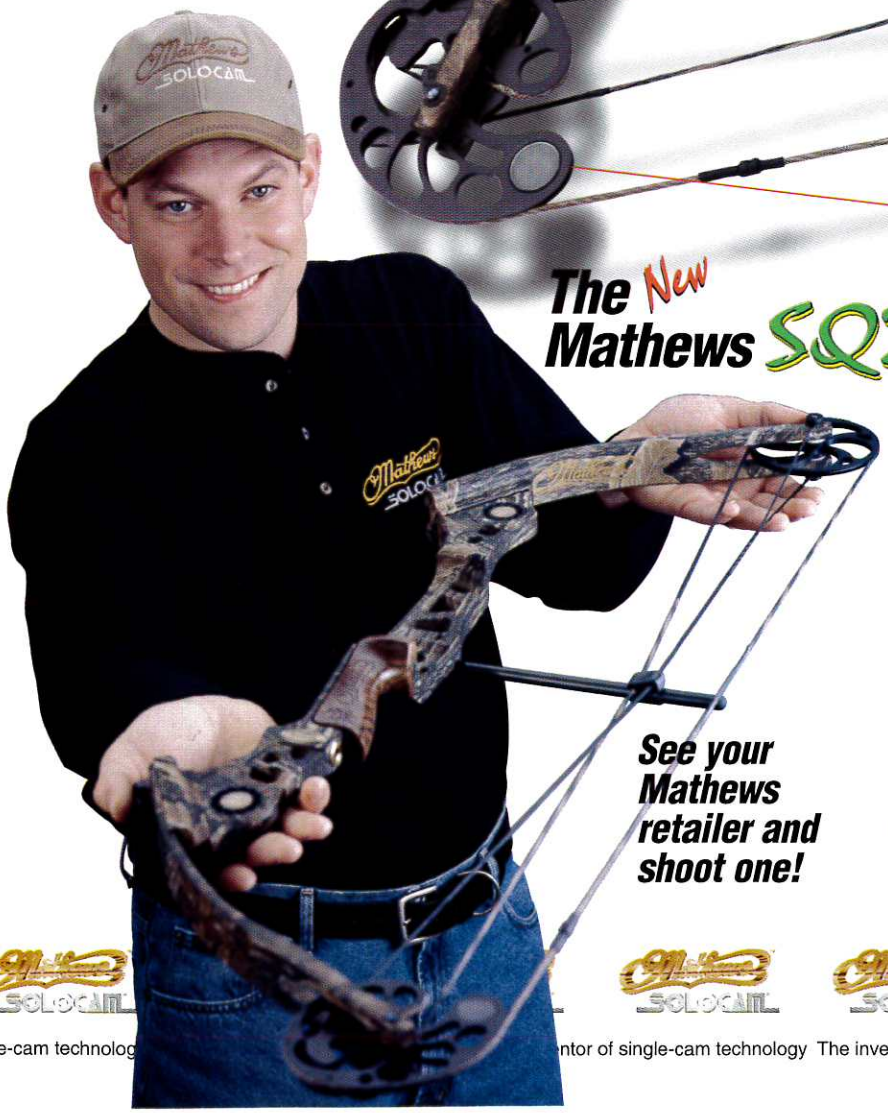
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Fair Chase Whitetails

Part 5

Better management has improved deer-hunting prospects in many parts of North America. But can it go too far? Here's what you told us.

by Gordon Whittington

It's no secret that the desire to shoot bigger bucks has spawned an entire industry catering to the needs and dreams of hunters and landowners. Nor is it news that the herd in many places is now better off for it.

But in striving to reach our hunting goals, can we go too far? Might we risk losing some of the mystique that drew us to deer hunting in the first place? In short, in trying to use management to make the hunting experience better, might we instead end up making it *worse?*

That question was the impetus for our feature "Managing Whitetail Management," in the January 2001 issue. There, David Morris — who has over 20 years of professional deer-management experience — voiced concern that misusing some intensive management practices could take too much of the challenge out of harvesting deer. Were that to happen, David argued, we would risk the sanctity of what the hunting community knows as "fair chase."

David's look at the ethics of various management practices was necessarily based on his own experiences, as well as those of many readers he knows across North America. But how do the rest of you feel about such matters? To find out, along with David's feature we ran a survey asking for your input. We wanted to know which practices *you* think have a place in today's deer woods.

In the past three issues, we revealed how readers voted on the fair-chase aspects of many hunting tactics, including everything from baiting and deer drives to snow tracking and the use of high-let-off bows. Now, it's time to reveal how you voted on some management practices now being used in the deer woods.

As with earlier parts of this series, keep in mind that our goal isn't to turn this into an "us against them" debate. That does none of us any good. All we want to do is show that there's a wide range of opinions on how to hunt and manage the species ethically. Engaging in an open dialogue makes us think about our own views and why we hold them, which is healthy in the long run.

That said, here's how you voted on many of the management questions we asked in our survey:

HUNTING DEER THAT HAVE BEEN HANDLED BY MAN
Fair Chase: 14 Percent
Unfair: 84 Percent

David claimed in his feature that fair-chase hunting is impossible if the deer have been tamed or otherwise habituated to humans. "This involves handling, holding in captivity or any other type of recognized dependence on man, such as direct dependence on feed," he wrote. (Notably, David distinguished this from *supplemental* feeding, which is part of many sound management programs.)

Seven of every eight voters agreed with the author, saying they were against hunting "handled" deer. Only 3 percent of Iowa voters approved of the practice, followed by 5 percent in Illinois and 7 percent in Missouri.

Highest support came from New Jersey, with 35 percent of voters approving of the practice as being consistent with fair chase. However, every other area with above-average support was below the Mason-Dixon Line: South Carolina (28 percent), Louisiana (24), Texas (23), Georgia (23) and North Carolina (21).

HUNTING DEER IN HEAVILY OVERBROWSED HABITAT
Fair Chase: 77 Percent
Unfair: 21 Percent

To have fair chase, "the habitat must be 'natural,' " David wrote. "By this, I mean there must be at least a certain minimum vegetative quality level, with the habitat in good condition and not too damaged or denuded by gross overbrowsing. . . . This is primarily related to deer density and calls for a herd to be in balance with its food supply."

David argues that if a deer is desperate for food it will sacrifice some security to find food, making it overly vulnerable to hunters. But based on the voting, not many of you agree that this is reason enough to avoid hunting nutritionally stressed animals. Indeed, some of you claimed that such herds *need* to be hunted, to get deer numbers in line with the food supply.

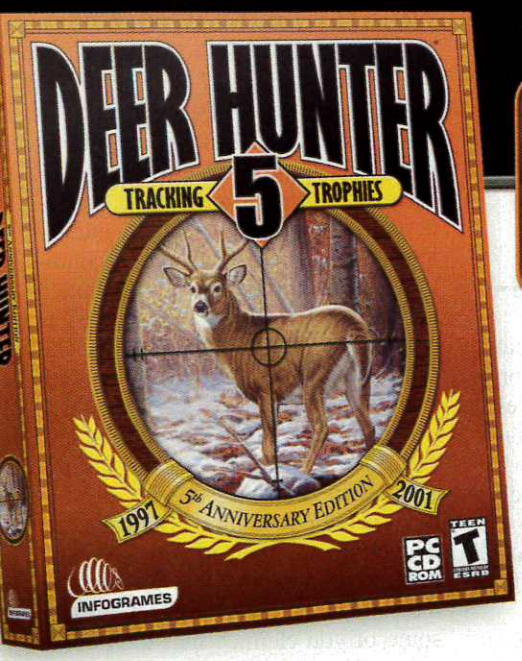
INTRODUCING NON-NATIVE GENETICS
Fair Chase: 43 Percent
Unfair: 55 Percent

In his January feature, David contended that bringing in "new blood"

The majority of readers who took our survey on fair chase expressed support for most efforts to grow bigger deer. Photo by Mike Searles.

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has the potential to compromise fair chase. However, he claimed that this threat largely comes from hunting the deer that have been released, not the descendants of those animals.

Few of us hunt native whitetails in the purest sense. Most states and provinces at least dabbled in restocking during the 20th century, moving deer within their own borders when possible but going elsewhere for brood stock when it wasn't.

What's done is done, and we've come to accept the descendants of those deer as "native," whether they are or not. But what about further infusions of new genetics, via restocking and/or artificial insemination? Do these threaten fair chase?

Votes largely divided along regional lines. Among states and provinces from which we got at least 20 votes, highest support was found in North and South Carolina, where 70 percent of voters in each state approved. In Tennessee, approval was 68 percent, and Florida came in at 62. Meanwhile, only 28 percent of Iowa respondents approved, with Vermont next at 29 and Wisconsin at 34.

FOOD PLOTS
Fair Chase: 79 Percent
Unfair: 19 Percent

David argued that using food plots to improve herd nutrition is consistent with fair chase. "All things being equal," he wrote, "a deer's wildness is directly related to the quality and availability of food, provided it's always available and the deer don't associate it with man, both of which are the case with food plots."

Traditionally a means of luring deer to specific areas for hunting purposes, food plots now are being used more and more to improve herd health. And more than four of every five readers who expressed an opinion on using food plots to boost deer number and/or size supported it.

In areas from which we received at least 20 votes on this question, approval was highest in South Carolina and Texas (92 percent); followed closely by North Carolina, Arkansas and Florida (91); Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky and Oklahoma (90); and Mississippi (88).

By an overwhelming margin, readers in Maine expressed the lowest



By a 10-to-1 margin, readers who took our survey agreed that supplemental feeding is consistent with fair chase. Photo by Tom Evans.

support; only 36 percent of respondents there gave it a thumbs-up. Then came voters in Minnesota, Wisconsin and New York, with 74 percent from each state advocating the use of food plots as fair chase.

SUPPLEMENTAL FEEDING
Fair Chase: 90 Percent
Unfair: 9 Percent

David supports supplemental feeding, provided it's used to "help level out and somewhat elevate the nutritional plane of a herd without degrading the habitat." An overwhelming majority of survey voters agreed.

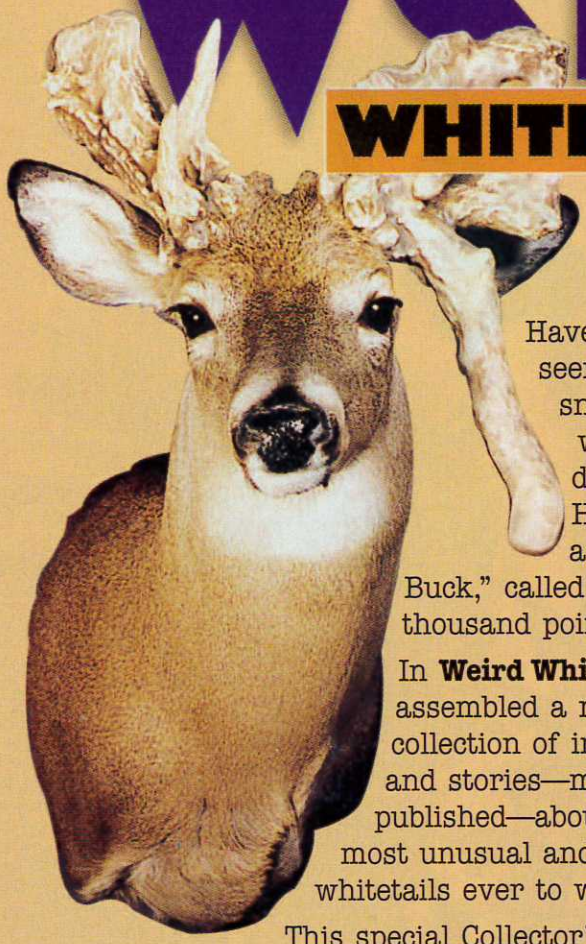
Feeding got unanimous approval in Oklahoma, South Carolina, Rhode Island, Wyoming, Washington, New Brunswick, Colorado, Arizona, Quebec, Ontario and Manitoba. Nearly as supportive were voters in Kentucky (98 percent); Tennessee, West Virginia, Florida and Kansas (97); Michigan and Missouri (96); and Indiana (95).

On the other end of the spectrum, just 68 percent of voters in Maine and 83 percent of those in Wisconsin agreed that supplemental feeding is consistent with fair chase.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Next month, we'll see how readers voted on the practice that elicited the most comments of any on our survey: the use of high fences in deer management. Stay tuned!

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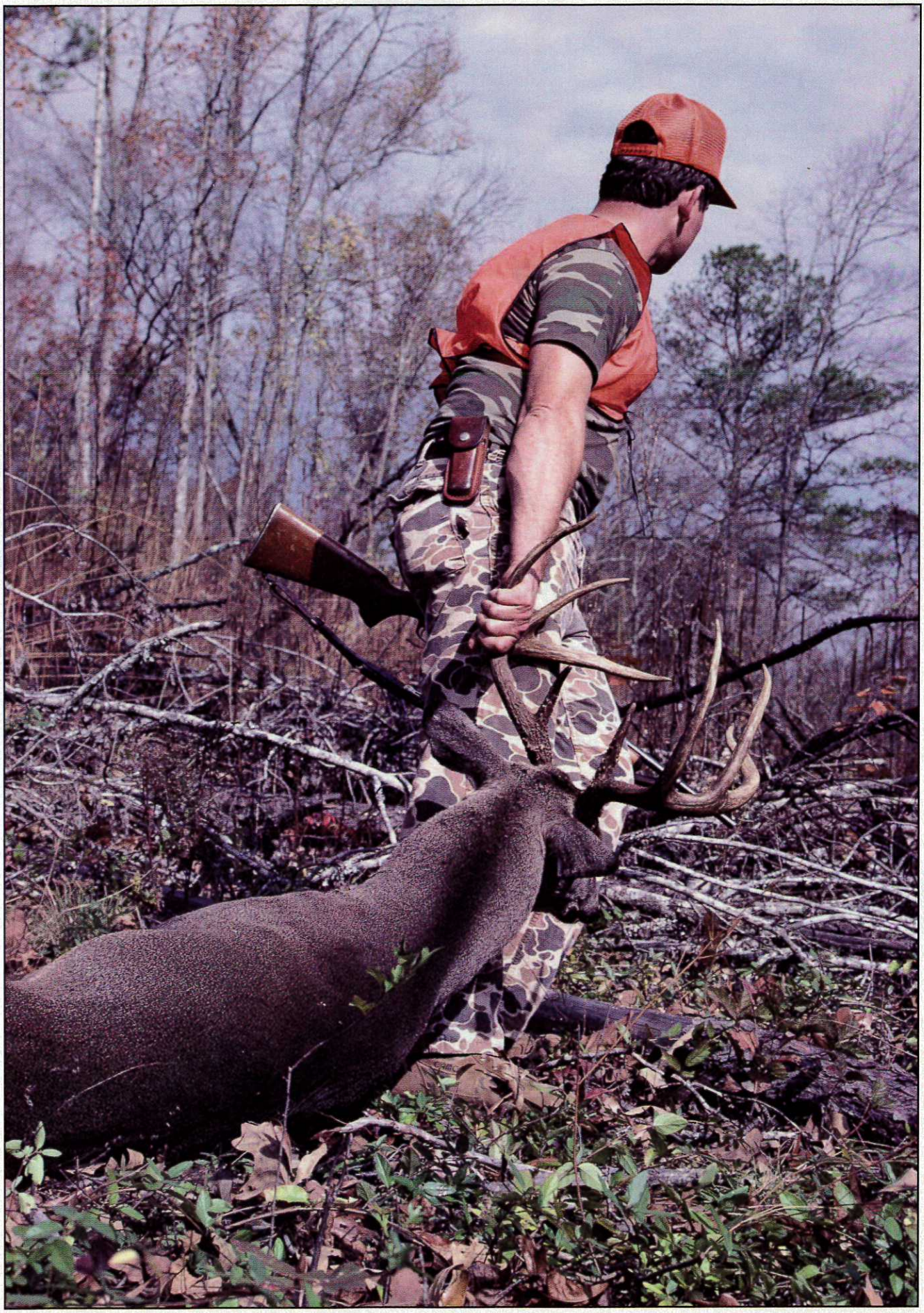
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BUILDING YOUR OWN
'DEER FACTORY'

Make Your Woods Better For Bucks

When you learn to see the forest through the eyes of a whitetail, you realize that proper care of the woods is just as important as any other aspect of your management program.

by Dr. James C. Kroll

"We have some of the most beautiful woods you ever have seen," many landowners tell me, "but we don't see that many deer. Why not?"

The problem usually is one of forest protection — not too little, but too *much*. You must manage a forest for deer, not just *protect* it. The whitetail is not an old-growth forest species; rather, it thrives on the new growth created by habitat disturbances. How can we use this knowledge to produce greater numbers of healthy bucks where you hunt?

A DEER'S-EYE VIEW OF THE WORLD

The head of a standing whitetail generally is held about four feet above ground level, and that's the maximum height at which the animal would prefer to feed. Although a deer can stand on its hind legs and reach to about six feet into trees, that is not ideal. Such behavior suggests that an ample supply of highly preferred food is not available near ground level.

With this 4-foot zone in mind, walk around in your hunting area, stopping periodically to ask yourself "What is there for a deer to eat right here *on a year-round basis?*" If the answer is "Not much," then you obviously have some work to do.

MANAGING WOODLANDS FOR WHITETAIL FORAGE

The total amount of plant material growing on a given acre of ground is a function of two variables: available moisture and light. Both have major impacts on growing deer forage.

Soils play an important role in moisture availability. A perfect soil is made up of an equal mix of sand, silt and clays, allowing it to absorb water and make it available to plants.

Unfortunately, there is little you can do on your property to change the basic moisture-holding capacity of the soil itself. However, there *are* things you can do to make the soil better for plants.

Increasing the forage production of a forest can be as simple as taking out some trees. But how many of which types? Photo by Keith Brooks.

A soil with higher organic matter tends to hold more moisture and yet still make it available to plants. Because organic matter comes from leaves, twigs and other debris falling to the forest floor from above, a canopy of some type is important in improving innate soil fertility in forested habitats.

The second factor, light, is the one you can do more to control. The amount of light reaching the forest floor is directly influenced by the density, or closure, of the canopy. Canopy is the uppermost layer in any plant community, whether grasslands or majestic forests, but in this case we are referring to tree canopies.

The two canopy types that let the least light reach the ground are dense stands with the treetops tightly intertwined and those with several layers of vegetation. You can have a relatively sparse stand of trees, but many layers beneath the canopy still keep light from reaching the forest floor.

The composition of tree species in the canopy also affects light availability. Hardwoods provide more shade than do conifers (pines, cedar, etc.) during the growing season; conifers tend to have lighter crowns and let more light pass, even at higher densities. Mixed pine-hardwood stands tend to be intermediate in light reduction.

Armed with this knowledge, take a walk around your place and evaluate the types of forests present. This is where a good aerial photograph comes in handy. Make notes about the relative forage production potential of each forest or stand. Record whether the top layer is composed mostly of hardwoods, conifers or a mixture, and note the number of layers of vegetation present.

Studying the understory plants will tell you a lot about their growing conditions. In general, good deer forage should impede you as you walk, with the tops striking you at roughly chest height.

Classify the relative age of each stand: seedlings, saplings, young forest or mature forest. Once you have completed your assessment, it is time to develop a plan to ensure good forage production on a perpetual basis. *(Continued)*

HOW MUCH FORAGE CAN YOUR WOODS GROW?

If you are doing a good job of woodland management, on an acre of forest you can expect during the growing season to produce about 1,000 total pounds of vegetation within the 4-foot "deer zone." I wish all of this forage could be eaten by deer, but in most areas only about a third turns out to be good deer food. We now are down to roughly 300 pounds per acre. Good land stewardship dictates that we not allow the deer to eat more than half of the available forage, thus reducing the available total to around 150 pounds per acre.

The average whitetail will eat about 8-10 pounds of plant material per day, so this hypothetical acre will support a total of 15-19 "deer-days" per year. Using this figure, without any crops or supplemental feed it will take about 25 acres to support a single deer for a year. Some areas have higher productivity and some lower, due to precipitation and other climatic factors, but that is a good estimate.

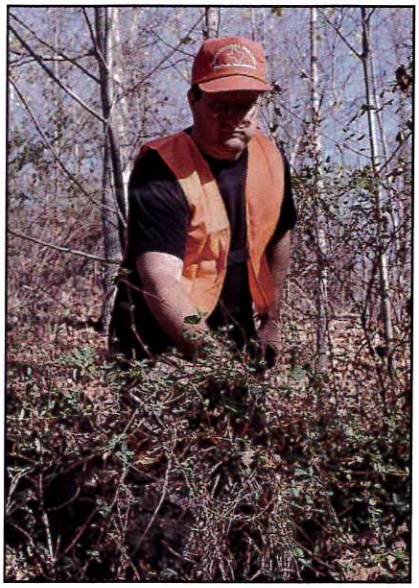
(Based on these numbers, it is easy to see why we at ***WHITETAIL*** so enthusiastically advise hunters and landowners to grow year-round food plots in addition to good woodland habitats. Our research shows that a single acre of highly productive food plot can sustain at least three deer on a full-time basis, far more than even the most productive woods. But even if you have a good plot program, it makes sense to maximize your forest production as well.)

THINNING THE WOODS

The last century saw a great deal of research on how forests can be manipulated to produce both plants and animals. What the research showed was that *a healthy deer woods is one periodically thinned to keep the canopy from closing in.*

Over the years many rules of thumb have been suggested for accomplishing this, but one of the simplest is "the D+ rule." Here is how it works:

Measure the diameter of the canopy trees at about four feet from the ground ("breast height"). You can do this randomly or, if you have time, measure as many as you can in the stand. Now average the diameters of these trees, giving you the "D."



Whenever you're in the woods, look around and ask yourself, "What is here for a deer to eat?" This is Japanese honeysuckle, a whitetail staple. Photo by Gordon Whittington.

Wildlife biologists often disagree on the correct number, but I prefer to use what I call the "D+12" rule. In other words, if the average diameter is 10 inches, add 12 to it, giving you 22. Armed with this value, you now can thin the stand to improve both forage and timber growth.

If the value is 22, simply start with any well-formed tree in the stand, then mark all trees within a 22-foot radius of it. Then remove them, either by cutting or injecting with an appropriate herbicide. Now move to the next good tree outside this radius and repeat the procedure until you have covered the entire stand.

Using this method to reduce stand density, I have doubled or tripled the productive capacity of a property for deer. If you wish, a mixed conifer-hardwood stand can be thinned by removing just the conifers or just the hardwoods, depending on your goal.

PLANT YOUR OWN WOODS

Most trees are planted in late winter or early spring. You can get them from commercial nurseries or the local forestry agency. Most states now have their own nurseries to provide trees to the public, and they offer free assistance to landowners in planning forests. Commercial timber companies also have assistance programs, some free of charge.

The number of trees to be planted per acre is an important consideration, as is how you are going to plant them. It normally takes about a day to plant one acre of trees, so you will need help. Again, agencies and companies are available to assist you.

You can plant either in rows or randomly. The former is easier, the latter more aesthetically pleasing. But however you plant the trees, spacing is important. In general, plant conifers on at least 12x12-foot spacing, hardwoods on 20x20-foot spacing.

Here is how to estimate the number of trees you need. Suppose you want to plant 10 acres to pines. There are 43,560 square feet in an acre. For a 12x12 spacing, there will be $43,560/144$ ft^2, which comes to about 300 trees per acre. To plant 10 acres, you need to order 3,000 trees.

Most nurseries sell trees in lots of 100 or 1,000. Costs range from $25 to $150 per 1,000, depending on species. In Texas we normally pay about $30 per 1,000, so a 10-acre job there would cost about $100 plus labor.

TENDING YOUR TREE CROP

Planting trees is just the beginning. Stands must be nurtured, just as any other crop must be. This includes thinning at the proper time. Each time you thin, there is a corresponding increase in forage production.

The time it takes to get to this point depends on the region. In the South, from planting to thinning might only take five to eight years, while in the North it might take up to 20. The best rule of thumb is simply to *thin when the canopy closes*. Either thin as discussed or, if your trees are in rows, simply remove every third row. This produces trees with their crowns in the sunlight on at least three sides, which is conducive to good growth.

The first thinning is a *non-commercial thin*, meaning you will have to foot the bill for the work; the trees you remove will be too small for anyone to buy. In most cases, however, the next thinning will come at a time when the trees are beginning to have economic value. Each time you thin thereafter, your return will be greater. (In the South, well-managed mature pine forest is worth about $1,500 per acre, a hardwood stand in the North perhaps

four times that.)

But managing a stand for good forage is not the whole picture. What about acorns? A healthy canopy of oaks of several species will ensure a good crop. With few exceptions, however, acorn-producing stands do not come into their own until they are at least 30 years of age, so you must be patient. In the meantime, you can do a lot to increase the mast crop.

The amount of acorns produced, measured in pounds per acre, is determined by the following, all of which are under landowner control:

- Tree age
- Crown diameter
- Fertility
- Tree species diversity

By practicing good forestry, you can ensure proper age and crown diameter. You also can determine, to some extent, the diversity of acorn species in your stand. Record the number of individual trees in the average acre per species. (This will require learning to recognize them, but it is not hard.)

If one species is too abundant and another too scarce, the next time you thin your stand, simply remove more of the overabundant species. In time this will result in a very diverse forest, and the more diverse the stand, the more stable the acorn crop.

What about fertility? I have had great success with fertilization of my acorn trees. It often is difficult to get around in the woods with a hand spreader filled with fertilizer, but that is what I like to use. (If your trees are in rows, you possibly could use a tractor- or ATV-mounted spreader.)

A general rule would be to apply *one pound of a balanced fertilizer (such as 12-12-12) per average inch of tree diameter per tree per acre.* In other words, if the average diameter is 10 inches and there are an estimated 100 trees per acre, apply 1,000 pounds of fertilizer per acre. Some biologists recommend using only phosphate (0-0-40) at the same rate. It is necessary to apply fertilizer only once every three to five years.

COVER MANAGEMENT

Most of what I am recommending here will improve cover as well as forage. This is worth remembering, for in my travels the No. 1 habitat problem I see is a lack of good cover.



Clearcuts less than 5 years old have some of the highest and most diverse forage production. As the canopy begins to close in and the light availability at ground level drops, so does the yield of good deer food. Photo by Ben H. Koerth.

Whitetails need about 30 percent cover, preferably distributed evenly over the landscape. Rarely do hardwoods provide adequate year-round cover, so you need to take a look at the amount of coniferous forest you have. Mixed pine-hardwood forests also can provide good cover.

A rule of thumb is that dense stands of conifers provide *thermal* cover (protection from the weather), while young conifer stands provide excellent *screening* cover (protection from predators). Unfortunately, young pine stands only stay in a positive screening condition for five to 15 years after planting, depending on geographic location. I recommend you manage your woods so that every block of 80 acres has at least one good cover source of at least 5-10 acres.

Small-patch clearcuts provide the best screening cover, while densely stocked mature stands (conifers and/or hardwoods) provide the best thermal cover. You want to hold some stands at a higher density of trees to produce this effect.

Summer thermal cover has a closed canopy but a very open understory to allow the flow of cooling air. *Winter thermal cover*, on the other hand, needs to be dense, with an understory that impedes cold airflow. Stands that are thinned regularly will do the job.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Analyze the conditions in each part of your hunting area, looking for good distribution of cover and forage areas. If your timber isn't being managed to produce a sustained yield of good forage, develop a plan to meet that need. Contact your forestry agency and work out a sound plan for timber management. Most states provide this service free of charge or will put you in contact with a consulting forester. However, a word of caution: Most foresters are committed to producing wood fiber, so if not told otherwise, they tend to develop a plan to that end. If you work with a forester, remind him that your management goal is to optimize wood *and* deer forage. There must be tradeoffs.

You normally will face one of two situations: (1) no forest where there needs to be one, or (2) too much forest. In the former, you can develop a planting program, perhaps under the Conservation Reserve Program, that will provide immediate cover and later forage. In the latter, you can work out a program of forest harvest and thinning that will ensure a constant supply of forage.

CONCLUSION

With a good plan, you can make your woods a place where deer want to be. You even can use cover to "steer" them across the landscape in the way you want. Of course, they still will move *when* they want to, and there is not a lot you can do about that. But then again, as a hunter, I wouldn't have it any other way.

some interesting things in regard to color patterns. There is no doubt that genetic makeup controls the overall coloration and markings on whitetails, even within a single population, but there is much about genetics we do not yet understand.

As a result of the restocking of whitetails in many areas over the years, there are few places with "original" gene pools anymore; however, there are areas with somewhat consistent traits. For instance, I generally see more double patches in the Midwest than anywhere else, with the possible exception of the Northwestern subspecies found in the northern Rockies (which are some of the prettiest deer I ever have seen).

In most of North America I see mixtures of no, one and two patches. Apparently there is some genetic link that determines the characteristics of the patch, but at this point it is not known if the gene for any one type is dominant or recessive.

East Texas was restocked mostly with deer from South Texas and coastal marshes of the Gulf of Mexico. These animals represent two distinct original races, and I see no consistent pattern in coloration as a result of their mixing. In localized areas such as you mention, however, I do see some consistency in patterns.

It would seem that you hunt in an area where double throat patches predominate in the local gene pool. Again, that is not the norm in most areas. However, it does not necessarily mean the two deer you harvested were closely related.

Dr. James C. Kroll

THE HIGH-LOW PATTERN

Question: My brother and I often bowhunt a ranch in eastern Montana. The ranch borders the south side of the river and extends a couple of miles back into rough, broken country with a few pines and cedars. There are both whitetails and mulies in this area.

At night, it's common to see big whitetail bucks crossing a road along the river, but we almost never see any of those bucks in daylight on the river. Could they be bedding back off the river and then dropping into the bottom at night? If so, what's the best way to intercept them?

B.D., Pennsylvania

Answer: I noticed this exact behavior over many seasons hunting in eastern Montana. I suspect it is the same in other parts of the country as well. During the rut, big bucks often will push does up side drainages to "corner" them at first light. The upper portions of smaller drainages get far less human disturbance during hunting season than the bigger bottoms do.

During the rut, big bucks often will push does up side drainages to "corner" them at first light.

Hunt lower in the draws in the evenings and/or about halfway up them in the mornings. Remember to try to enter your morning stand by a sidehill access if possible, as you don't want to be moving uphill through deer that are in the bottom before daylight. The name of the game is to get there before the buck does without disturbing any deer.

Gene Wensel

CURSE OF THE PIEBALD?

Question: I live in the lower Hudson River Valley of New York, and this year I have seen an 8-point piebald buck on my property. I think the deer will score around 130 points.

I have spoken to only a few friends and family members about this, and a couple of them have told me that I should pass on trying to shoot the buck. They claim that if I harvest him, it will bring me bad luck in my future hunting efforts. I'd like to know your thoughts on this.

D.S., New York

Answer: I wouldn't let such wives' tales stop me from going after a trophy piebald buck. The animal is apparently at least fairly mature, based on his rack size, and he'd make a striking mount. Uniqueness is part of the definition of a trophy in my book, and few other animals are as noteworthy as a big piebald buck. He'd definitely be a conversation piece. Besides, there's no particular management advantage to letting such a deer breed.

Would it be bad luck to shoot him? My own hunting experience involving piebalds, limited though it might be, strongly suggests otherwise. In January 1989 in Georgia, I shot the only piebald of my life, a doe. The following December I shot my biggest-racked buck to date, on the Guajolota Ranch in Texas. Based purely on that, I'd suggest that shooting a piebald comes closer to bringing good fortune than bad!

If you do get that piebald, please send us photos here at the magazine (P.O. Box 741, Marietta, GA 30061). We're always interested in reader photos of trophy bucks — no matter what color the deer might be.

Those of you who are intrigued by piebalds and other strange deer should be interested to learn that our special collector's edition, titled ***Weird Whitetails,*** will hit newsstands on Nov. 20. This one-of-a-kind publication will feature color photos, hunting stories and other fascinating information on all sorts of strange and unusual deer. Included will be not just piebalds but also albinos, black whitetails, freak racks and a number of other anomalies from the whitetail world — including a buck with five legs and another one with fangs. No joke!

Gordon Whittington

FAWN BREEDING

Question: Occasionally on our farm we see bucks chasing doe fawns in late season. We assume these fawns are in heat and that they're being bred, though we've never actually witnessed the act.

If a doe fawn is bred and then gives birth at the age of one year, will she most likely have one fawn or two? Also, are there any studies that show what the survival rates of such fawns would be, compared to the survival rates of fawns mothered by adult does?

S.C., Missouri

Answer: Does generally will breed prior to their first birthdays if they reach or exceed 60 pounds in body weight during fall or early winter. As it turns out, this generally means that if the herd is well managed and has not reached habitat saturation, approximately 40 percent of doe fawns normally will breed. They will do so during the second or third normal estrous cycle for your herd, meaning they will conceive around 30-60 days later than mature does in good condition.

As to the number of fawns you can expect, the normal production for doe fawns is one. But here is an interesting fact: The vast majority of these fawns will be bucks! I don't know why this would be the case, but I have documented it several times in my research. It might be related to stress or the uterine environment.

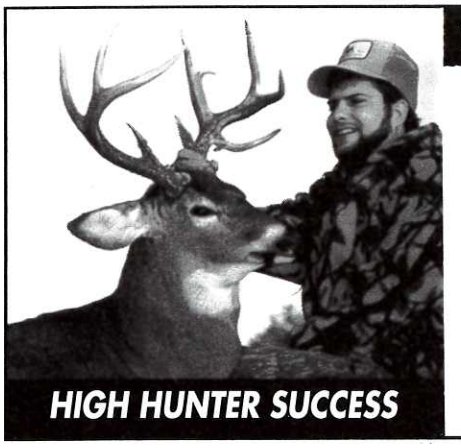
Yearling does tend to have more female offspring than males, a dramatic switch from what we see in doe fawns.

Because doe fawns are bred late, they give birth late as well. The resulting fawns have a lower probability of survival, particularly in the North. In years/areas with more moderate winter temperatures, of course, more will survive.

An interesting final note is that yearling does tend to have more female offspring than males, a dramatic switch from what we see in doe fawns. Approximately 53 percent of the fawns born to mature does (those age 3 years or older at the time they give birth) are bucks.

Dr. James C. Kroll

In each issue, *WHITETAIL's* experts answer selected questions of general interest to our readers. If you have a question for the panel, send it to: Whitetail Forum, P.O. Box 741, Marietta, GA 30061. Sorry, but due to the volume of questions received, we can answer only those chosen for publication.



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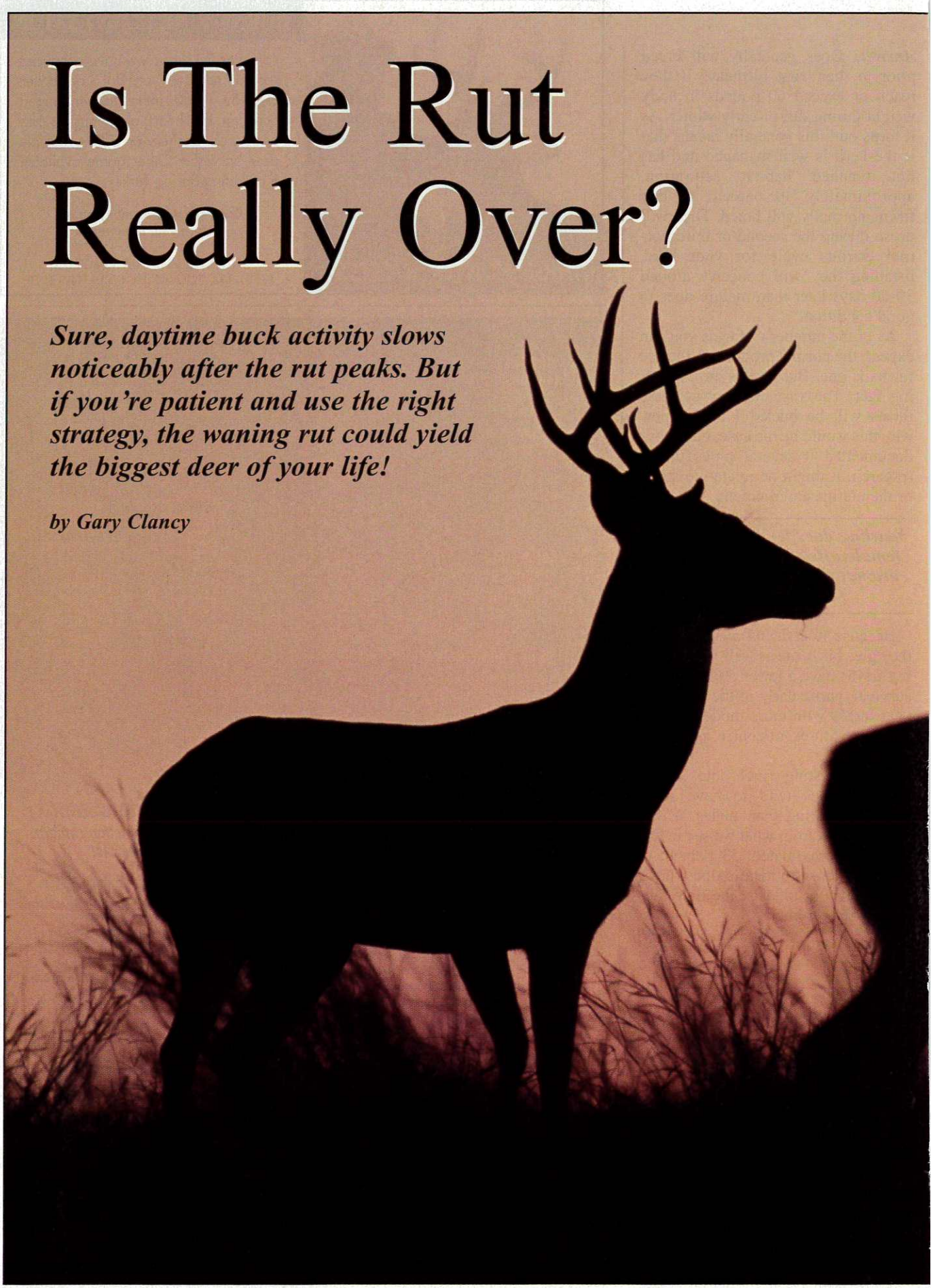
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by Gary Clancy



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