Dr. DEER

BY DR. JAMES C. KROLL

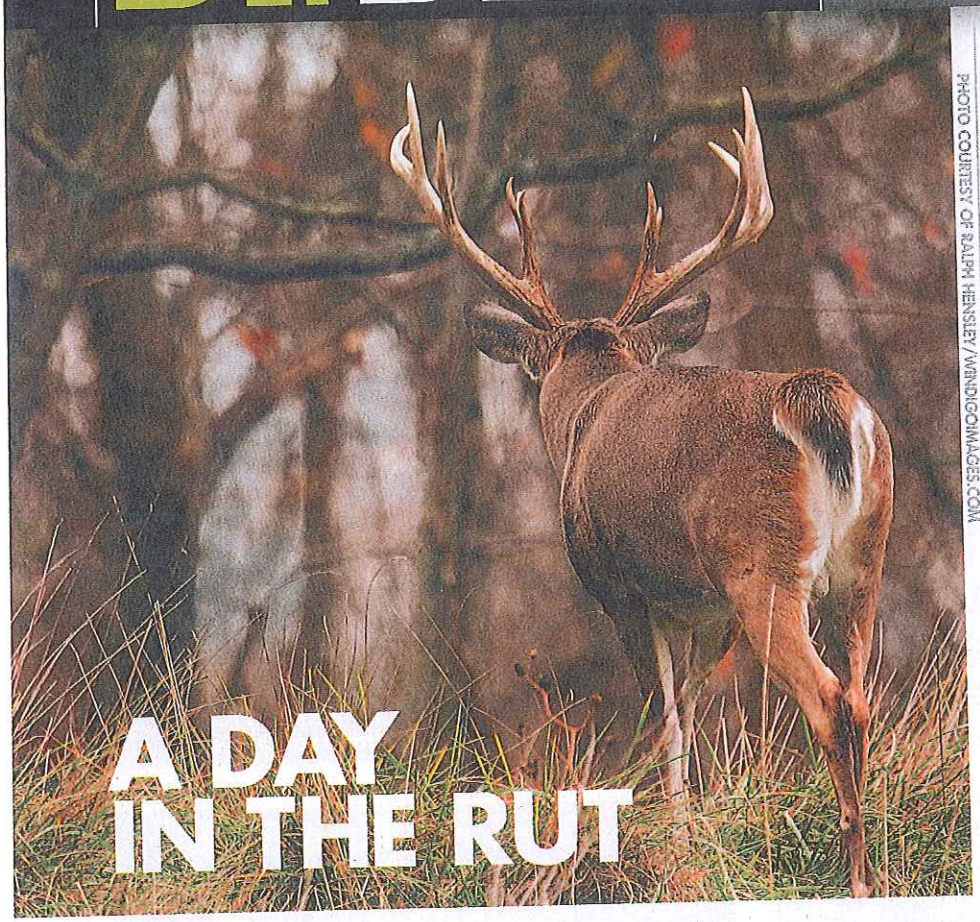


PHOTO COURTESY OF RALPH HENSLEY/WINDIGOIMAGES.COM

A DAY IN THE RUT

Have you ever been in the woods during the rut and wondered where all the big bucks are? Of course you have. Every whitetail hunter has.

Let's look at a hypothetical mature buck and lay out his typical day during the rut. I'll base this not just on my own observations but also on tendencies borne out by years of using radio-telemetry and GPS units to track movements and activity patterns. Perhaps through this you can get a better idea of just what the big bucks are doing while you're afield.

This imaginary day is taking place as the peak of the rut approaches, and it involves a buck that's dominant within the local herd.

4:30 a.m.

Our buck is on his way back to one of his bedding sanctuaries after just breaking up with his first "girlfriend" of the breeding season. The two have been together for a couple of days, ever since he bumped into her at the edge of an alfalfa field.

By now our buck has grown tired of constantly guarding the doe from others — especially other mature bucks. He knows most of these rivals; they settled their differences back in the summer, whether by kick-boxing on their hind legs or via subtle gestures. The really pesky bucks are the 2 1/2- and 3 1/2-year-olds. They know just enough about what goes on during the rut to be irritating. Over the past few couple of years, more than one of these youngsters has slipped in and bred "his" doe while he was dealing with a more mature rival.

Although the rut is just getting under way, our buck already is showing signs of conflict. Along the angle of his jaw he sports a fine new scar, similar to those on old German officers in World War I movies. A trickle of blood ran down his neck earlier, but the bleeding already has stopped. His right ear is split from its tip down about two inches, and he walks with a noticeable limp favoring his left front foot. Yet he feels no pain from any of these wounds, thanks to the high levels of testosterone in his bloodstream. He just wants to get to his sanctuary and bed down for the morning.

5:00 a.m.

Our buck carefully works each of his signpost rubs in a tight circle around his bed, then drops — first to his front knees, then lowering his rear end to the ground. Here he'll stay as dawn comes to the deer woods.

9:00 a.m.

The buck continues to lie with his back to the wind and his eyes on the slope extending gently beneath his bed. No way will he be surprised by an intruder. He's never really slept since reaching his bed; he's just been resting and listening to the sounds of the woods. Other than a distant gunshot now and then, it's been relatively quiet.

This year's rut was particularly intense in the beginning, but now most of the mature bucks have found dates. There's a false peace in the woods. Our buck's rumen is making noises, and he senses it's time to put something into it.

He stands slowly, watching and listening, basically doing everything in reverse order from four hours ago. He stretches and defecates, sniffs one of his signpost rubs, gives it a lick or two with the base of his antlers, then stands quietly. He has no thought of moving quickly. It's daylight, and sudden movement could easily be detected. Besides — what's the hurry?

Our buck browses around the general area of his bed for only a few minutes, then lies back down. That snack is enough to satisfy the "bugs" in his rumen. A wad of undigested food slips back up his esophagus and he begins to chew, working the

forage from side to side. Back down goes that food ball; up comes another. He's grinding the contents of his rumen into finer and finer particles to aid digestion by the bacteria, protozoa and fungi in the rumen liquor. Then he again stretches out his neck and rests his chin on the ground.

11:30 a.m.

Once again our buck gets up and stretches. But this time, he walks stiff-legged away from his sanctuary. He's heading for a nearby pool off the side of a creek. Reaching the edge of the water, he slurps up his fill. He could quench his thirst with running water nearby, but the noise would make it hard for him to hear.

After taking in roughly a half-gallon our buck raises his head, water streaming from the sides of his mouth. He plucks at a few leaves and stems of plants along the edge of the pool, then slips back out of sight into the thick underbrush.



12:15 p.m.

Our buck doesn't like to return to the same bedding area each time. It's only a short distance to another bedding sanctuary, this one within a plum thicket on a rocky ridge only about 400 yards from his earlier bed. Reaching this new spot, he lies back down to rest quietly. Again, there are no other deer around.

3:00 p.m.

The buck rises from his second bed and inspects his signposts there. By now, testosterone levels in his blood have risen, and he's angry at the pine sapling in front of him. Driving forward with his front legs and shoulders, he hits the small tree with a loud "whap," then rubs up and down with the base of his left antler to freshen the visual appearance and smell. He stops rubbing to sniff the quality of his work, then gives it a few more touches of scent from his forehead.

Then the old buck just stands there, as if formulating a plan for the evening. Even he probably doesn't know how he's deciding where to go next. But then, he heads off down one of the three rublines leading from his bed along the mid-slope of a small drainage. Once again, he's somehow put himself in position to drop down and away, should an intruder come over the ridge, or up over the top if a threat appears below.

Our buck's pace is ever so slow, as if he's on "cruise control." There's plenty of time to get where he's headed for the evening.

At the same time this is going on, hunter Robert Wallace is heading to the spot he found earlier in the day. It's a small grove of saplings on the downwind side of a nearby soybean field. The grove sticks out into a narrow part of the field, making it appear to be a perfect ambush spot. Yet Bob is too experienced to sit right in what he recognizes as a staging area. The wind isn't in his favor for that, and he knows that by the time a big buck reaches the location, daylight will be all but gone anyway.

Bob has decided to hang his stand about 100 yards downwind from the staging area, but offset from it a bit to keep from being scented. Now, in his return to hunt it he takes care not

to walk on any existing trail.

This is a great setup, and Bob knows it. A staging area is a social meeting place for deer because of the elements present: a nearby food source, an open understory with visibility and a position downwind from the direction does will be heading in the evening. Bucks come to staging areas right at dark, work their signposts and hang around, waiting for the does to pass.

Bob has picked well. The mature buck he's hoping to arrow fully intends to visit this spot today.

4:45 p.m.

Both Bob and the old buck anticipate success in the staging area. And as darkness approaches, Bob sits frozen, perched on his portable 14 feet above the ground. The wind is moving left to right, parallel to the rub line revealing the location of the buck trail.

Meanwhile, the buck is 200 yards away and closing at a leisurely pace, moving in much the same way as an old bull in a pasture. With each step he swings his front legs outward and downward, dragging his front feet through the light skiff of snow.

5:10 p.m.

Now the opponents are a mere 100 yards apart . . . yet neither has any idea the other is near. Still, Bob is ready, bow in hand.

Suddenly, from far to the west the faint sound of antlers clashing and bucks grunting drifts into the scene. Bob can't hear it, but our buck can. The big deer stops, turns toward the sound and ponders his next move . . . and then wheels around and dashes off toward the commotion.

Bob remains on alert, never realizing his chances of taking a dominant buck on this sit just went to zero.

5:30 p.m.

Although our hunter hasn't heard the distant buck fight, it has drawn plenty of attention. It began when a 3 1/2-year-old buck bumped into a doe that was just coming into estrus. The buck couldn't keep a secret, and before long the doe has quite an entourage chasing her. The chase started around 4:40 p.m., but now it's in full play. The buck that started it already has been replaced by a more mature one . . . which already is having trouble fending off our old buck, which has just arrived on the scene.

As darkness falls, the chase is well over a mile from Bob. He's left his stand disappointed and has returned to the truck, trying to come up with a new plan for tomorrow. This stand looked so good. But our frustrated bowhunter never saw or heard anything to confirm that hope.

Of course, Bob just as easily could now be sending photos of his trophy to his buddies. Luck simply wasn't with him this cold November day.

CONCLUSION

The odds are *always* against us. So the next time you go hunting, remember this imaginary tale. Success is often a matter of persistence.

It would be nice if we could lift the brush and trees to see where the bucks are and what they're doing. But we can't. Then again, if we could, it might take a lot of the fun out of it.

