Dr. DEER

BY DR. JAMES C. KROLL

THE CHASE

Early on the Saturday morning after Thanksgiving 2012, cameraman Nolan Swinghamer and I sat overlooking a huge valley on Gary Snook's ranch near Midland, South Dakota. And my mood could have been far better. I'd just ended a disappointing Kansas hunt and was burned out from the frustration of a season in which bucks hadn't consistently moved well in daytime.

Yet this was another place and another situation. So as we sat there, I found my spirits slowly improving. And in short order, that feeling was justified. We finally were in the right place at the right time.

In Texas, I once heard a frustrated guide say, "I'd give a year's pay just to raise this thick brush up about 50 feet and have a look at what's there and what's going on!" Well, western South Dakota's prairies allow you to do just that: see whitetails as they move about, largely free of cover to hide them. And this morning would offer a perfect example.

On this particular morning, the first deer I saw was a doe running in a zigzag pattern. Behind was a mature buck working her like a cutting horse on a steer! Periodically she'd stop to catch her breath, and so would the buck. However, each time she stopped he'd take the opportunity to check the landscape around her for other bucks.

Scanning the terrain, I quickly found at least eight bucks in various positions around the pair. Closest to them were two more mature bucks that obviously wanted to get past the tending buck and steal the doe. Wherever they walked, he kept moving toward them, threatening with ears laid back and head held high, sporting a beautiful set of antlers.

A considerable distance back were four or five bucks of intermediate age (2 1/2-3 1/2 years). They were just trying to locate the chase. As they couldn't see the tending buck or doe in the rolling terrain, they were reacting more to sound than sight. And way behind these young bucks were a couple of yearlings with their noses to the ground.

The doe caught her breath and bounded off in a new direction, her attendant in hot pursuit. A couple of times he stopped to charge at the two lurking suitors when they got too close. The chase went on for more than 15 minutes, with the entire group eventually disappearing over another hill. A few minutes later, we observed a couple more bucks trailing far behind. They eventually gave up the chase, obviously having no idea where the party had headed.

ANALYZING THE CHASE

OK, that's what we observed. Now let's talk about what likely happened *before* we saw this group of deer.

The doe encountered one or more of the bucks in the chase, most likely either the dominant buck but possibly one of the satellites. She probably was on her way to feed or already there. Seeing the bucks, she no doubt exhibited a posture indicating she



The author and videographer Nolan Swinghamer managed to get the jump on a breeding party while hunting at Two Rivers Outfitters in South Dakota for North American Whitetail Television last season. The result was this impressive old-timer with a droptine. PHOTO BY NOLAN SWINGHAMER

might be interested in mating. That elicited stereotypic vocalizations (grunts) from the buck(s) . . . and the chase was on!

Sounds emanating from the chase began to draw other bucks in the vicinity, and they joined the chase. Periodically, one or more of them stopped to fend off another. The dominant buck probably fought one or more briefly, adding to the commotion. By the time the chase arrived in front of Nolan and me, a full-scale breeding party had formed.

Let's say we have a property of one square mile, or 640 acres. It has a deer per 20 acres, or 32 total. A buck:doe ratio of 1:3 reduces the number of bucks in this population to 10-11. Further dividing the bucks into age classes, there probably are no more than four of middle age or older. For sure there are fewer than eight.

Now, consider there is one doe in estrus, and she is at the northeastern corner of this hypothetical square mile. She's drawing bucks from as much as a mile away (the maximum distance at which I feel deer can hear a chase). This creates a temporary "buck vacuum." The party then travels in a linear direction, adding new bucks as the chased doe moves across the landscape.

What's the impact of this? If you're sitting in a tree on the southwestern corner of this square tract, the chances of seeing one of the bucks involved in the chase are next to nil.

Fortunately, in "normal" years there are several does coming into estrus at about the same time. This results in more chases on a given day, each on average involving fewer bucks. This is the "rut" most hunters dream about. One chase might be moving to the southeast, while another receptive doe is heading northwest with one or more bucks in tow. It's a mix-and-match situation.

So what happened in 2012? It was a perfect storm of conditions for a poor rut. First of all, in some areas 2011 and 2012 saw one of the worst droughts in decades. This was followed by wetter conditions, which stimulated plant growth — but too late for farmers. The Midwest in 2012 had thousands of acres of failed crops, mainly soybeans and corn.

One might assume this produced less food, and it did — but not for deer. Farmers in some areas didn't even harvest their beans or corn, opting instead to collect crop insurance. After all, there were just stunted plants in the fields, each holding a handful of corn kernels or beans. But this became a carpet of deer food. Fields normally disked clean by October lay unplowed. I saw it firsthand in Kansas.

Lastly, in 2012 we had five straight months of late full moons and one month (August) with a "blue moon" (two full moons in a single calendar month). So we had a situation in which deer were coming into fall in pretty good condition, had plenty to eat and were cueing on the late full moon to breed.

I don't know what you might have read about the effect of the moon on estrus, but I'm here to tell you with all the weight of science that whitetails "want" to breed 3-5 days after whichever full moon their gene pool uses as a cue. During the 2012 deer season, full moon dates were: Sept. 30, Oct. 29, Nov. 28 and Dec. 28.

This luck of the draw on moon phase effectively moved the bulk of breeding later in most areas in 2012. And even where it didn't have much visible effect on when breeding began, it frequently created a "trickle" rut — which can be even tougher for hunting. Perhaps now it's simpler to understand why many of you joined me in seeing relatively few chases last season.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

There are few easy solutions to dealing with a "poor" rut. But if you've done your homework and are flexible in your hunting approach, you naturally have a far better chance of succeeding.

On that late-November 2012 hunt with Two Rivers Outfitters, Nolan and I were able to get in front of the breeding party and score. I actually tagged out on one of the satellite bucks, but he was still a fine trophy: a drop-tined patriarch in excess of 10 years old!

Of course, it's one thing to cash in on a rut opportunity on a huge piece of open land with little hunting pressure, quite another to come up with a game plan for hunting tough rut conditions on a smaller, thicker and more heavily hunted tract. So next month, in an extended feature I'll go into more depth about the "new norm" of the rut and will offer thoughts on how to deal with whatever the 2013 version might bring.

