Fair Chase Whitetails

Part 7

In earlier parts of this special series, we discussed reader views on various aspects of ethical deer hunting and management. What might these opinions tell us about the past, present and future?

by Gordon Whittington

Over the past five issues, we've presented the results of our special reader survey on that nebulous concept known as "fair chase." In hopes of determining what's ethical and what isn't in the deer woods, in the January 2001 issue we asked you to vote for or against a broad range of hunting and management practices, each of them legal in at least one state or province. Here's a final look at how the voting went for all 36 of the questions. (Note: The "yes" and "no" responses to most questions total less than 100 percent, as not every respondent answered every question.)

* * *

1. Is it fair chase to hunt whitetails that have been handled by man? *Yes: 14 percent; No: 84 percent*

2. Is it fair chase to hunt whitetails where the habitat has been noticeably damaged by overbrowsing? *Yes: 77 percent; No: 21 percent*

3. Is it fair chase to introduce non-native genetics into a whitetail herd (by stocking and/or artificial insemination)? *Yes: 43 percent; No: 55 percent*

4. Is it fair chase to use supplemental feed to increase the number and/or size of deer in a herd? *Yes: 79 percent; No: 18 percent*

5. Is it fair chase to use food plots to increase the number and/or size of deer in a herd? *Yes: 90 percent; No: 9 percent*

6. Is it possible to provide fair-chase whitetail hunting on a high-fenced tract? *Yes: 40 percent; No: 58 percent*

7. Have you or anyone you know ever hunted inside a high fence? *Yes: 23 percent; No: 77 percent*

8. If you had full control of a tract of land and no financial limitations, would you erect a high fence? *Yes: 25 percent; No: 73 percent*

9. If you answered "Yes" to Question 6, what do you think is the minimum total acreage required for fair chase inside a high fence? *1,458 acres (average)*

10. If you answered "Yes" to Question 6, what do you think is the minimum acreage of escape cover required for fair chase inside a high fence? *834 acres (average)*

11. If you answered "Yes" to Question 6, what do you think is the minimum total acreage *per hunter* required for fair chase inside a high fence? *244 acres (average)*

12. What do you think is the minimum total acreage *per hunter* needed in order to have fair chase on land *not* enclosed by a high fence? *126 acres (average)*

13. Is it fair chase to hunt near feed bait? *Yes: 37 percent; No: 58 percent*

14. Is it fair chase to hunt near a food plot? *Yes: 88 percent; No: 11 percent*

15. Is it fair chase to use does as bait? *Yes: 54 percent; No: 41 percent*

16. Is it fair chase to hunt near a waterhole? *Yes: 92 percent; No: 6 percent*

17. Is it fair chase to use people to drive deer? *Yes: 79 percent; No: 20 percent*

18. Is it fair chase to use dogs to drive deer? *Yes: 27 percent; No: 71 percent*

19. Is it fair chase to shoot deer from a motor vehicle? *Yes: 10 percent; No: 90 percent*

20. Is it fair chase to hunt on an island? *Yes: 87 percent; No: 8 percent*

21. Is it fair chase to hunt with a guide? *Yes: 91 percent; No: 8 percent*

22. Is it fair chase to track deer in snow? *Yes: 99 percent; No: 1 percent*

23. Is it fair chase to use an aircraft for scouting? *Yes: 46 percent; No: 53 percent*

24. Is it fair chase to use a spotlight for scouting? *Yes: 50 percent; No: 49 percent*

25. Is it fair chase to use a camera for scouting? *Yes: 90 percent; No: 10 percent*

26. Is it fair chase to use GPS technology in deer hunting? *Yes: 83 percent; No: 13 percent*

27. Is it fair chase to use a human odor eliminator? *Yes: 95 percent; No: 4 percent*

28. Is it fair chase to use calls and rattling? *Yes: 98 percent; No: 2 percent*

29. Is it fair chase to use a deer decoy? *Yes: 84 percent; No: 14 percent*

30. Is it fair chase to use an attractant scent? *Yes: 94 percent; No: 5 percent*

31. Is it fair chase to use a laser rangefinder? *Yes: 80 percent; No: 20 percent*

32. Is it fair chase to use an ultra-long-range rifle? *Yes: 69 percent; No: 29 percent*

33. Is it fair chase to use an in-line muzzleloader? *Yes: 84 percent; No: 14 percent*

34. Is it fair chase to use a scope on a muzzleloader? *Yes: 77 percent; No:*

If you had this huge buck in your sights right now, and it was legal to hunt over bait in the area, would it be fair chase? The record books say yes, but many ***North American WHITETAIL*** *readers disagree. This is just one issue on which serious hunters are split. Photo by Dave N. Richards.*





Brian Lindberg displays the buck's enormous shed rack from the spring of 2001. As the score sheet on the facing page illustrates, these antlers would have made the deer an easy world record by muzzleloader, and very nearly a Pope and Young record for archery. His next rack (grown last summer) was even bigger. Photos courtesy of Ron Willmore.

documented on video but also ranks right up there with the greatest bucks ever, including those already in the record book.

Based upon study of the still photos and videotape, this buck appears to have added approximately 15 to 20 inches of abnormal points from 2000 to 2001. We estimate that his current rack will gross over 300 inches and net approximately 285. That would be a jump of roughly 8 inches of net score from 2000 and would make him a world record for P&Y's bowhunting record book or the Longhunter Society's muzzleloader records.

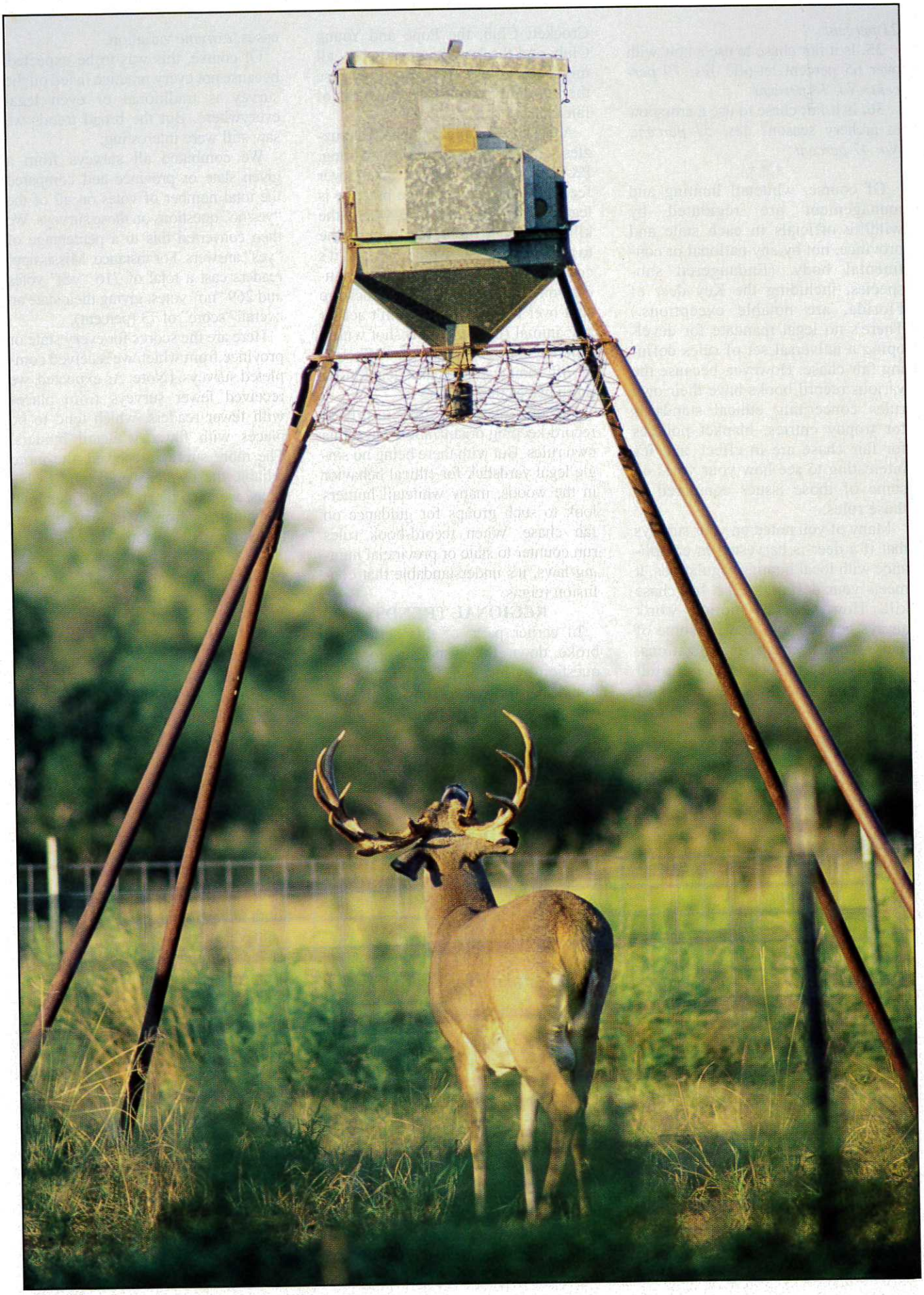
And perhaps this buck isn't done growing yet. Based upon examination of the live photos by one of the leading deer biologists in the United States, Dr. Harry Jacobson, the nontypical is estimated to have been only 4 1/2 years old last autumn!

Should this buck somehow live for even one more year, it is not unreasonable to think he might net 300 inches, perhaps even a bit higher. That would push him way up into the all-time rankings, conceivably even up to or beyond the 304 6/8-inch trophy Mike Beatty shot in Ohio in 2000. Mike's monster is apparently the top-scoring hunter-taken buck of all time (see the February and July 2001 issues), so if this new deer can reach his size, it will be even bigger news in the whitetail world.

At the time this is being prepared to go to press, the Iowa buck apparently is still alive and intent on being around during the fall of 2002. In fact, there have been no reported sightings of the deer since bow season began last Oct. 1, despite a fair amount of hunting pressure in the area. But at press time, the December shotgun season was about to open, and there certainly is a chance he will be shot — or at least seen — then.

So, as far as we know, the final chapter on this buck is yet to be written. Obviously, we will report in a future issue if someone is fortunate enough to get him; if he's not taken during the last days of the 2001-2002 season, a major effort will be made to find his sheds. Should the deer live another year, we can only imagine what his *next* rack might look like!

Regardless of what happens to this magnificent trophy, it has been an experience of a lifetime to be so close to a free-roaming buck of such spectacular size. All serious hunters fantasize about taking a world-record buck, and based on all of the evidence, this particular Iowa monster is what such dreams are made of! Will some hunter's dream eventually come true? That's what we all are waiting to find out.



21 percent

35. Is it fair chase to use a bow with over 65 percent let-off? *Yes: 79 percent; No: 18 percent*

36. Is it fair chase to use a crossbow in archery season? *Yes: 51 percent; No: 47 percent*

* * *

Of course, whitetail hunting and management are regulated by wildlife officials in each state and province, not by any national or continental body. (Endangered subspecies, including the Key deer of Florida, are notable exceptions.) There's no legal mandate for developing a universal set of rules defining fair chase. However, because the various record books have their own rules concerning ethical standards for trophy entries, blanket policies for fair chase are in effect, and it's interesting to see how your votes on some of those issues compared to those rules.

Many of you noted on your surveys that if a deer is harvested in compliance with local hunting regulations, it meets your definition of a fair-chase kill. However, that notion won't always get you too far with some of the record-keeping organizations. Even if a trophy buck is taken in full compliance with the regulations of the state or province, the Boone and Crockett Club, the Pope and Young Club, and the Longhunter Society all might still refuse to accept it because the kill didn't meet their standards of fair chase.

A classic example, and one that puzzles some observers, concerns baiting. P&Y will accept a buck taken over feed bait, provided that the practice is legal in the state/province where the kill occurred. This is ostensibly done to conform to local regulations, and it's consistent with P&Y's fair-chase standard on black bears, most of which are shot over bait. But P&Y won't accept any animal (baited or not) shot with a bow having over 65 percent effective let-off, though such gear is legal in far more places than baiting is.

No one questions that a private record-keeping organization can set its own rules. But with there being no single legal yardstick for ethical behavior in the woods, many whitetail hunters look to such groups for guidance on fair chase. When record-book rules run counter to state or provincial hunting laws, it's understandable that confusion reigns.

REGIONAL TRENDS

In earlier parts of this series, we broke down the responses to each question by location. In doing so, we found that the voting showed significant geographic variation — in some cases, *extreme* variation.

Of course, this was to be expected, because not every practice listed on the survey is traditional or even legal everywhere. But the broad trends we saw still were interesting.

We combined all surveys from a given state or province and compared the total number of votes on all of the "yes/no" questions on those surveys. We then converted this to a percentage of "yes" answers. For instance, Mississippi readers cast a total of 716 "yes" votes and 269 "no" votes, giving their state an overall "score" of 73 (percent).

Here are the scores for every state or province from which we received completed surveys. (Note: As expected, we received fewer surveys from places with fewer readers, which tend to be places with fewer whitetail hunters. The more surveys received, the more reliable the results would tend to be. Thus, we have far more confidence in the numbers from Michigan than in those from Nova Scotia.)

* * *

83: South Carolina, Rhode Island
81: Arkansas, New Brunswick
79: Georgia, Florida, North Carolina
78: Texas, Ontario
77: Washington
76: Tennessee
75: Missouri, Indiana, Oklahoma
74: Louisiana
73: Mississippi, West Virginia, Virginia, Massachusetts, Saskatchewan
72: Kentucky, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Delaware
71: Michigan, Alabama
70: Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, Colorado
69: Wisconsin, Illinois, Kansas, South Dakota, Quebec
68: Vermont
67: Wyoming, Manitoba
66: Minnesota, Maine
65: Maryland
64: New Jersey, North Dakota
63: Montana, Alberta
62: Nebraska
61: Iowa
60: Idaho
59: British Columbia
41: Nova Scotia

* * *

What can we make of these results? It's dangerous to generalize too much about what they mean, but one fact that stands out is that the highest scores tended to belong to Southern



Some readers told us tha primitive-weapons seasons should be limited to open-sighted "traditional" muzzleloaders, but most survey voters said they had no problem with in-line designs or scopes during such seasons. Photo by Tom Evans.

states. In fact, no state in that region had a score of less than 71.

It's hard to fathom that there's a fundamental ethical difference between whitetail enthusiasts in the North and the South; people are people wherever you go. So, if there are regional differences in perspective on fair chase, perhaps they're due to the fact that deer habitat, land-ownership patterns and hunting laws vary so much by region.

In the South, the cover is often thick (and in many cases evergreen), there are few restrictions on hunting gear and methods, and a significant amount of deer hunting is done for a fee on private land far from major metropolitan areas. In the North, by contrast, a lot of hunting still occurs for free, whether on public land or on small tracts of private land, in areas of relatively high human populations. Relative to the amount of deer cover, hunter densities also tend to be higher, particularly in heavily farmed portions of the Northeast, Midwest and Great Plains. All of this not only makes the herd more vulnerable to hunting pressure, it also makes human safety a bigger concern. As a result, in those areas there tend to be more limitations on hunting gear (e.g., no centerfire rifles).

For assorted reasons, some deer herds can tolerate more manipulation than can others without apparent harm to the resource. This is particularly true in rural Southern areas with few restrictions on hunting/management methods, such as Texas. For example, consider the case of Texan Bobbie Brown, who participated in our survey.

"I have a ranch that's high-fenced, 7,000 acres, with food plots and supplemental feeding," he wrote. "I use spotlights for deer counts, limit hunting pressure, try to balance the buck:doe ratio, use ultra-long-range rifles and hunt almost every day of the season . . . and have not harvested a buck in eight years."

Bobbie's approach to deer management and hunting is far different from that of most other whitetail enthusiasts. But does that necessarily make it unethical? Not on the basis of its impact on the deer resource. In Texas, such management and hunting practices are widely used, and they have resulted in some of North America's healthiest herds. You'd have a hard time getting a South Texas rancher to listen to anyone's claim that an intensive approach to deer management and hunting is the work of the devil. Yet in some other state, there might be a huge backlash against such practices.

Even with long rifle seasons, over-the-counter tags, liberal bag limits and sometimes even legalized baiting, many Southern states still have far more deer than they can support in good health. Thus, finding that many readers there have more relaxed views of fair chase was no surprise to us.

FAIR TO THE DEER — OR TO OTHER HUNTERS?

In this series, we've wrestled with the question of how to delineate fair chase. What we *haven't* discussed is a question that no longer can be ignored: Do we fret over the rules because we want to ensure our methods are fair to the deer — or because we don't want other hunters to have a competitive advantage on us?

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For at least some folks, the answer apparently is a blend of the two. On the surveys, they frequently wrote that certain practices are for "lazy" hunters or that they go against tradition. In many cases, no claim was made that the herd or hunting's image was being harmed in the process.

It's prudent to be aware that non-hunters could view a practice with disfavor (a claim some of you made about high fences and huge deer drives). The general public's perception of hunting and management practices definitely should be a concern for all of us, so that point is well taken. But is that really what's eating at us when we hear that someone 150 miles from where we hunt legally used an airplane to scout a trophy, or that he shot a record buck over a legal bait pile? If either bothers us, only we as individuals really know why.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON FAIR CHASE

Hundreds of you who sent in surveys shared your own definitions of "fair chase" as it applies to whitetail hunting and management. Typical of many of these opinions was one given by Missouri reader Robert Freund, who defined fair chase as "hunting deer in their own environment, when and where the animal has a greater chance of escape than the hunter has of making a kill."

To be honest, most of us don't hunt in a truly "natural" environment; the world is less "natural" every day. But that's not to say we should quit hunting, or that we've lost any hope of ever experiencing fair chase again. To a great extent, fair chase lies in the heart of the hunter, not in his choice of gear or tactic.

"One could say that when man picks up a weapon, fair chase ends — but rocks, spears, bows and arrows all are natural materials . . . so, maybe they're acceptable," wrote Benjamin Harrison III of Georgia. "Once we're over that hurdle, it's easy to accept simple, traditional technology such as guns, and harder to accept more recent/more exotic technology that places the quarry in greater jeopardy and requires less ability of the hunter. But fair chase means one thing to one man and something else to another."

As hunters and managers, we must pursue one great goal: to grow and then maintain a healthy herd in a way that the non-hunting majority find acceptable in terms of human safety and ethical treatment of animals. All of our practices — not just those affecting an animal's eligibility for the record book — must pass this test if hunting is to thrive.

Does that mean everyone must conform to a single set of rules to be an "ethical" hunter or manager? Perhaps not. Legally, it's up to each state or province to determine what's appropriate within its borders. All a wildlife agency is obligated to do is to set standards that make sense biologically and yet are palatable enough to the citizenry to be enforceable. Such standards might not be universal.

We all know what seems to work in our own woods, and we know we don't always agree with the way things are done elsewhere. Yet from Canada to Mexico, whitetail enthusiasts employ many varied practices, often without measurable harm to the species as a whole. If our special survey on fair chase has led us to any firm conclusion, it's that there's room for a variety of views on nearly any topic. Thankfully, in a free society, there always will be.

Canada are those fringe territories, where deer can still reach quality farmland foods at important times of the year for antler growth, but also can find protective cover in the dense bush. The above scenario describes the Dunhams' huge hunting area. According to Dan, many of their better bucks are taken in the first five miles of the fringe.

At Dunham Outfitting, which has been in business for 11 years, hunting is done from stands overlooking grain baits (which is legal and customary in Saskatchewan) at distances of 100 yards or less. Stand sites are not randomly selected, however. Instead, they are chosen because of their proximity to rubs, scrapes and other buck sign. This is important because many big bucks don't frequent baits for food alone. Instead, they come for does or when the weather dictates. When site selections are based on natural travel patterns, the hunting results tend to be far more favorable.

Out of the customary 40-45 hunters per season, 30-35 generally take bucks with an average gross score of 144 inches and an average age of 3 1/2 years. Those who don't are often holding out for the chance at an exceptional buck.

Hunters are taken by vehicle each morning to drop-off points, and quads transport them to their respective stands, where they will spend the day. Dan points out that, interestingly, 95 percent of their kills occur between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m., a time period when many deer hunters traditionally are not in their stands.

On Sunday morning, Nov. 25, Dan delivered his customary "rules and routine" talk and the group was ready for the Monday hunt. Dennis was focused on finding a trophy. In his eight seasons of hunting with Dunham Outfitting, he has taken four bucks including this season's giant; his first three scored 160, 167 and 168. He has a personal conviction that he'll only shoot a mature buck.

In the early part of the November season, some unseasonably mild weather had contributed to dismal early-season results for many outfitters. However, Dan and Rob's hunters were having great success, with at least one gross "book" buck taken each week. Because of these results, and the fact that snow and bitterly cold weather had finally arrived, Dennis was optimistic.

The hunt began in spectacular fashion on Monday, as Dennis saw 15 bucks — the best being a good 140-class deer — and watched a cow moose and her calf bed down very near his blind. Tuesday dawned with light snow and colder temperatures — a perfect deer hunting day. Not long after Dennis had climbed into his stand, a huge 6-pointer came by and caused some accelerated heartbeats, but Dennis passed on him. Nick Marshal, one of the other hunters in camp, killed an impressive buck that day that scored 169.

Dennis decided to try something different on Wednesday. He went to a new bait, where the stand consisted of just two round hay bales. But it was a windy day with temperatures below zero, and when he didn't see much, he radioed Dan at 11:30 and said he'd like to move to a less open stand site in another area.

At this point, the plot thickens. About a week earlier, two hunters were traveling to their stand a couple of hours before daylight in a vehicle when they nearly hit a huge buck. He was alongside a well-used logging road about two miles in from the farmland, but to the best of Dan's knowledge no one had ever seen this deer before. According to the hunters, it was a new world-record buck (but then again, we've all heard that story before). They described an incredibly wide and massive buck with a drop tine.

Dan didn't discount their story, because he knew they were experienced enough to know a big buck when they saw one. And it so happened he had a new bait about 600 yards from where the buck had crossed the road. But that site hadn't been hunted the entire season, because a big bear had moved in on the bait early in the fall. In fact, the stand was now referred to as "Bear



With almost 50 inches of mass (and no circumference less than 5 6/8 inches), Dennis Adams' buck posts an unofficial "green" gross score of 224 4/8 inches. The main beams were measured at 29 and 31 1/8 inches. Photo by Ron Sinfelt.