BUILDING YOUR OWN
'DEER FACTORY'

Is Co-Op Management For You?

One of the biggest worries of private-land deer managers is that their neighbors will shoot the bucks they've produced. But if everyone works together, everyone will benefit!

by Gordon Whittington

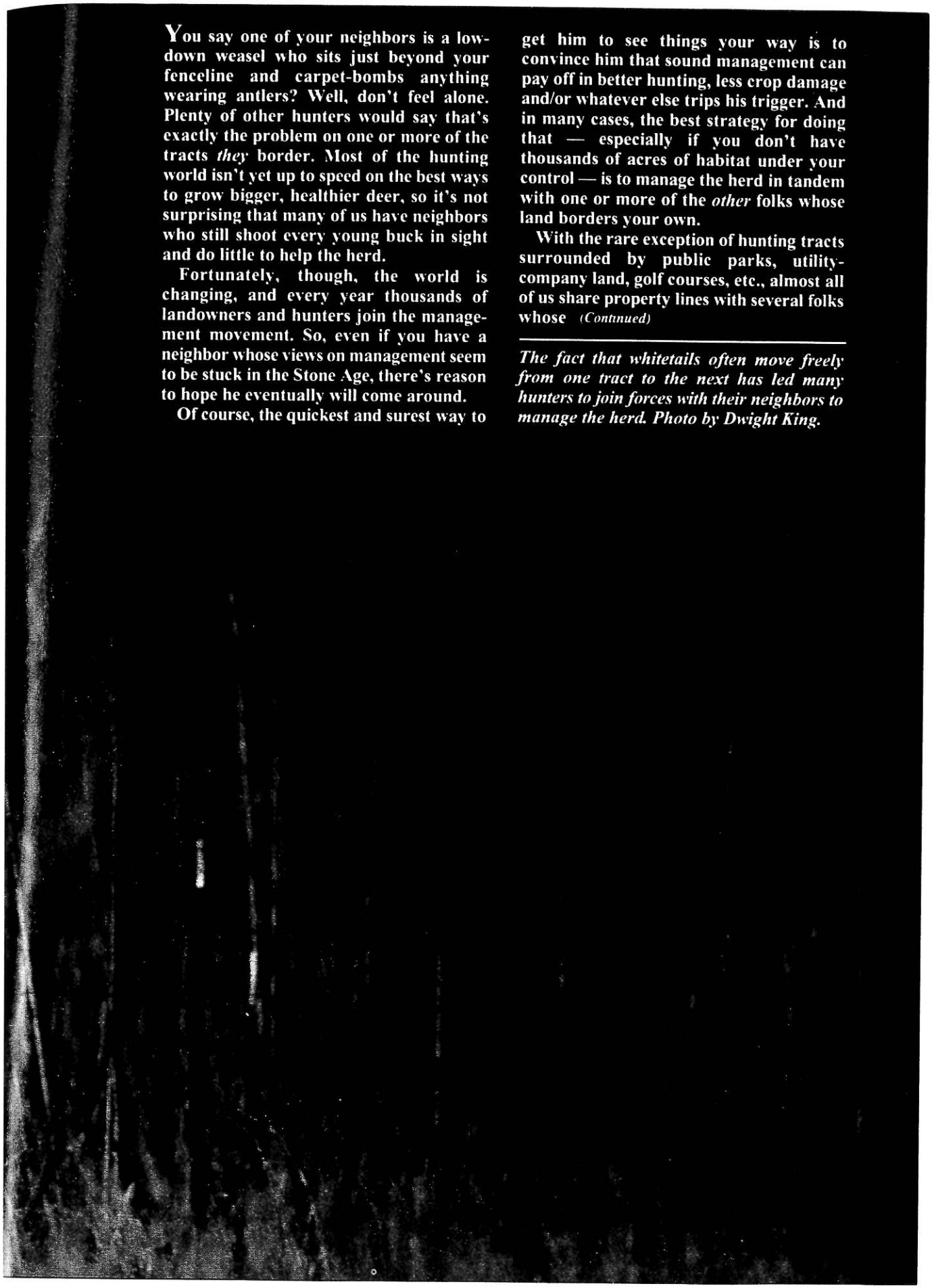


You say one of your neighbors is a low-down weasel who sits just beyond your fenceline and carpet-bombs anything wearing antlers? Well, don't feel alone. Plenty of other hunters would say that's exactly the problem on one or more of the tracts *they* border. Most of the hunting world isn't yet up to speed on the best ways to grow bigger, healthier deer, so it's not surprising that many of us have neighbors who still shoot every young buck in sight and do little to help the herd.

Fortunately, though, the world is changing, and every year thousands of landowners and hunters join the management movement. So, even if you have a neighbor whose views on management seem to be stuck in the Stone Age, there's reason to hope he eventually will come around.

Of course, the quickest and surest way to get him to see things your way is to convince him that sound management can pay off in better hunting, less crop damage and/or whatever else trips his trigger. And in many cases, the best strategy for doing that — especially if you don't have thousands of acres of habitat under your control — is to manage the herd in tandem with one or more of the *other* folks whose land borders your own.

With the rare exception of hunting tracts surrounded by public parks, utility-company land, golf courses, etc., almost all of us share property lines with several folks whose *(Continued)*



The fact that whitetails often move freely from one tract to the next has led many hunters to join forces with their neighbors to manage the herd. Photo by Dwight King.

acreages are hunted for deer. If at least one of your neighbors shares your management goals, you can pool your resources — land, labor and knowledge — to manage these separate properties with the same strategy, gaining the positive effects of controlling more acreage without any of you having to spend an extra dime to buy or lease more land.

This concept is most often termed *cooperative ("co-op") management*, and it's one of the most encouraging trends in deer hunting today. Co-ops are paying dividends for landowners, individual hunters and hunting clubs across North America, and the idea might work for you, too.

WHO NEEDS A CO-OP?

If you've been reading this series from the start, you know those of us at ***WHITETAIL*** enthusiastically endorse what we call "food source" management. It's a strategy based on providing the herd with plenty of nutritious food year 'round, in an effort to grow the maximum number of big, healthy deer.

Nowhere else has this concept been as highly refined as at Fort Perry Plantation in Georgia, our magazine's one-of-a-kind facility for management research. A decade of study at Fort Perry and elsewhere has proved conclusively that this management strategy can help any private-land manager grow more and bigger deer on his land.



Passing up immature bucks helped Ron (left) and David Jilot bag these Wisconsin trophies last Nov. 23. Ron's deer scores 203 5/8 B&C points; David's deer scores 134 6/8. The more you work with your neighbors, the more effective such a strategy is. Photo courtesy of David Jilot.

The second advantage of food-source management is almost as encouraging: It can hold those deer very near prime feeding areas the majority of the time. In fact, there's evidence that if the herd's most preferred habitat (year-round food sources, cover and water) is concentrated on your land, you can keep many of those deer from

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straying far, even without a high fence. This improves the odds of a big buck being taken by one of the hunters whose efforts produced him.

But does this mean that implementing a food-source management program will eliminate any worries about deer *ever* leaving your land? Hardly. A variety of factors can make "your" deer vulnerable to neighbor losses, even if you're managing the herd properly and hunters on surrounding lands keep themselves (and their bullets) on their side of the fence.

For starters, the property under your control might not be as large as the home range of a deer — even a deer that finds everything it needs inside your borders. Whitetails, like people, instinctively crave a certain amount of "elbow room." As a result, they like to roam a bit.

This is especially true of bucks, which have wanderlust programmed into their genes. At a year of age, they disperse to establish their home ranges, often settling into core areas some distance from where they were born. Then, at age 1 1/2 and every fall thereafter, they head out in search of does. Depending on the deer density, sex ratio, etc., such forays can take a rutting buck on a daily route of several miles.

Another factor that has a huge impact on how much "your" deer roam is the uniqueness of your land's food sources and other features. If a standing corn field in the center of your property is easily the best fall forage within three square miles, local bucks will have relatively little need to roam far to find females or food during the rut. But if several of your neighbors have foraging areas just as attractive as that corn field, "your" deer might feel less of a need to stay home all of the time. And in the event that neighboring lands have *better* food sources and other habitat features than yours, along with lower hunting pressure . . . well, you get the idea.

As a general rule, *the less land you have and the less uniquely attractive it is to deer, the more influence neighboring properties will have over your management program.* If your best efforts to improve the habitat and make deer feel safe on your land still don't keep them there all of the time, joining or forming a co-op might be your best option.

A VEHICLE FOR CHANGE

Most co-ops, like the vast majority of individual management programs, are born of frustration. This usually is the result of low numbers of mature bucks being available, which in turn is almost guaranteed to be a function of excessive long-term hunting pressure on young bucks in the area. Often compounding the problem is a history of too little pressure on does, keeping deer numbers higher than the habitat can support in good health. Mixing these problems is a recipe for hunter and landowner dissatisfaction.

But a co-op can help to break this depressing cycle. First, it brings concerns about herd health and the quality of the hunting experience out into the open, which at least gets everyone — hunters and landowners alike — to think and talk about what's needed to improve the herd.

Then, if the co-op's management plan is sound and properly executed, its positive results will be just that much more obvious than if they were confined to a single tract. If one piece of land is known for producing a big buck or two every year, it's impressive, but if multiple

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adjoining tracts each yield that many trophies, it's harder to dismiss that as the result of a single hunter's skill, persistence and/or luck.

Also, through peer pressure, a co-op often accelerates positive change in local views on deer management. Having several respected hunters and landowners work together to manage the herd sends a powerful message to the "wannabes" out there: If you aren't teaming up with your neighbors, you're not among the management elite.

Don't overlook the impact this can have on the psyche of other deer enthusiasts in the vicinity. If your co-op is successful, they're going to take notice, giving you a chance to educate them on the principles and details of management. Answer their questions in the right way, and they're likely to follow your lead.

This already has happened in some areas. In parts of Wisconsin, for example, passing up immature bucks is resulting in more true trophies being taken, which in turn is convincing even more landowners and hunters to give it a try. Herd health and the quality of the hunting experience are beginning to take priority over just filling a tag.

Finally, the hunter-landowner unity growing out of a co-op can translate into greater political power for dealing with matters affecting the local herd. A group of constituents speaking with one voice has more clout than any individual.

COULD A CO-OP WORK FOR YOU?

Before you try to set up a deer co-op, get accurate answers to the following questions:

1. Are "your" deer spending part of their time on neighboring properties?
2. Does one or more of your neighbors share your concern about managing for a healthy herd?
3. Are the landowners and hunters in the proposed co-op willing to take a long-term approach to herd improvement?
4. Can you deal with the occasional mistakes and misunderstandings that are likely to crop up in any co-op?

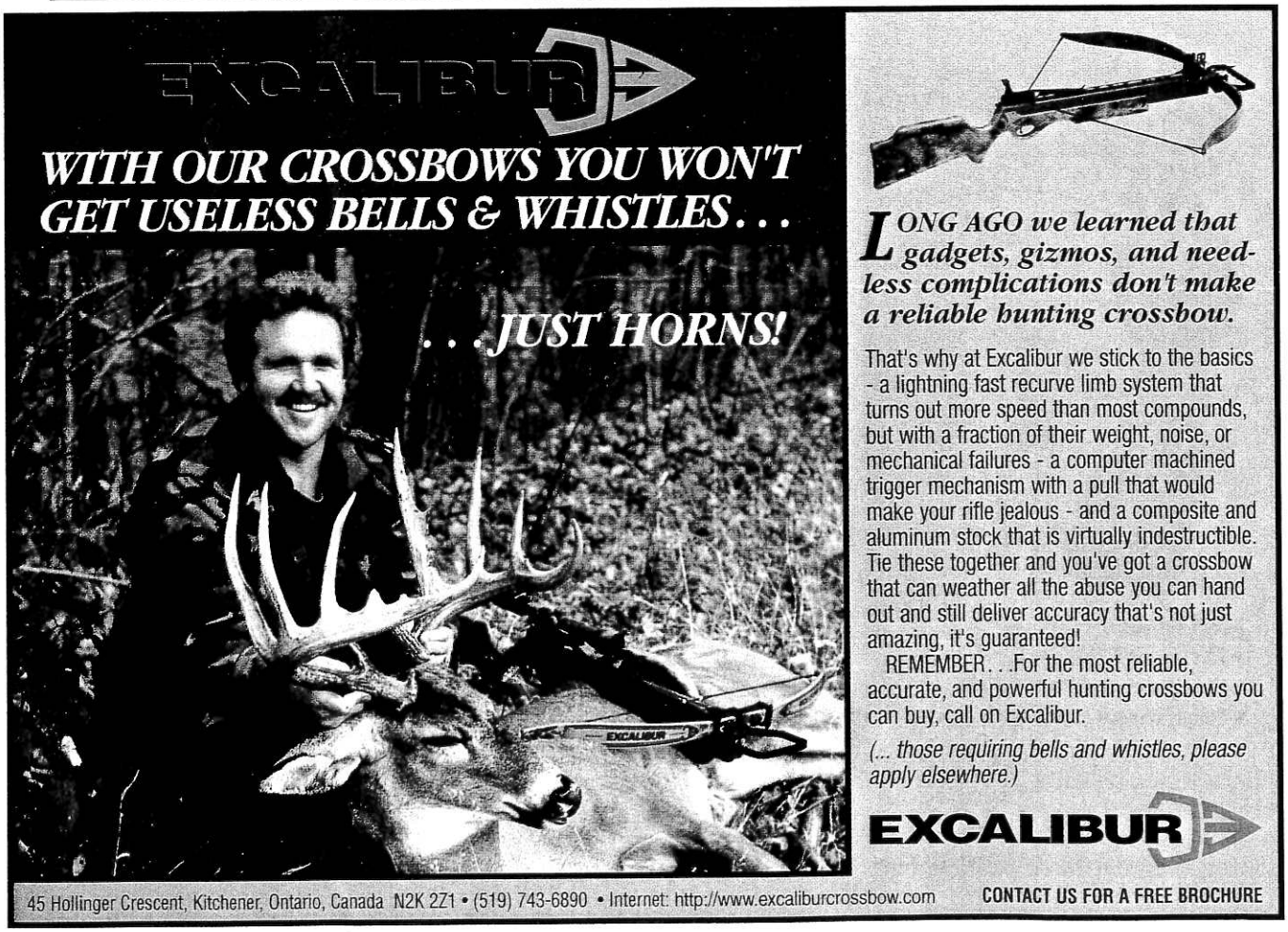
GETTING STARTED

Rural landowners and avid deer hunters often are independent types who like to call their own shots. This is fine for the most part, but it can be a barrier to building close working relationships with other landowners and hunters. To set up a co-op, someone must make the first move. If none of your neighbors has done so, maybe it's up to you.

There's no single best way to get the ball rolling. Land-ownership patterns, deer-hunting traditions and the human personalities involved vary widely from one situation to the next. But in general, a good first step is to find out as much as you can about all of the players involved.

Is everyone on your land willing to work with the guys next door to census the herd you share, establish harvest goals, pool harvest records for analysis (as discussed in Dr. James C. Kroll's feature on Page 34), and improve the habitat? You can't develop a co-op with the neighbors until everyone on *your* land agrees that something needs to be done.

Once that hurdle has been crossed, it's time to broach the subject with one or more of your neighbors. In many cases, it makes sense to start with the property owner, rather than the hunters. He'll get involved in the



matter at some point anyway, and you don't want to make him feel left out of the loop. Then again, in some cases you might deal first with the hunters. This is likely to be true if the neighboring landowner is a stranger to you, as is often the case with many tracts now being under absentee ownership. You'll just have to feel your way through that part.

Regardless, present your case for co-op management as clearly and cordially as possible. Opening with "You guys need to stop blasting everything that moves and start managing the way *we* do" isn't the best way to break the ice. Express genuine concern for the welfare of the herd and the habitat but do so without criticizing anyone for what might have happened in the past.

Your neighbors might not know as much as you do about the benefits of management, so don't be surprised if an education campaign is needed. To that end, it might help to give them copies of management features from back issues of ***WHITETAIL***. (This series began in October 1997.)

The first goal of most co-ops is to get everyone to pass up younger bucks and shoot the right number of does. To that end, you'll want to stress the fact that nature's plan is for a herd with a healthy buck:doe ratio, a good age structure and a total deer number that's within the capacity of the habitat. Note the direct benefits — primarily, more big, healthy deer for everyone to hunt — that come from managing properly.

Point out that deer do move back and forth between the tracts, so it only makes sense to manage them in a single way. This should show them that the management strategy you propose is much better than having a different plan for every piece of hunting land in the area.

STRUCTURING A CO-OP

Let's assume your neighbors like the sound of co-op management and are willing to try it. Now what?

A co-op usually is a handshake deal, not a legally binding contract. It's based on mutual trust and the free flow of relevant information among all affected parties, hunters and landowners alike. However you choose to structure things is fine, as long as those key tenets are upheld.

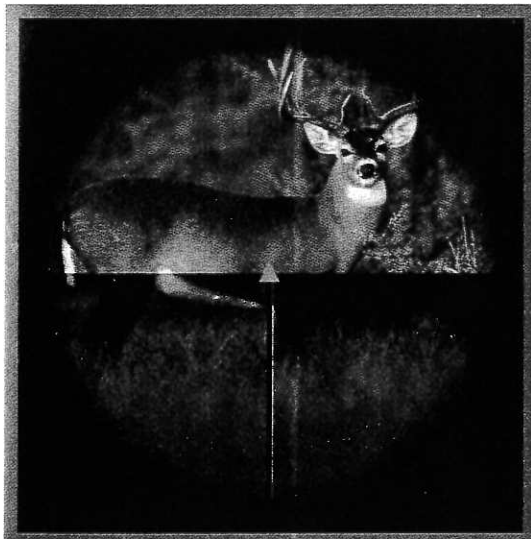
Many co-ops elect officers and hold regular meetings to discuss herd censusing, harvest data, habitat improvements, poaching problems, etc. Such meetings also strengthen the bond among members and unite them in pursuing the goals of a healthier herd and better hunting.

Regardless of the acreage or number of tracts involved, making a co-op work ultimately depends far more on the people than on the deer. It's a team effort aimed at a common goal, one that must be stated clearly up front. Every participant should make a serious commitment to abide by the agreed-upon rules, however formal or informal those might be.

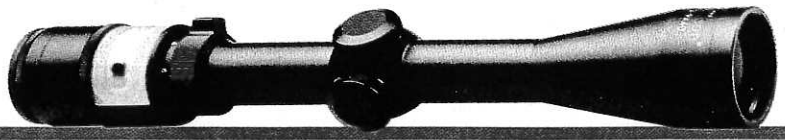
CONCLUSION

Whether it's hunger, thirst, love or fear that leads a buck off your land, you're helpless to protect him from persons whose actions you can't control. Reducing such worries, if not eliminating them, is the reason co-op management is catching on with hunters and landowners today.

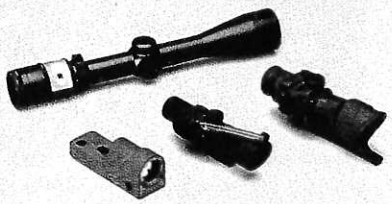
Next month, we'll profile one of North America's pioneering co-ops to show you how everyone can pull together to help the herd. This co-op has operated for 15 years now, so its members must be doing something right. See our January issue to find out just what that "something" is!



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