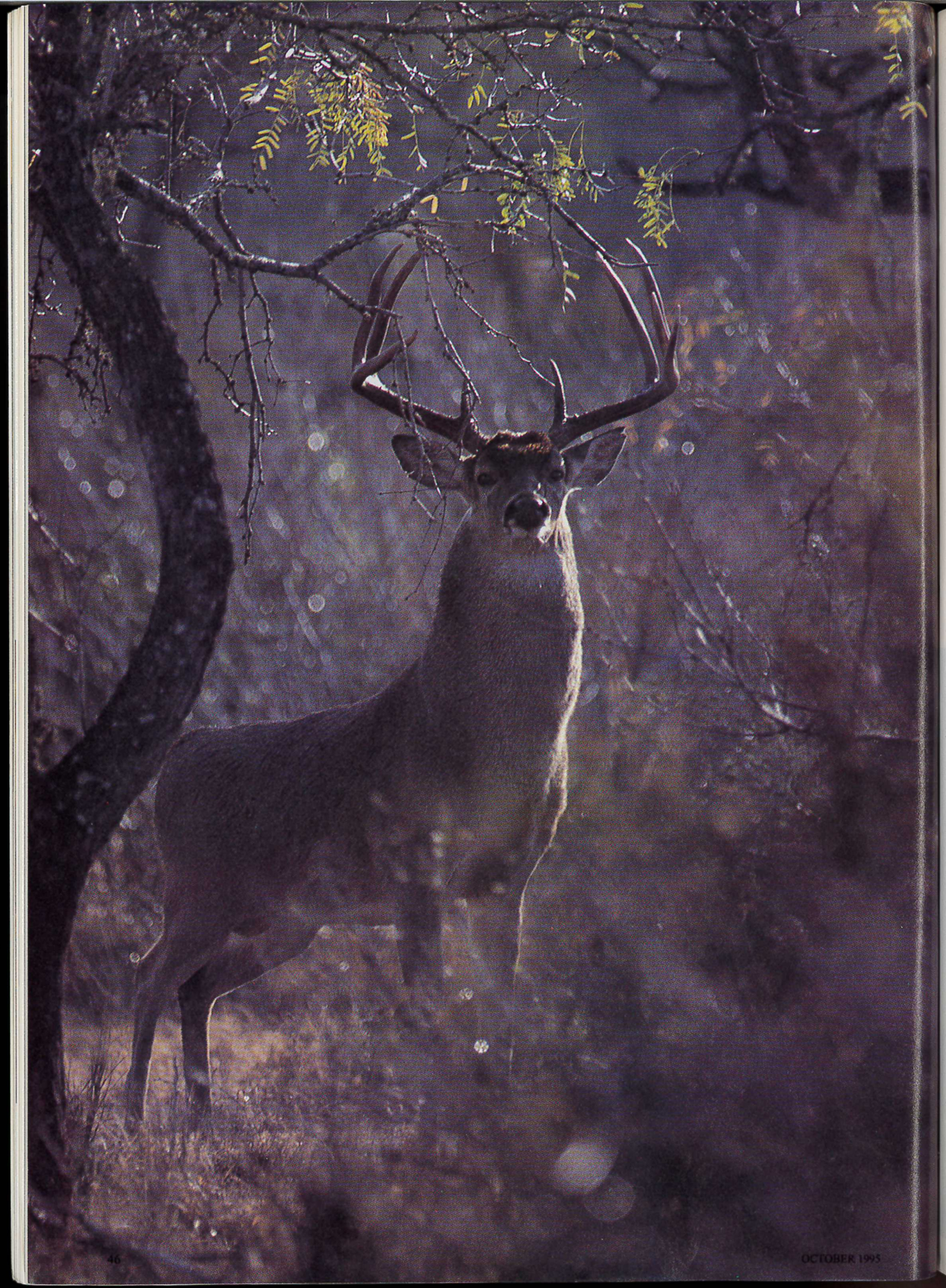


Because they feel more secure in heavy cover, big whitetails often can be found moving there in daylight hours — especially during the rut. Rattling and calling can be particularly effective in the thick stuff, but a bit of planning is required so that you can spot, judge and shoot the buck before he detects a human presence. Photo by Mike Biggs.

Big Bucks In Tight Places

You say you aren't seeing as many mature bucks as you think you should? Then maybe you need to get back in the "jungle" with them!

by Dr. James C. Kroll

An irate green jay bobbed up and down on the mesquite limb above my head, seemingly unable to comprehend what a human was doing making so much noise in the top of a tree! The ground is for humans, and trees are for birds — sound logic to a green jay.

It was December, time for my annual trek to the Diamond H Ranch near Carrizo Springs, Texas. My hunting buddy Gordon Whittington and I make this trip every year, around the peak of the rut in much of South Texas. For many years, I have managed the Diamond H, along with my former student Mark Ellett. The ranch is part of the estate of H.H. "Pete" Coffield, a pioneer oil man and Texas rancher. Having no heirs, Pete left the ranch and his many financial interests to the Boy Scouts, the Episcopal Foundation and the Salvation Army. Until his death, he annually invited several of his closest hunting buddies and business associates on deer hunts. These hunts meant so much to Pete that he requested in his will that each year the hunts would continue, even in his absence.

One of the duties Mark and I have is to manage the herd for top-quality bucks. The 10,000-acre ranch fronts the San Roque Creek bottom, which probably has produced as many Boone and Crockett bucks as anywhere else in the range of the whitetail. Great soils, limited rain and incredible genetics meld in a unique way to produce large numbers of monster bucks. Yet only proper management through population control, good range management and manipulation of age structure will allow this country to realize its true potential. Removing the *right* bucks is one of the most important aspects of the program. We only harvest mature (4 1/2 years or older) bucks from the herd — and most of these are not the largest-racked bucks on the ranch! Those are left to breed.

The spot in which the green jay and I now found ourselves was a classic one, the likes of which I have written about on numerous occasions. A food plot adjacent to the San Roque was the current focal point for several doe groups. Downwind from the plot, I found numerous signpost rubs and scrapes. There were four travel corridors leading to a staging area adjacent to the plot. Each was identified easily by the rubs produced as bucks approached the area. Several other hunters had spent hours in a stand overlooking the plot, but they had seen only immature bucks. If I was going to kill a trophy buck this day, it would have to be in the thickest of cover.

Twenty yards upwind from my vantage point I had found a travel corridor marked with numerous rubs, all leading to the staging area. I knew from the recent appearance of scrapes in the staging area that the peak rut was nearing. Rattling certainly would be in order.

Rattling in a skinny mesquite tree 15 feet above the ground is no easy task! I locked one leg around a fork, got my balance and rattled vigorously, then eased the antlers down over a limb and gripped my rifle. I knew my chances of success were exceptional. Positioned between the staging area and the dense cover of the San Roque, a big buck had to be in hearing distance.

I waited for about 15 minutes, then eased the antlers from their limb and *(Continued)*

rattled for another 10 to 15 seconds. More time passed . . . then, a *snap* to my right gave away a buck's presence. He was rubbing the overhanging limbs of another mesquite less than 10 yards away! All I could see was the top of his head as he rubbed up and down on the tree. He had extremely long tines, but I could not make out their number.

I lowered the antlers across my left knee, hoping they would stay put. Then, from farther to my right came another rubbing sound; a second buck apparently had come in with the first. Now I really was in a dilemma. Which — if either — was the right buck, and how would I shoot him?

The first buck turned to look behind him. It was then that the size of his antlers became obvious. He had 12 long tines and a 21-inch spread, a serious record-class buck! He lowered his right beam and stared defiantly at the trailing buck. At less than 10 yards, I could hear the tines of both bucks brushing against the vegetation. I had the wind, so all I had to do was wait for the right moment. But there was a slight problem: I could not in good



The author brought this trophy buck almost into his lap by sneaking into a nasty thicket and rattling. Photo by Gordon Whittington.

conscience shoot this buck! Based on body characteristics, I knew he was a mere 3 1/2 years old! How could I possibly shoot such a magnificent animal? I had to let him go.

The buck turned his head and eased forward, ears at the "ready" position. He knew there was a third buck present and did not want to walk right into him. Despite this buck's rack size at age 3 1/2, he certainly was not ready to take on a dominant buck.

I shifted my eyes slowly to the second deer. I could make out 10 points, and he was also wide. But I could not get a good look at his body to age him. I gripped the synthetic stock and slipped my finger onto the trigger. The first buck eased forward, and the second followed.

In close cover, you have to be prepared to shoot in a variety of situations. The mesquite behind which they had stood had a fork in its top. The second buck's body would be exposed for just an instant; so, I would have to size him up and make a killing shot quickly. If he's mature and has short tines, I decided, *he's going down.*

The buck stepped into the notch; now I could see he was a mature 5x5 with tines shorter than I would like to see at that age. *BOOM-THWOCK* roared the Jarrett 7mm Rem. Mag., and the buck dropped dead. (The recoil nearly blew me out of the mesquite, but I managed to hang on until it stopped moving. The worst damage was a thorn in my knee.) Climbing down, it took only three steps to reach the buck, a beautiful, mature animal scoring well into the 140s. It was an exciting hunt, and I had let a high-scoring buck walk, in hopes that he'd improve the genetics of the herd.

WHY THICK COVER?

The vast majority of my best bucks have been harvested under similar conditions. As regular readers of ***WHITETAIL*** are aware, I have studied mature buck behavior for many years. My studies have covered just about the entire range of the species across this continent. I've forced many secrets from the whitetail over my career, the most significant of which is that mature bucks behave in a very different manner from does and younger bucks. My telemetry (radio-collaring) studies have yielded insights and discoveries about sanctuaries, travel corridors, nocturnal behavior and scent communication. But it is the differences in habitat preferences between sexes and ages that intrigue me the most. After 30 years of deer research, I have come to the conclusion that bucks and does might as well be different species! That's how disparate their habitat preferences are.

As we pointed out in our book, *The Art and Science of Patterning Whitetails*, Gordon and I focus our hunting efforts primarily on staging areas: places where bucks tend to set up and wait for does on their way to feeding areas. When not stationed at their posts, bucks tend to remain secluded in sanctuaries, which are

Now I really was in a dilemma. Which — if either — was the right buck, and how would I shoot him?

located primarily in dense, protective cover. Except during the peak of the rut, the chances of seeing mature bucks in open country consistently rival the probability of winning the lottery!

Years ago, I conducted a study of hunters to determine just how they think. What I quickly learned is that few of them think like mature bucks! When asked why they positioned their stands in certain locations, most hunters had no real explanation other than "The visibility was good."

The classic case was a fellow I met in Louisiana who had a large tower blind, or "shooting house," erected in the middle of a fresh 1,000-acre clearcut. "With my old .300 Win. Mag.," he bragged, "no buck is going to make it across that cut!" But the reality is that areas with long vistas seldom are frequented in daylight hours by mature bucks. The fellow had some long, boring days ahead of him.

My studies strongly suggest that mature bucks: 1) are predominantly nocturnal, 2) prefer dense understory cover, and 3) tend to bed adjacent to staging areas. Staging areas more often than not are located in a place that is generally downwind from a doe feeding area. This feeding location can be a food plot, an oak stand, a residual agricultural crop such as alfalfa, or even a brushy area with natural browse.

Dominant bucks tend to construct signposts (rubs and scrapes whose scents prime doe reproductive behavior) within staging areas. Does moving to feed spend a good deal of time in staging areas, establishing social position and waiting for low-light conditions. The bucks bedded nearby thus can intercept a receptive

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CLOSE-COVER TACTICS

It's a workable system that serves deer well. But it does not serve the average *hunter* very well. He's sitting in a tree or ground blind on the edge of the feeding area, carefully scrutinizing every doe that enters the feeding area, hoping to see some sign of antlers. The bucks, on the other hand, are back in the thicker cover provided by the staging area and are seldom seen by the hunter. By moving from the edge to the interface between a staging area and one or more buck travel corridors, you can increase your chances significantly. That's precisely what I was doing on that day in December. The green jay might have thought my actions were illogical, but I knew exactly what I was doing!

Too many hunters find a staging area and then set up right on top of it. Always remember that a buck knows more about the areas in which he spends the most time. This includes bedding areas, sanctuaries, feeding areas and, most certainly, staging areas. There is no way you are going to set up for long in a staging area (high-knowledge zone) without being detected. The best stand location is the travel corridor leading to the staging area. In most cases, this low-knowledge zone occurs a few hundred yards away from the staging area. At that point the buck is focused on where he is going, and he thus tends to put his senses on "autopilot." My mesquite tree was about 200 yards from the staging area, in a low-knowledge area.

Dominant bucks tend to construct signposts within staging areas.

If you are the type of hunter who has to see great distances or feels bored/unsuccessful unless you see large numbers of deer, close-cover hunting is not for you. Remember, you are only looking for one deer: the right one. That's all you have to see. The trick is to give yourself the advantage when he actually appears.

Unfortunately, in thick cover you seldom have a clear shot. You can pick your setup carefully to give you the best odds of clear shots, but the buck has a great deal to say about how he will position himself on approach. The best strategy is to acknowledge that the buck generally will approach from downwind or will quickly position himself there, especially if you're rattling or using a grunt call. So, you will have to select a location that gives you a potential shot from two directions. (See map.)

There are three close-cover tactics to consider. Gordon and I both have used them successfully throughout North America. The one you use will determine your location, and your choice will be based on what is happening at that moment with your deer.

If, for example, you are hunting the breeding or post-rut periods, you probably will be setting up on a travel corridor leading to a staging/feeding area. You will be in tight cover downwind from the travel corridor. Your two clear shooting lanes will have to be at 45-degree angles from your position. No matter from which direction the buck approaches, he then will give you a shot.

On the other hand, if it is the late pre-rut or early rut, you might be calling, with rattling antlers and/or a grunt call. In this case the buck will be coming to you and likely will circle downwind. Select or arrange two shooting lanes, again at 45-degree angles, so the buck will pass through one of them *before* he arrives downwind. No cover scent or odor neutralizer can hide you for very long once your scent stream reaches a big buck's nose. However, proper preparation can buy you a few extra seconds — long enough for a good shot, particularly with a gun.

A third tactic is one of my favorites. It can be used with a hunting buddy or alone, but the former is more successful. Because deer are creatures that relate to structure (much the same as fish do), we like to take off during the peak rattling and calling period and work dense cover as a team. This procedure works in dense habitats throughout the range of the species.

Beginning at daylight, Gordon and I go to our most likely buck habitats. We begin with the area we feel offers the highest probability of success and then work our way to various secondary areas. One hunter will position himself so as to intercept a buck coming to the call and/or antlers. This hunter's position usually is about 30 to 50 yards downwind from the caller. The "shooter" picks a setup location similar to the ones discussed above. There must be visibility at approximately 45-degree angles from the hunter. Remember, visibility does not necessarily mean a clear shooting lane such as pipeline right of way, cutline or open field. It simply can be thinner vegetation allowing a shot at the buck as he circles.

Gordon, being considerably smaller than me, prefers to climb trees to gain a visibility advantage. I prefer to remain on the ground, but as noted, sometimes I will climb trees as well. Unfortunately, because you sometimes will be getting right in on top of the buck before rattling/calling, it can be hard to set up even a lightweight portable stand without announcing your presence. So, I generally stand on the ground. But frankly, I have shot as many trophy deer from the ground (even with a bow) as from a tree.

The greatest mistake in applying these techniques to hunting dense-cover bucks is *impatience*. Again, remember that you are out there to see just one buck. Your window of opportunity could be only a few seconds and a few feet of clearance. The whitetail buck is a "percentage player," meaning he *always* stacks the odds in his favor. If he feels there is the slightest chance of a problem, he never will take the chance. So, just be patient. Remember my hunt at the Diamond H? How many times in those few short moments could I have fouled up? What if I had impatiently wanted to get a better look at the first buck? What if I had decided to take a chancy shot at the second buck through the thick mesquite?

I hope you'll give these tactics a try this season. From my own experience, there is nothing more exciting than patterning a mature buck, then taking him with gun or bow at very close range in tight cover. Come December, Gordon and I will be back on the Diamond H, and this time, that old B&C buck may not be so lucky. After all, I did give him a year to pass on his genes!

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