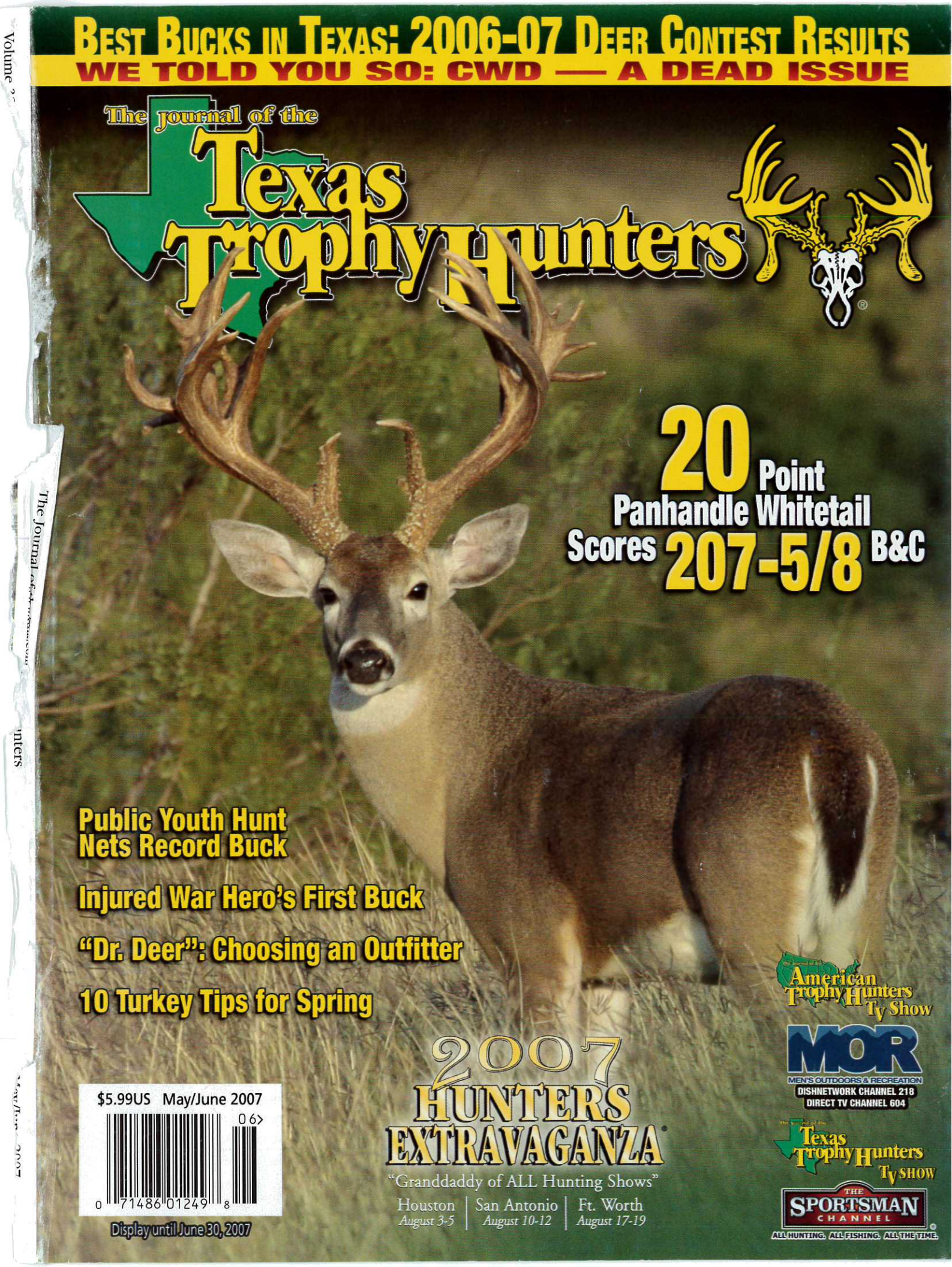
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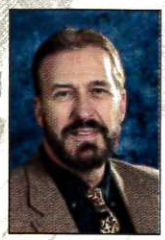
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FRED

By Dr. James C. Kroll, Ph.D.

I just got back from Saskatchewan where I was fortunate to shoot a Boone and Crockett-class buck. While I was sitting out there in subzero temperatures, I began to think about all the places I have hunted, all the outfitters I have known and all the landowners I have helped manage their deer. Believe me, when you are sitting for hours in the cold, a lot runs through your mind.

So, just for fun, I started analyzing why this particular outfitter was so successful and so many others were not. This column is the result of that mental exercise.

There is one type of outdoor article, the very sight of which will send me into a tizzy. It is the one that appears predictably in every periodical at least once each year. It generally goes under the heading: How to pick an outfitter.

On the surface, it appears to be a "nuts and bolts" article to help you pick out a reliable hunting operation. Yet, in reality, the purpose of the article is to provide an "infomercial" about some pet operation(s) for whom the author works! Objectivity is not a component of the article.

This column is not a disguised version of such an article. The outfitter I used in Saskatchewan was Fred Gopher, who operates Double Arrow Outfitters. Fred routinely kills some of the largest bucks taken in the province and has more clients than he knows what to do with. So, anything I say about Fred's operation in this column is unnecessary. However, I do want to use Fred as my good example where appropriate.

Over the last 35 years, I have been fortunate to hunt every habitat in which whitetails reside. This experience represents a staggering array of outfitters and guides. In addition, I also have participated in countless hunting shows, including the Hunter's Extravaganzas® put on each summer by the Texas Trophy Hunters Association.

My first exposure to such shows was one of the first shows our magazine put on. It took place at Laredo. At that time, two things were common components in exhibitor booths: beautiful women and starched, monogrammed shirts. As we have gotten older, the beautiful women seem to have disappeared, but the shirts are still there!

In those days, visiting a booth was very predictable. Behind a tall, bar-like display sat two men on personalized bar stools, each person with the requisite monogrammed, heavily starched shirt. Behind them were two or three deer heads, which more often than not did not come from their operation. If they did, the bucks were taken in the distant past.

The demeanor of these guys was curious. You quickly were given the impression they knew more about hunting than Fred Bear. "If you want to kill bucks like these," one would exclaim, "you better book with us early."



DR. JAMES C. KROLL PHOTO

to kill a bobcat because sightings are few and it can give the impression that the cat population is low," Roberson mentioned. "In truth, a bobcat tries not to make a habit of being seen."

For those wanting to call bobcats, Roberson suggests calling with a high-pitched cottontail sound for 20 minutes and then if nothing shows up, switch to a woodpecker for 10 minutes. The yellow-hammered woodpecker is almost too tempting for a bobcat to turn down. If he's already in earshot and interested, chances are the woodpecker will pull him out in the open for a shot.

I've found that a vast majority of bobcats respond after 25 minutes of calling. They have a habit of coming in, stopping and studying an area, as opposed to a coyote or fox that come running in at full tilt. The bobcat struggles with senses less keen than a canine, so they tend to sit and conduct research and observation before moving out into the open.

Since that first bobcat in 2004, I've called in dozens for different hunters, some to within five yards of the barrel or bow. It's Roberson's wisdom that I'm using, not anything special or knowledgeable on my part. Every bobcat that responds to a call sends a burst of adrenaline rushing through my body, losing all composure and getting the shakes. I hope it always does.

On February 16, 2007, while visiting friends at a ranch in South Texas, Page McDaniel asked me to take her out and maybe call in a bobcat, something she's always dreamed of, but never had much luck with. She was surprised that my location selection was up in a tower blind that overlooked two intersecting senderos. But, the theory is, a bobcat knows where the feeders are and they cruise these areas regularly looking for birds and rabbits cleaning up on thrown corn.

It was a cold morning, we set up with the sun at our backs and Page commented on the loudness of the electronic call. I shrugged my shoulders and scanned the brush, hoping something might happen.

At 22 minutes, only 35 yards in front of us, a beautiful bobcat appeared in the open, sitting in front of an algerita bush. In a loud whisper, I nervously instructed Page to bring up her rifle and get ready to shoot the cat if it should come out in the road. Sure enough, the cat walked to the edge of the sendero and Page shot. The bobcat jumped three times in a twisted, bouncing death dance and then fell dead in a prickly pear.

After almost two hours of celebration, Page's friend Deborah Spillar asked for the same favor that very afternoon. I told Page and Deborah they should do it themselves and I would tag along with a video camera. We set up with the sun at our backs out from the edge of a food plot.

After 18 minutes, a bobcat literally ran out in the open and headed straight for the call. Deborah leveled her rifle and watched the cat walk right up to the unit and stop. One shot brought the bobcat straight down and the two women celebrated two beautiful bobcats in one day.

That night, Page's husband Denny asked for the same favor. By this time, Page had become a self-professed expert at calling cats, and the very next morning we set up with the sun at our backs on the elevated rise of a tank dam.

After only two minutes of rabbit squeals, Denny spotted a bobcat back in the brush. Lifting the crosshairs to his eye, Denny watched the cautious cat for a few minutes, hoping for it to clear the brush and walk out in the open. Page impatiently urged Denny to take the shot through a tiny window in the brush. Denny fired and bobcat number three hit the ground.

Three bobcats in a day-and-a-half isn't typical, and it probably means I won't call up another cat for a long time. But, it does mean that, in the future, when a deer hunt goes slow and long, I've got the hopeful prospect of bobcats that keeps me excited...borrowing time from the tail end of a whitetail hunt.

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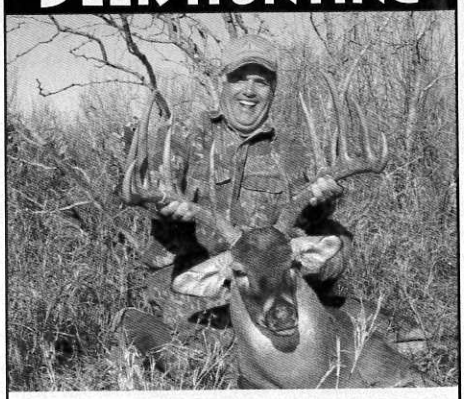
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Then, the other would flip through an old photo album, which oddly enough contained a large number of pictures of these two guys with bucks.

If you took the bait, in many cases the hunt was one never to be forgotten. When you arrived on the hunting property, you encountered two very different people. The starched shirts were replaced by torn T-shirts, which revealed the "awesome" physical condition of the outfitters. The "lodge" was an old ranch house, littered with liquor bottles, empty cans and assorted debris left over the millennia.

After a mostly sleepless night with five snoring strangers, the "guide" arrives late to drive you to your stand. At that point, any resemblance between a hunting guide and your driver was purely coincidental. "Find you a place here in the front seat," he directs. There is never a comment about safety.

You push over the empty chicken box, used oilcans and rags to make room for you and your rifle. He then proceeds to forget where the blind was, arriving there after sunrise.

In the blind, you find numerous cigarette butts, an empty whiskey bottle and several spent cartridges representing at least four calibers. As the day warms up, the humming you hear turns out to be the red wasps making a home behind the stained carpet on the walls.

The scene is repeated over and over the next two days, at which time you succumb to temptation and shoot a 2-year-old eight-pointer. Sound familiar? Now, let's look at how a true professional operates.

I already declared that Fred was going to be my good example. So, let's take my experiences from the top, using Fred as a standard.

Producing a quality hunting program is not an easy task. In addition, the cost in time and money associated with filming a TV show is so high you have to be very careful where you hunt. So, before I make the commitment to tape a show at a particular location, believe me,

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 140]

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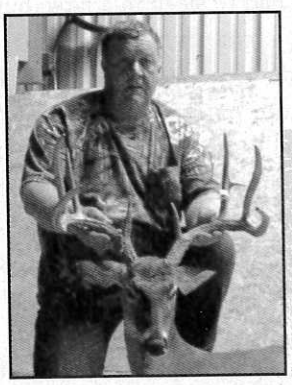
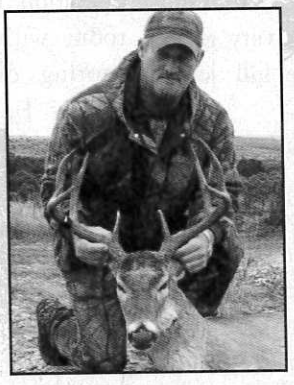
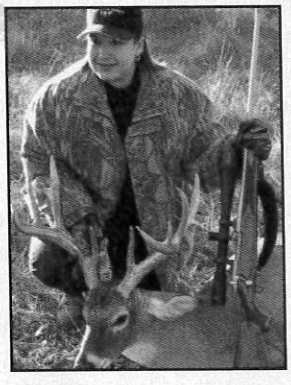
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[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 139]

I do my homework. The methods I use to vet potential outfitters has been very successful. So, I thought I would share them with you.

First Impressions

My first encounter with Fred Gopher was in the "spill over" room of the Hunter's Extravaganza® in Ft. Worth. Between my presentations, I like to quietly circulate among the crowd, studying each booth's merits from afar.

Fred's booth was located in a back corner of the hall. It consisted of a table, a backdrop with several pictures and several antlers. It was not an imposing booth, but the pictures and antlers certainly were. I stopped to discuss his operation.

Fred was there with a couple of his guides. Their overall appearance was neat, clean and professional. When asked about their operation, Fred politely explained who they were, where they operated and the kind of hunting they offered. Not once did Fred brag or act like he was the most knowledgeable hunter in the world, although my subsequent experiences hunting with him proved he qualifies.

I asked about the heads and antlers in his booth. Again, he politely explained that they were from one of the local hunters who had hunted with Double Arrow Outfitters for a number of years. Getting heads down from Saskatchewan was not easy, so why not use one of his hunter's trophies? "These are very good heads," he offered, "but we kill some better and some not as good."

I picked up the sheds and asked about them. "These were picked up by the boys here last spring from our hunting area," he answered. I thanked him for the information and walked on.

Later, I returned each of the three days and stood afar, watching how Fred and his guides interacted with the crowd. Everyone received the same attention, same courtesy and, most important, same story. Fred qualified for the next step.

References

On my last visit, I inquired about the names and addresses of all his most recent hunters. I randomly picked out several names and made calls. Each pretty much said the same thing; Fred was the real deal and a straight shooter. I did not receive a single negative comment.

The Camp

During my phone conversations, I asked some questions about specifics. During this phase, I focused on the camps Fred operated. "What kind of vehicles do they use?" I inquired. The general comment was, "They drive mostly pickups in good condition." Then, I asked about the state of equipment. What kind of binoculars did they use? Did they take pictures of the recovery of their buck? Were their vehicles clean? Were they always on time? These are tell-tale questions to ask.

I then turned to camp operation. What kind of sleeping accommodations did they have? The general reply was most either stayed at a bed and breakfast or at one of the camps.

I then asked about sleeping accommodations. How many folks slept in a room? On a 2006 hunt at another operation, I had to sleep in a large bunk room with eight bunk beds full of snoring old men! You know, John Wesley Hardin once shot a man for snoring, and I am fully sympathetic. Getting enough sleep is a critical component to trophy hunting. Most of Fred's clients said they slept in clean rooms, no more than four people at a time.

The meals were simple, home cooked affairs. You do not have to serve gourmet food to impress me. I have hunted at places where the food was the only thing good about the hunt. You cannot mount a pork chop.

How a person treats his game animals tells me a great deal about him also. This applies both to respect given the animal and care of the meat and cape. An operator who lets deer hang under a tree or shed for days probably will fail you in other ways. Fred and his guides treated killed bucks with proper respect and processed animals quickly on arrival. The only thing that held up processing was photography.

Photography is another diagnostic I use. Why would you not want to document both the hunt and the animal? Fred's folks, I was told, were all equipped with cameras and took great care to get tasteful photographs that accentuated the best points about each buck. This serves both the hunter and the outfitter.

No one appreciates what we have long called the "midnight in the garage" photograph. This consists of a deer hanging in a garage by its antlers or hind legs, blood covered and tongue hanging out. Beside the deer stands one or more men with beer cans in their hands smiling. And then, there is the "wonderful" field shot of a hunter astride his buck, knife firmly gripped between his teeth!

My last camp-related question was about the camp atmosphere in general. Was this a drunken brawl or a group of serious trophy hunters? Did the guys get along? How many repeat hunters were there? These also are critical questions. Again, Fred passed the test.

The Opportunity

I once had a guy come up to me in North Carolina and say, "I'm really not a very good deer hunter." When I investigated what made him think so poorly about himself, he disclosed he had never killed a trophy-class buck. I asked him about the ages of bucks he

[CONTINUED ON PAGE 142]








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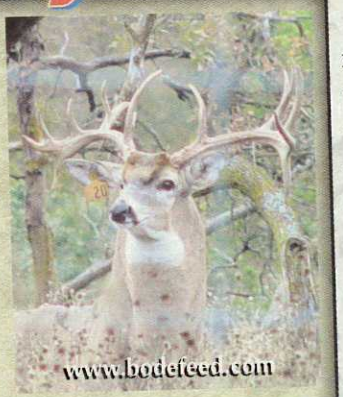


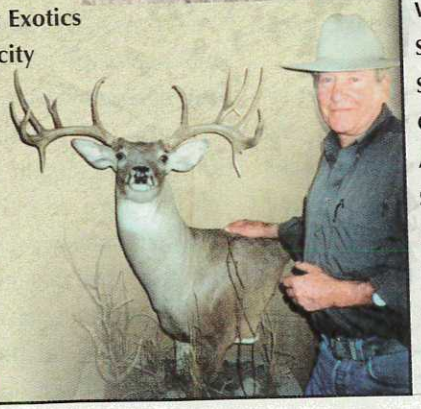
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[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 140]

had killed, finding out most were mature animals. Because none of these scored above 140 somehow meant to this man he was not a good hunter.

What he did not consider, however, was there are very few record-class bucks killed anywhere in that state. I think it is a hard and fast rule: "You can't kill a trophy buck where none live!"

So, before you shell out cash for a hunt, always do some research on whether or not trophy bucks are common to that area. Most states and provinces now operate a big buck record system. Obtain a copy and examine where and when such bucks were taken in that state or province. It may turn out the last time a big buck was killed in your outfitter's area was 20 years ago—not much chance for you to succeed.

I also look at year-to-year comparisons of the top bucks. Some of the latest "hotspots" are already showing signs of deteriorating in quality. You may be going to a place based on the past, not the present. Reputations for trophy bucks may have been earned a decade ago, with very few taken in the last three years.

An important question to ask your potential outfitter is, "When is your rut?" In many states, gun seasons are positioned on purpose to exclude the rut. This is an attempt to reduce the buck kill. In states such as Wisconsin, for example, bowhunting has become the best way to kill a big buck. If you are not a bowhunter, you may need to think again. A state with a very short rifle season may not be all that good a place to hunt, even if big bucks have been taken.

Lastly, the best way to assess a potential outfitter's operation is to ask for data. A good operator will routinely measure the scores of every buck taken, along with the age of the buck. If he has not already done so, calculate the average Boone and Crockett (B&C) score of last year's bucks. Often, one or two monsters will disproportionately affect the calculation of average.

To offset this effect, graph the number of bucks killed by 10-inch score classes. This distribution of kills will tell you a great deal about your chances of taking a buck of a lifetime. Some Texas ranches rest their reputations on one or two trophy bucks each season, while the average buck taken from their ranch is less than 140 inches!

Fred's average scores were remarkably high. I determined my chances of killing a buck breaking 150 inches were high enough to commit to the hunt. In three seasons, I have killed two bucks, one a 160-class and the other a massive typical scoring 173-4/8, with 12-inch brow tines.

The one year I did kill a buck was the worst weather ever experienced in Saskatchewan, with air temperatures exceeding 50° F. Buck movement was totally shut off, and the best buck I saw was a 150-class 4-year-old. That certainly cannot be blamed on Fred.

Management is Important

I have made a hunting career of pursuing what I refer to as "wilderness whitetails." These are deer living in far away, primitive places such as northern Mexico, western Canada and any mountainous terrain. (The more severe the weather, the better the hunting opportunity.) But, these types of places are slowly disappearing as man expands his range across North America. More and more, you have to consider whether or not a place is managed to find good hunting.

As I have pointed out many times, "management" takes many forms, ranging from feeding to a total package consisting of habitat, population and hunter/management strategies.

If the place you are considering touts itself as "managed," take some time to find out what that means. A high fence does not mean a place is managed! What are they doing for their deer? How long have they been in a management program? Do they cull their deer? These and others are important questions to ask.

Again, the best diagnostic to whether or not an operation indeed is managed lies with records. If the operator can show you detailed records about the effectiveness of his management program, he probably is running a pretty good operation.

Good records include: 1) charts and graphs showing the numbers and ages of deer taken over time; 2) trends in B&C scores and ages; and 3) health indicators such as reproductive success. More recently, photographs from infrared-triggered cameras—taken during the current year—are being commonly taken. Again, Fred and his guides impressed me by not only having trail camera photographs for the current crop of bucks, but also the latest technology for storing and analyzing them.

Final Points

The number of commercial whitetail hunting operations is growing at an impressive rate; that's a great thing. Hunter opportunity is increasing along with this trend. However, this also presents the potential pay hunter with a confusing array of operations to choose from. A pay hunt is not cheap, and you cannot afford to waste your time or your money. Using the diagnostics discussed in this column, you should at least reduce your chances of being disappointed next season.

Some of them are obviously those made during the hunt and do you very little good in decision-making. But, if you ask questions about each criterion from references and the outfitter, you can make a more informed decision.

Writer's Note: If you are interested in trying to get in on a hunt at Double Arrow Outfitters, look them up at the Hunter's Extravaganzas® this summer. Tell Fred Gopher I said, "Hi."