

THE FIRST DAY OF THE SEASON

By Glenn R. Cummings

On November 8, 1997, I was sitting in my stand about daylight, wondering how I managed to misjudge the weather so badly. Boy, it was cold! Being a coon hunter most of my life, I know how to dress for the weather, but we were having a mild winter this year in Webster County, Kentucky, or so I thought. Not seeing many deer may have made it seem colder, too. I left my stand about 10 a.m. and went home for a break and some warmer clothes. I like to get back in my stand early, so I returned about 2 p.m. As the afternoon progressed, it turned partly sunny and soon I realized how completely overdressed I was.

Since it was so beautiful outside and still early in the day, I was watching the thick woods to my right. My deer stand has the best of both worlds—it has views of a cornfield and nice woods. Normally, I see quite a few deer from this location, but today I had only seen three does. After passing on so many bucks with basket-racks last year, I was starting to think maybe I would

not get a chance at anything, much less a big one.

At 3:45 p.m., for no particular reason, I happened to look over my left shoulder. Trotting across the middle of the cornfield as if it owned the world was the biggest deer I have ever seen in the wild. The buck was looking straight ahead, not smelling or looking around, and coming toward me at an angle. Immediately I knew I was not going to pass on this one! The buck was about 200 yards away from me. Normally I would look at it through my scope and then binoculars to make sure of its size, but

took off running as if I never hit it. The deer kept heading in the same direction towards the woods. I knew if it reached the woods, there would probably be hunters there, and it would be hard to find.

I knew the shot was good because I could see blood in the kill zone through my scope. Nevertheless, the buck continued to run as if I had never taken the shot. I followed it the best I could with my scope, but tree limbs got in my way and kept me from shooting again. It seemed that it was headed for a clear spot, but I took my chances and made a desperate 75-yard shot. Seeing the front end of the deer go down, I thought the shot had hit its mark until the buck stood up and took off again. Amazingly, the buck kept moving, but not very quickly, directly towards the woods.

At this point, my heart was about ready to pop out of my chest. I tried to pull myself together to take another shot. This time, I not only had the limbs to contend with, but the trees were blocking my line of sight

through the scope. However, there appeared to be one last opening the buck might cross before it reached the safety of the deep woods. I had the feeling it might veer to the left and I wouldn't get another shot. The buck kept heading in a straight line. Sure enough, it came right across the clearing and stopped, only a few yards from the woods. It turned and presented me with a perfect broadside shot. I couldn't believe it! A hunter simply couldn't ask for a better shot. Needless to say, the moment it stopped, I fired. The buck reared up, looking like a ram that was fixing to charge, running on its hind legs before it dropped.

I looked through the binoculars and saw it wasn't going anywhere, so I sat down and started gathering up my stuff. I was a basket case. I decided to sit in the deer stand for a while and try to fill my doe tag. Every once in a while I would look at my buck through the binoculars and see its rack sticking up out of the corn stalks. It just got bigger and bigger every time I looked, so I said to heck with the doe for today. I wanted to see the buck up close. When I reached it, the buck was even bigger than the deer I thought I had been waiting for. I realized how lucky I was just to get the opportunity to see this buck in the wild. I stood there, thanking God that I actually got it.

My buck has 14 points, and a 21-7/8 inch inside spread, and officially scored 173-7/8 points. I am truly thankful to be able to have experienced such a hunt. ■

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Glenn R. Cummings with his typical whitetail deer scoring 173-7/8 points.

I didn't need my binoculars to know this was a keeper.

I pulled up, but small limbs blurred my vision through the scope. Although I was anxious and I knew my .30-06 was dead on at 200 yards, I forced myself to wait. At about 175 yards, I finally had a clear shot. The buck was still coming towards me at a slow trot. I probably should have waited because it appeared it would only get closer to the deer stand, but its rack just kept getting bigger and bigger and I was afraid it might turn and ruin my chances. At 150 yards, I squeezed the trigger. The buck went almost all the way down, and then

A Most Unlikely Hunt

By John J. Wright ■ B&C Associate

Being a farm-boy from North Dakota, I was no stranger to hunting. All five boys in the family were hunters and shooters. When I began working as a highway engineer in Montana in 1965, I continued my interest in hunting and began applying for a bighorn sheep permit. I had some success in drawing various tags over the years, but the sheep permit eluded me. No wonder. The odds are incredible — there is less than a two percent chance of drawing a bighorn permit! However after some 30 years of applying for a sheep tag, the “unlikely” became a reality in 1998.

My success in drawing the bighorn permit fully recharged my hunting interest, but also impressed on me my questionable physical ability to hunt. I was 57 years old, and had been suffering from multiple sclerosis most of my adult life. The sheep hunting permit came at a particularly bad time. Due to the MS, I had been experiencing more trouble walking during the past year, to the point that I had initiated the occasional use of a cane. In addition, I had been suffering from severe neck and shoulder pain from a whiplash injury that made sleeping difficult.

My bighorn hunting permit was in Area 210 along lower Rock Creek, 25 miles east of Missoula. After thoroughly explaining my condition and physical limitations, I booked with Dan Ekstrom, owner of L-E Ranch Outfitters

headquartered at the mouth of Rock Creek. A bighorn hunter who walks poorly is not a promising client, but Dan was confident I could have a successful hunt.

I told Dan I would prefer to not book a 10-day continuous hunt, but wanted to hunt a couple days a week if possible. Dan was agreeable; he could use the extra time to prepare for his deer and elk clients, and I would be able to continue my chiropractic treatments for the whiplash injury in Helena.

On opening day, Sunday, September 15, Dan and I started our bighorn hunt on horseback in a side drainage of Rock Creek high in the John Long Mountain Range. Dan soon came to appreciate my MS difficulties, including my frequent “pit stops” and not being able to get my left foot out of the stirrup when I dismounted. He patiently endured all of this and helped as necessary. That day we came onto a band of 30 fast-moving bighorn rams, but never had an opportunity to look them over. Later, we were hit by a strong storm punctuated with intense lightning. It blew down areas of timber as it proceeded down the Rock Creek Valley. All we could do on the high grassy sheep pasture was to huddle down and hold the horses.

We made three early season, one-day horseback hunts, but my lack of walking ability soon inspired Dan to try another angle. He was aware of a U. S. Forest Service policy that allowed disabled residents to have vehicular access through its locked gates. I obtained a disabled resident conservation license, and thereafter, we drove into areas where previously we had ridden horses. Dan had also observed how my use of the cane while walking had compounded the difficulty. I was bending over nearly double to use it. Consequently, one day he cut and trimmed a two-inch-thick lodgepole pine about five-and-a-half feet long for my use as a staff. The staff enabled me to walk upright and to have something to hang onto.

Prior to hunting season I carefully checked the accuracy of my 7mm Remington Magnum and .270 Winchester rifles using a bench rest at a shooting range near Helena. I selected the magnum rifle for the bighorn hunt, and was surprised to cleanly miss easy shots as the season progressed. Sighting through the scope, I soon became aware of my MS related tremors, which had not been noticeable while shooting from a bench rest to sight the rifles.

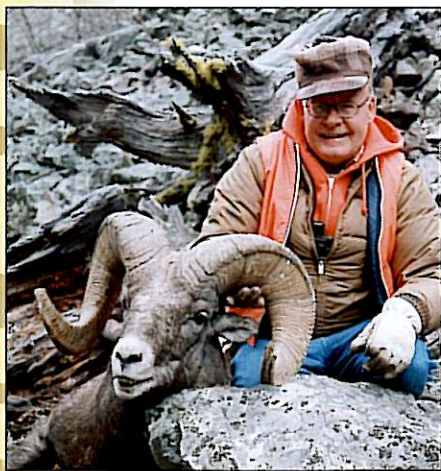
On the third day of November, Dan and I drove up the paved road along lower Rock Creek at first light and spotted four bighorn rams in single file slowly crossing a 200- to 300-foot high rockslide. The full curl, lead ram was the largest of the four, and since they were moving slowly while nibbling on the wet mossy rocks, we drove on thinking we could come back to them later. We soon spotted a very large ram alone at roughly the same elevation as the previous four. While we rushed to set up our spotting scopes, the big ram disappeared in the cliffs, talus rockslides, trees, and brush. We then decided to go back and take a closer look at the four rams we had passed by.

They were still on the rockslide, only heading in the opposite direction, moving slowly in single file, with the largest ram last. Dan stopped the Suburban in a permissible shooting area, placed his backpack on the hood for my rifle rest and proceeded to adjust his rangefinder to determine the 200-plus yard distance to the rams. For this particular week’s hunt I had cleaned and parked the magnum rifle in my Helena gun safe and brought my old tried and true .270 Winchester. I rested the rifle quickly on the backpack and scoped the first, second, and third rams between the trees as they casually crossed the rock slide, waiting for “big number four.”

The full-curl ram walked nonchalantly into a small space between trees and stopped to pose. I fired one 130-grain bullet, striking him in the heart. The ram dropped, then tumbled, rolled, and slid on the icy moss-covered rocks to the base of the slide.

I had hunted with Dan a total of nine days, two days with Mike Trevor, my taxidermist friend, and one day alone. My six-and-a-half-year-old bighorn ram was excellent eating and bigger than I first thought. It produced a final Boone and Crockett score of 179-1/8, qualifying it for entry in the Montana Big Game Records and the Boone and Crockett Club Awards Program.

This “most unlikely” hunt turned out to be not so unlikely after all. Thanks to a determined, high-quality guide and outfitter, and lots of help from friends! ■



John Wright with his bighorn sheep scoring 179-1/8 points.

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Bringing Home the Tradition

By Craig R. Zmijewski ■ B&C Associate

Of all the memories I have of my childhood, probably the most vivid was watching my father leave for deer hunting and wishing I was a year older so I could go with him. When I was eight I recall staring out the window and watching him drive up in the family station wagon and in the back was the biggest eight-pointer I had ever seen. I'm convinced it was at that moment that deer hunting truly began to flow in my veins and left me wondering if I would ever encounter such a beautiful animal.

Twenty-eight years later, with longtime hunting partners Brent Smith, Toney McMillan, and Rob Komyathy, we left for Winnipeg, Manitoba, for our first trophy whitetail hunt. Four hours later we arrived in friendly Manitoba and were greeted with frigid temperatures and knee-deep snow.

After a day of orientation and preparation, opening day finally arrived. Although it wasn't needed, the alarm clock rang at 5 a.m. We were all anxious for this moment and had anticipated it for nearly a year. I think this is my favorite time of the hunt.

You and your partners each start out with a clean slate, all with an equal chance at that trophy buck. Although no one will admit it, there is a certain covert competitiveness that exists on the first day.

The temperature was -10° F, with a slight breeze. After breakfast we headed out to an area that had been scouted and offered promise.

According to our guides there had been some nice bucks sighted in this region. Sure enough, there were fresh tracks all through this area and deer were on the move. Unfortunately, that morning only two does were sighted.

The frigid temperatures made it difficult for us to sit all morning, even though this was something we were accustomed to in Michigan.

That afternoon we all met for lunch and discussed the afternoon hunt, giving me a chance to survey the terrain. It was not as I had pictured; it was flat, agricultural land with pockets of dense forest of willows, aspen, spruce, and an occasional oak tree. I had expected larger hardwood trees and pines and less underbrush. That afternoon I was moved to a stand located in a small oak tree overlooking a road with pockets of woods all around me. My guide told me to keep an eye out for a trail located about 40 yards to my right, which

I noticed had been used heavily the night before.

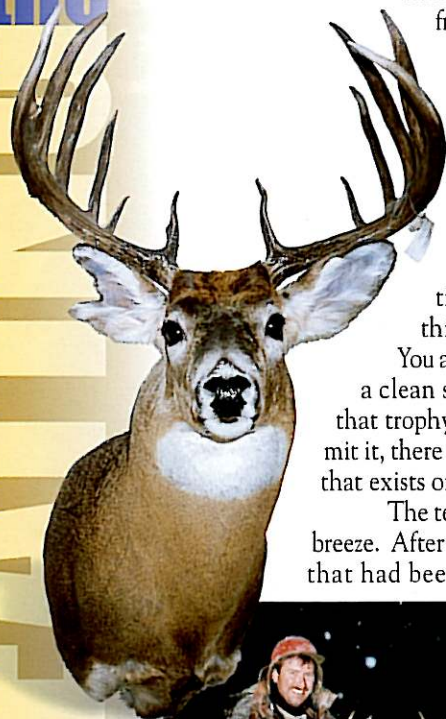
Since it was so wide open with no cover and the sun was shining brightly into my face, I had reservations about sitting there. I decided it would be better to hunt from the ground directly across from the oak tree so my back was to the sun. As fate would have it, after standing for two hours in the freezing cold I heard movement coming from the woods in front of me, just beyond the oak tree in which I should have been sitting. I followed the noise for what seemed like hours, my heart pounding louder with every step. Suddenly a buck with a massive rack emerged from the woods walking in my direction. Instinctively I raised my gun and followed his movement through the woods, waiting for a clear shot. I was only able to see one side of his rack and counted five long, thick tines. At that moment the memories I had as a kid of my dad's eight-pointer returned to me. As he kept walking I kept praying the woods would allow for a clear shot. I was concerned he might wind me or change direction, but he kept coming my way.

The buck was now more to the left, but still in heavy underbrush. Finally he was in an area open enough where I felt my bullet would penetrate his vitals. I fired once and missed, only grazing his brisket. I thought, "How could I miss?" But the bullet had deflected off a branch, sending it south instead of into my quarry.

The next morning I still felt the sting from missing that buck, but remained positive. I resolved to correct my mistake and prayed for another opportunity. The temperatures, however, were not forgiving and neither were the deer. We awoke again to sub-zero temperatures, only we were blessed with a stiff breeze to go with it. Up to this point no hunter had harvested the first buck, and I felt optimistic today someone would end the drought.

The morning proved unproductive and we gathered for lunch as we had done before. Our guides decided it would be best to hunt a two-track road not far from our lunch site since it had experienced little pressure up until then. They had four treestands along a mile stretch of two-track road. The first stand would go to another hunter in camp. As we moved on to the second stand, Rob and I discussed who should take it. Rob had hunted this stand previously and opted for a change of venue. I hopped from the back of the truck and climbed the extension ladder to the platform of the treestand. Once in place and certain I had everything, our guide, Loren, removed the ladder and proceeded on to set up Rob and Brent. As he pulled away, the obvious struck me: "What am I going to do if I shoot a buck? I have no way of getting down!"

It was around 1 p.m., snow was falling steadily, and there was a stiff wind blowing from behind me. I sat there motionless, scanning the woods in front of me looking for the slightest movement. As I sat there, the snow started to build up on my arms and legs. The temperature was brutally cold. The hours passed by slowly without the slightest movement from anything. By now my hands and feet were numb from the cold. I stood up to stretch my legs and get the circulation flowing again to my feet. I removed my gloves to place disposable hand warmers in my pocket and ended up knocking my left glove off the treestand and watched it float helplessly to the ground. I sat back down, placed my rifle across my lap and stuck my hands in my coat pockets



Craig Zmijewski with his typical whitetail buck scoring 180-5/8 points.

for warmth. By now my thoughts were of warmer surroundings, a hot meal, and a shower. However, I knew it would be a couple more hours before I would have any of those comforts, and continued to watch the forest with the hope that a trophy buck would pass my way.

It was after 4 p.m. and the snow continued to fall. Daylight started to fade and, at times, so did my focus. In the blink of an eye, there appeared a dark shape on the horizon. I couldn't get a clear view, but knew it was a deer. The movement continued from the right then the left and all I could see was a brown body coming towards me. The cold and numb feeling that had consumed my body suddenly melted away. I could only think of one thing—don't make a mistake. About 80 yards in front of me was a pile of fallen trees and this is where the noise was centered. Suddenly, a monster buck emerged from a small clearing in the bottom of the fallen trees.

Its rack was tall and wide, and I will never forget the way it cocked its prized antlers to maneuver under the obstacle. I'm sure my heart stopped beating for a minute, but it picked up with a rapid pace. I knew I needed to remain poised and focused, this was my chance to harvest what every deer hunter dreams about and I didn't want to make another mistake.

The buck cautiously poked its head out, looking from side to side for danger. Since most of the buck was still hidden, my scope was focused on its head. I knew it was an impressive and massive rack with long tines, but I wasn't too concerned about counting points. It slowly took one step out and stopped, again looking around for the slightest hint of danger. I didn't have a clear shot and didn't want to rush it. The deer decided to take two more steps and stopped. I now had a clear shot, and slowly squeezed the trigger.

The whitetail dropped down for an instant, then disappeared down the same path that had brought it to me. A dead silence seemed to fall over the woods, and then suddenly, I heard its rack crashing against the fallen trees. The noise stopped as abruptly as it had begun. Within seconds, though, I heard the buck moving again. Then silence completely consumed the forest. This was my time to pray that my single shot was enough to bring its big body down.

I later confirmed what my heart had known—I had just shot the biggest deer of my hunting career. The whitetail buck was a typical 14-point, scoring 180-5/8 points.

This was an experience I will never forget. It tested my endurance, resolve, and character, and was truly one of the happiest days of my life. I had felt like I was eight years old again, watching my father bring home a beautiful buck. ■

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