

blacktail

The deer of the Pacific Northwest aren't just miniature mulies they're altogether different and delightful!

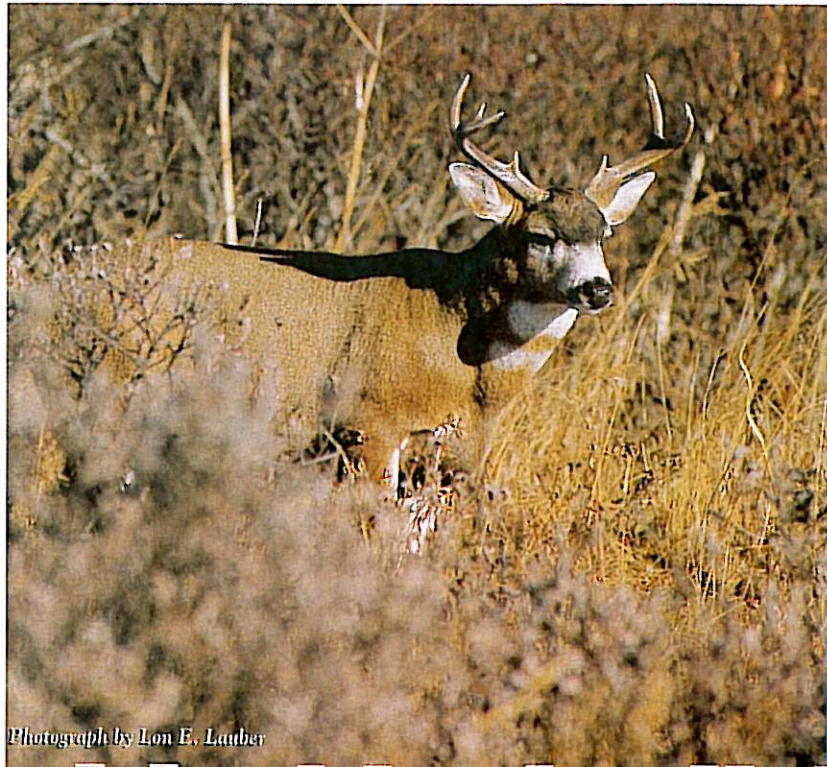
By Col. Craig Boddington USMCR

The serious hunters who live in blacktail country love their local deer just as much as American deer hunters everywhere love their homegrown deer. In fact, deer hunters in western Oregon and Washington and northwestern California are just as avid as Pennsylvania whitetail hunters, Colorado mule deer hunters, and Arizona Coues' deer hunters. You just don't hear too much about them because, for some reason, very few outsiders give a darn about blacktail deer. Except for the local hunters who pursue them (and religiously guard their secret hot-spots), the blacktail deer is far and away the least known, the least publicized, and the deer that is the least pursued by "outsiders."

deer

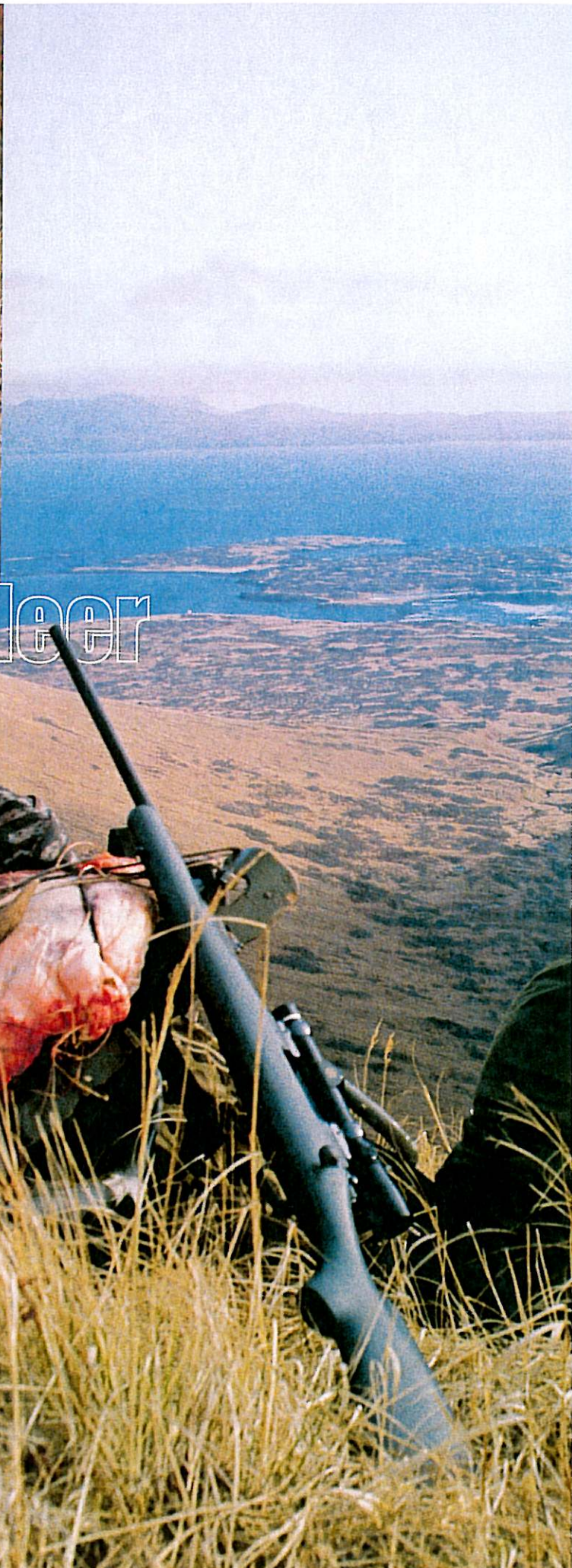


Photograph by Chuck & Grace Burtlett

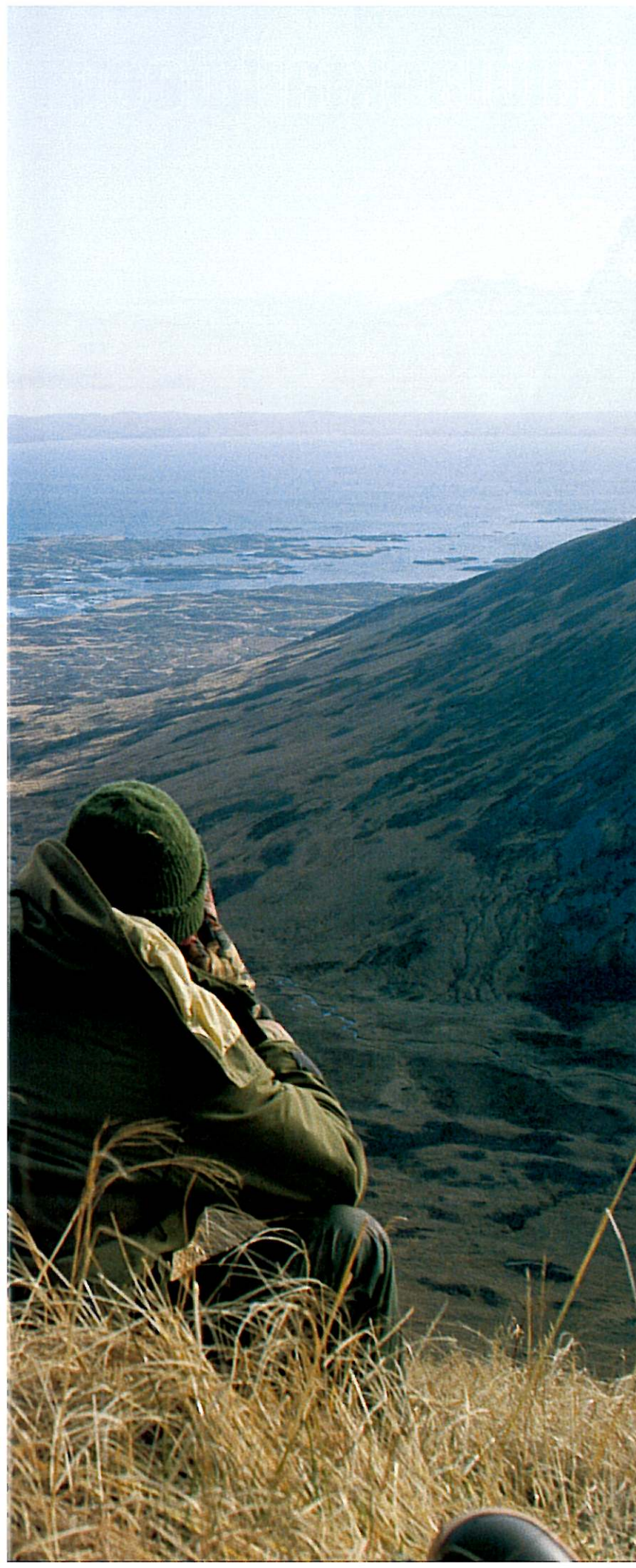


Photograph by Lon E. Lauber

sitka blacktail deer



THE BEST WAY TO APPROACH KODIAK HUNTING IS TO HUNT IN PAIRS AND IMMEDIATELY BONE OUT AND PACK OUT THE BUCK. THE DEER ARE TOO LARGE FOR MOST HUNTERS TO RACK ONE OUT ALONE, AND DUE TO THE PRESENCE OF BEARS YOU DON'T WANT TO RETURN TO A CARCASS THE NEXT MORNING.



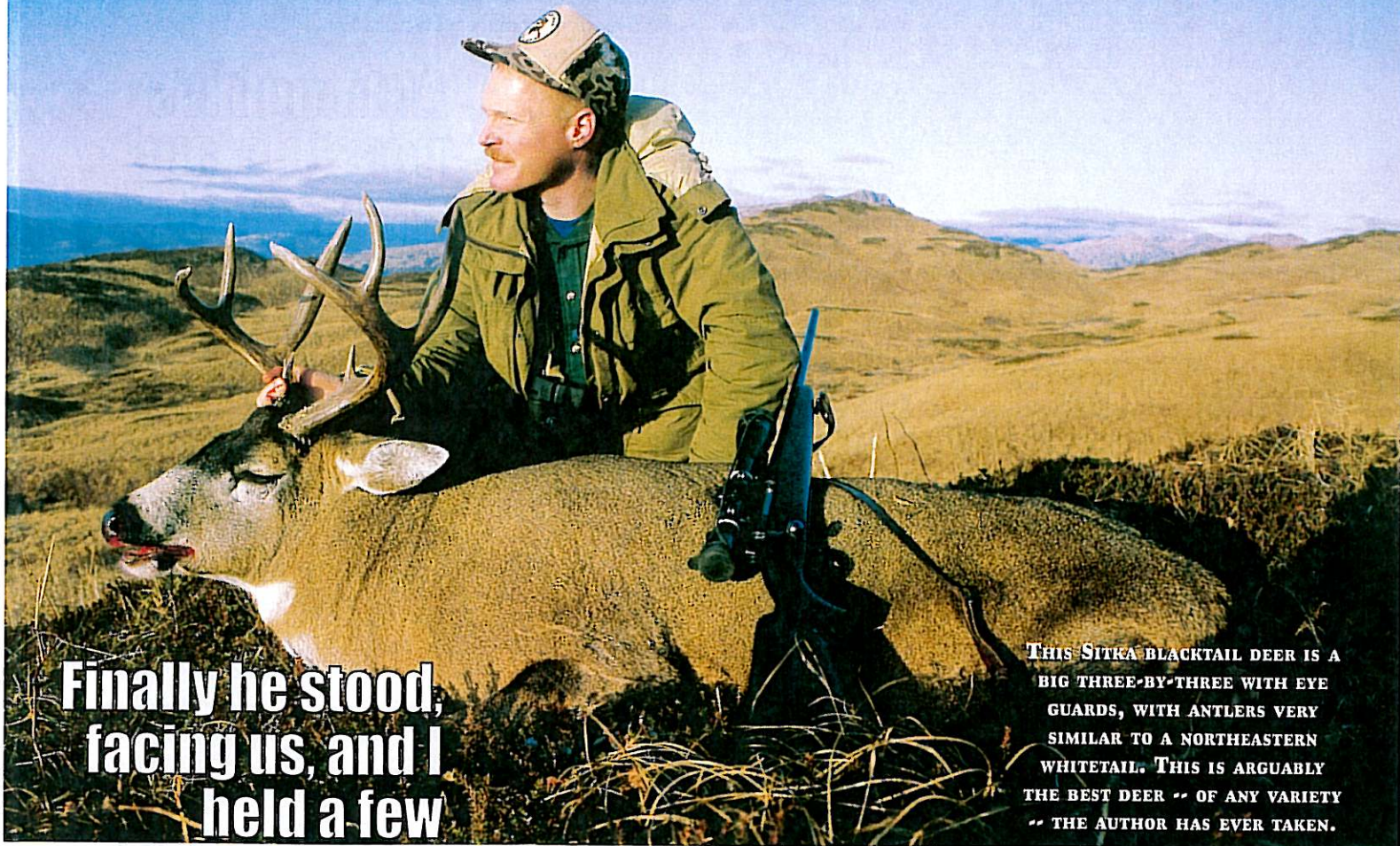
I'm not altogether sure why this should be, but I suspect it stems from a number of factors. For one thing, to be honest, blacktail hunting is very much an insider's game. The public hunting areas that are any good for Columbia blacktail (and some are very good indeed) tend to be either very high, very thick, or both. Access to private land is difficult, and there is just a tiny handful of outfitters who specialize in blacktail deer. Perhaps there would be more, but deer hunters from all over the country aren't beating down outfitters' doors looking for good blacktails the way they are for good whitetail, mule deer, and Coues' deer hunting.

The situation is just the reverse for Sitka blacktail hunting. There is literally unlimited public land available, and virtually every bear outfitter on Kodiak and the other Sitka hotspots would dearly love to extend his season by taking deer hunters... but they have trouble finding hunters and a harder time charging enough to cover their very considerable outfitting costs.

I think all this ties into the second primary reason why nobody cares about blacktails, which is simply that they're not only the least-known, but also the most misunderstood of our deer. Most of us simply regard the blacktail as a down-sized mule deer. As such, the blacktail cannot possess the heavy beams and 30-inch spread we prize in mule deer...so why bother?

Although it's possible, and you hear a lot about it, we had no trouble with bears. The secret is to hunt in pairs and agree upon who has the shot. When a deer is taken, bone it on the spot, make up your packs, and walk away.

sitka blacktail deer



Finally he stood, facing us, and I held a few

THIS SITKA BLACKTAIL DEER IS A BIG THREE-BY-THREE WITH EYE GUARDS, WITH ANTLERS VERY SIMILAR TO A NORTHEASTERN WHITETAIL. THIS IS ARGUABLY THE BEST DEER -- OF ANY VARIETY -- THE AUTHOR HAS EVER TAKEN.

inches into the wind and shot for his white throat patch. That's where the bullet took him. To date he is my finest North American deer, and one of my most memorable shots.

It is absolutely true that the blacktail is a small subspecies of mule deer. Actually two subspecies, the *columbianus* and the *sitkensis*. Only these two of at least five West Coast mule deer subspecies have been singled out for record-keeping purposes. I have no experience with the peninsular mule deer of southern Baja, but the southern mule deer, which ranges from Orange County, California down through the northern half of Baja is another most interesting and entirely different—in ant-

lers and coloration, if not in habit and habitat--type of deer. To the north and east you find the California mule deer, a bit more pale and smaller in body and antler than the Rocky Mountain deer. Since a deer hunter will hunt the deer closest to home, I have hunted California mule deer quite a bit. They're interesting, as are all deer . . . but in appearance and habit they really are just a small version of the big-racked Rocky Mountain and desert mule deer.

To the north and west of them lie the Columbia blacktail deer. They are different. To the north and west of them lie the Sitka blacktail deer. They are more different yet. We'll discuss them later. First let us deal with the blacktail everyone thinks about, the Columbian variety.

At first blush, and depending on how you encounter them, hunting the Columbia blacktail may seem just like hunting mule deer. My first meeting with this

deer was on the western approaches to Mount Lassen in northern California. We glassed for them on the open oak grassland and lava-flow slopes, which was fairly normal for western deer hunting. But we also made mini-drives through poison oak-choked canyons. This was twenty-odd years ago; I didn't have enough experience then to recognize that this was a little different. Now I know that it was not only different from hunting mule deer, but very normal for blacktails.

If the country is open enough you can glass for blacktails just like you glass for mule deer. For that matter, much western whitetail hunting is by glassing--not only for Coues' deer, but for plains white-tails as well. But there's a difference. Blacktails are more cover-loving than mule deer, and they're also more habitual. You can glass for them, and you should if there are openings to glass . . . but it's tighter glassing than is normally done for

mule deer, and you're much more likely to spot the same bucks in the same places. In most areas black-tails hang in the thick stuff as much as they can, and they often follow known trails. In fact, one of the most interesting things about blacktails is that they're a lot like whitetails. Given time and a clear playing field you can pattern them. You can also rattle them up and call them. None of these methods work all the time...but, then, they don't work all the time on whitetails, either.

I attribute this to the fact that blacktails live in heavier cover than mule deer, and have adapted accordingly. They rely on their ears and sense of smell more than their eyes, which is typically the mule deer's first line of defense. In the thick forests of western Oregon and Washington and coastal British Columbia serious blacktail hunters hunt their deer just like eastern sportsmen hunt their whitetails: they sit on trails, and they rattle, and they call. Mule deer can be hunted by these techniques, but blacktails typically respond to calling and rattling far more readily than mule deer . . . and, during the rut, they also respond extremely well to decoys!

Although they're clearly a mule deer subspecies, they've simply adapted to closer cover. They are also significantly different in appearance than mule deer. They're smaller, yes, and in both body and antler . . . but the black-tail is more than just a small mule deer. The black upper surface of the tail is distinctive, but so are other characteristics. The ears are much smaller and more rounded--not so small or round as the whitetail's, but not nearly so exaggerated as a mule deer. The face is much smaller and more pixie-like, and there are usually attractive black highlights on the nose and forehead. Capes vary tremendously, but typically the blacktail has a prominent white throat patch, much more similar to a whitetail's than the more subdued throat patch of a mulie. Many blacktails, though not all,

display a particularly attractive double throat patch.

The antlers are definitely smaller than a mule deer's; there's a difference of 55 Boone and Crockett points--55 inches of antler--between the minimum score for Columbia blacktail and the minimum score for mule deer. While mule deer hunters dream of 30-inch spreads, a blacktail with a 20-inch spread is a darned good

rare, and many big blacktails lack brow points altogether. With black-tails it's probably better to look for mass, spread, and point length before you count tines. Three-by-three blacktails are well-represented in the all-time record book, even at the newly-raised minimum. I've also seen (and shot) big forkie blacktails that are in all ways representative and respectable trophies.

THE TROPHY POTENTIAL FOR BLACKTAILED DEER IS FABULOUS RIGHT NOW. HERE ARE A FEW SHEDS PICKED UP ON ONE NORTHERN CALIFORNIA RANCH. NOT ALL ARE FOUR-BY-FOURS, BUT ALL ARE SUPERB.



There is much confusion regarding exactly what comprises a **good blacktail.**

deer. These much smaller antlers, however, are perfectly in scale with the blacktail's ear width and facial dimensions. A good blacktail with a brilliant cape is one of the most beautiful of our deer, and will stand out in any trophy collection.

There is much confusion regarding exactly what comprises a good blacktail. Everybody wants a four-by-four with eye guards, and provided such a buck is fully mature and carries a bit of mass that is a great blacktail. Non-typicals do occur, but are very rare--much more rare than is the case with mule deer. In truth, excepting in a very few carefully-managed areas with very good genetics, typical four-by-fours are also quite rare. Many very good black-tails never get beyond three fighting tines per side. As is true with mule deer, strong brow points are extremely

It isn't essential that one be a trophy hunter to pursue blacktails. They're a challenging and fascinating animal, and, like all of our deer, their venison is tasty. (Personally, I rate them better than mule deer, though grain-fed whitetail is hard to beat!) Their habitat is beautiful, although it varies too much to characterize. In the southern and

eastern portions of their ranges you can hunt them in rolling oak grasslands, interspersed with hillside of manzanita and chaparral and cut by canyons filled with poison oak. Or you can hunt them in groves of giant redwoods. Or you can hunt them in the high Alpine at the top of the Cascades. Or in the lush rain forests of the Pacific Northwest. Each of these habitats are unique and beautiful. However, you should keep in mind two things. First, the thicker the vegetation the more difficult the hunting. Second, antler growth is generally reduced in the very thick forests of northwestern Oregon, western Washington, and coastal British Columbia. This is almost certainly due to limited antler-producing nutrients in the conifer forests, and is probably the reason why blacktails from the more mixed vegetation of northern Cali-

fornia and southwestern Oregon dominate the record book listings.

Again, you don't have to be a trophy hunter to enjoy blacktail hunting. But if you are there is a caution that must be applied to blacktails that doesn't exist with our other deer. The range of the Columbia blacktail is not small. For records-keeping purposes it stretches north along the West Coast from south of San Francisco all the way to northern British Columbia. Unfortunately, whenever records-keepers are obligated to define boundaries between subspecies the lines must be drawn somewhere, and this is exceedingly difficult with blacktail deer.

In the north it's virtually impossible to say exactly where columbianus really becomes sitkensis, but at least both are blacktails. By the time you get to

Alaska's offshore islands where most of the hunting is conducted the differences are quite clear. The rub comes in the broad intergrade areas to the south and east, where blacktails bump against California and Rocky Mountain mule deer. My first experience with "blacktails" was on the western slopes of Mount Lassen. That was a great deer herd 20 years ago, one of our big migratory herds that, in the fall, could be seen streaming down out of the high country to summer pasture by the thousand. There are still good deer there, but that herd crashed due to overpopulation and now, with the abundance of predators, probably will never fully recover. These deer are small-bodied, small-eared, typically- antlered, and black-tailed--but they fall outside the

columbia blacktail deer

JIM SCHAAESMA AND
THE AUTHOR APPROACH
A VERY FINE
BLACKTAILED BUCK,
TAKEN IN NORTHERN
CALIFORNIA



official blacktail boundary.

I live in central California, as much as a hundred miles south of the "true blacktail line." Although many of the local hunters call our deer "blacktails," it's quite difficult to say exactly what they are. Technically I suppose they're a mix of blacktail and California mule deer. The deer on some of the ranches I hunt show pure blacktail tendencies. You can measure the tarsal glands, and they're correct for blacktailed deer. The tails are pure black on the upper surface, and the ears are small. You can't put much stock in the antlers, because our deer have small, almost stunted antlers--probably due to the long, hot, dry summers. The local deer in other areas--some of which are farther north--show mixed tails and ears that are clearly too big.

In my more argumentative days I corresponded with B&C's stalwart, the late Phil Wright, about trying to redefine the blacktail line, but the problem is that there are indeed very large intergrade areas. Mostly this is harmless; it doesn't matter to me if my local "almost blacktails" are called blacktails--especially since it's very unlikely for one to meet the record book minimum. It probably does matter with herds like that Mount Lassen herd, which are as pure blacktail as you can get . . . but which just might interbreed with mule deer up in the high country, so have to be classified as mule deer. This is unfortunate, but it really doesn't matter as long as you know.

Unfortunately, the blacktail line isn't able to follow state boundaries or major rivers. If you care

about hunting a genuine "B&C" blacktail you have to do your homework. If you don't, someone else may do it for you. In the years when I hunted that Mount Lassen herd I knew they were outside the official line, and I didn't care. But the first

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The buck on the left is a very good one, ear-wide, with classic four-by-four configuration, and pretty good mass. He's a keeper.

time I hunted in Oregon, having booked a "blacktail hunt" with my outfitter, I found myself glassing from a high ridge from which I could look west across Interstate 5. I-5 happens to be the demarcation line between blacktails and mule deer in that particular area, and I was on the wrong side. I wasn't pleased.

On both the south and east sides of the B&C blacktail range there continue to be ranchers and outfitters marketing transition deer as "blacktails." They're probably mostly blacktail, and the hunting isn't necessarily different, but if it's important to you to hunt the "real McCoy," then you'd better check a map.

To me, the beauty of the deer and the country they live in give plenty of reason to hunt blacktails. But there's a bonus: Right now the blacktailed deer offer the greatest trophy opportunity of any of our North American deer. This is certainly not universal across their range; big antlers come hard in the big northwestern forests, and it gets harder the farther north you go. However, on well-managed private lands in the mixed cover of northern California and southwestern Oregon; and in limited entry public land units in both states the opportunity to take a real trophy far exceeds the normal odds with our other deer.

As an example, my buddy Jim Schaafsma is about eight years into a management program on a ranch in ideal blacktail habitat. Jimmy takes about a half-dozen "trophy bucks" each season--and in a normal year more than two-thirds will measure above the B&C minimum. Odds like that simply don't occur with any of our other deer. Although there are very few outfitters who specialize in blacktails, Schaafsma isn't the only one who offers this kind of success on big blacktails--he's just the one I know best. Mind you, an outfitter like Schaafsma is not inexpensive on hunts for deer of this caliber. His leases cost a fortune, and of course those costs are passed along to his clients. There are high-dollar hunts

for the other varieties of North American deer as well, and while the potential for a record-class specimen isn't quite so high, these special places do yield special deer. A significant difference is that blacktails are also democratic.

There are a fair number of wilderness areas and limited entry units that offer the same kind of odds for a really big blacktail... provided you're in good shape and willing to work hard to get him. So there's a choice. You can pay for your blacktail with a lot of research and plenty of sweat, or you can hire a good outfitter and pay in the coin of the realm--but either way, your chances of coming home with a really big buck are actually quite good. There are several reasons for this. One is that, in comparison with the other deer, the record book minimum for blacktail is still relatively low. This is undoubtedly an offshoot of the general lack of interest in this deer; there are few serious trophy hunters who pursue blacktails, and over the decades very few big blacktailed deer have been measured.

Perhaps a more valid reason is that blacktails tend to have a much smaller home range than mule deer, so they can be managed well even on relatively small ranches. This does not happen, of course, on public lands that are accessible. However, limited entry units (Oregon has several good ones) and wilderness areas such as California's Trinity Alps and Yolla Bolly don't receive heavy hunting pressure, so the blacktailed bucks can mature and grow large.

A good example of the homebody nature of the blacktail is a buck they called "Rattler." He is not my best-scoring blacktail, but he's certainly my best buck. I can't tell you that it was a fabulous hunt; it was too short and too simple for that adjective. This was some years ago when Schaafsma was hunting a different ranch. Rattler hung out in the canyons and hills close by camp. He'd been big for several years, and so they'd tried to get him for several seasons. He had been fairly visible as well as recognizable,

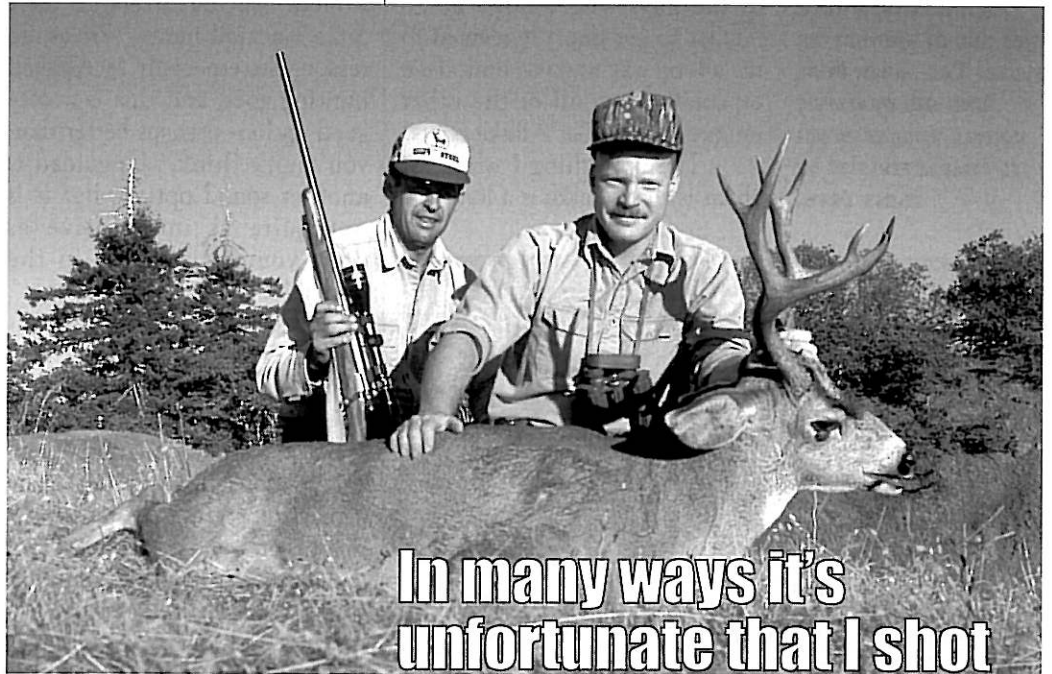
and was apparently a lot more lucky than smart. Over the seasons he had been missed several times, and even more frequently had somehow just slipped away.

I did not come to hunt Rattler. I hadn't even heard about Rattler, and Jimmy had never mentioned him because, for the first time in years, Rattler had not been seen. The assumption was that he had finally died of old age. But he hadn't. He was sleeping peacefully

him to a scale whole, and he weighed a whopping 180 pounds, a monster for a blacktailed deer.

In many ways it's unfortunate that I shot Rattler, for I surely didn't earn him, nor had I hunted him through the years. He does have a place of honor on my wall, and I hope I appreciate him properly. To this day some stranger will walk up to me at a sportsmen's convention and say, "You shot Rattler." And then I'll hear yet an-

THIS IS RATTLER, A VERY OLD BUCK THAT WAS MASSIVE IN BOTH ANTLER AND BODY. HE WAS AT LEAST 9-1/2 YEARS OLD WHEN TAKEN, AND HAD CARRIED MUCH BETTER ANTLERS IN HIS PRIME.



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on a little oak-covered knoll not much more than 100 yards above the track to camp. It was the first or second day of my hunt, and we'd seen little that morning. We headed back out in the heat of the afternoon, and I doubt we were five minutes out of camp when Schaafsma glanced up the hill to his left and spotted him.

Schaafsma knew immediately that the bedded buck was Rattler. I didn't; I only knew that I was being told this was my buck by somebody who knows more about blacktails than anyone else I know. So I took a careful rest and shot Rattler, and he died peacefully in his bed. At that time he was at least 9-years old, possibly 10. Although he'd been a "book buck" in his prime, he was seriously downhill in the antlers now, with mismatched points but wonderful mass. He was not downhill in the body. We got

other story about how Rattler evaded an earlier bullet.

The Sitka blacktail deer is altogether different. In fact, so different that one of the few things it has in common with the Columbia blacktail is the black upper surface of the tail. This came as

OF SOMETHING LIKE 500 SITKA BLACKTAIL BUCKS VIEWED IN A WEEK'S HUNT, NOT A SINGLE ONE WAS A CLEAN FOUR-BY-FOUR. THIS FOUR-BY-THREE BUCK WAS ONE OF THE BETTER BUCKS. THE LARGE BODY SIZE AND DRAMATIC DOUBLE THROAT PATCH IS CHARACTERISTIC OF THESE DEER.

somewhat of a revelation to me. I'm not much of a "splitter" in the taxonomic scheme of things. I think we have too many caribou categories, and (as much as I love to hunt them) I've never fully understood why the Coues' whitetail, out of some 38 subspecies, is the only one singled out for a separate place in hunters' hearts and record books. So as soon as the Sitka blacktail was separated out as a record book category I was not one of the guys who dashed up to Alaska to get one. It seemed to me a long way to go to hunt deer, especially with all of the other unique species that Alaska offers.

The only thing I was right about is that Alaska is a long dis-

of very few Alaskan hunts that can be taken on an unguided basis with every opportunity for an enjoyable and successful hunt.

As with Columbia blacktail, there are two good options for hunting Sitka blacktail: guided or unguided. Also as is the case with Columbia blacktail, prospective clients aren't exactly beating down the outfitters' doors. (The old "long way to go to hunt deer" syndrome.) However, virtually all the Kodiak bear outfitters do offer Sitka blacktail hunts. Prices are reasonable, especially as Alaskan hunting goes, and this is a very good option--perhaps better than you might think. Unguided is another sound option, but it is not quite as inexpensive as do-it-yourself hunting in the Lower 48.

You can hunt Sitka blacktails from the very limited Kodiak road system, which is by far the cheapest option. Some very fine bucks are taken this way, but understand that the concentrations of deer are generally found on the southern tip of the island, and no roads will take you there. So you need transportation and logistical support. No problem. There are plenty of air charter float planes in Kodiak that will drop you at a lake and pick you up a week later. Or, many of the commercial fishing boats take deer hunters in the fall. Charter planes are expensive and boats more so. However, to my mind the latter option is far the best. This is because you can use the boat as a camp, not only offering warm, dry quarters; but also providing a place you can bring your deer to where bears can't go.

To some extent it depends on the time of year. The season is very long, generally from August to the end of the year. In August and September most of the deer are usually high, well away from the beaches. At this time of year you are probably best-served by a float plane that will drop you off well inland. In October and early November the deer have usually moved down, so the boat option becomes much more viable. Be-

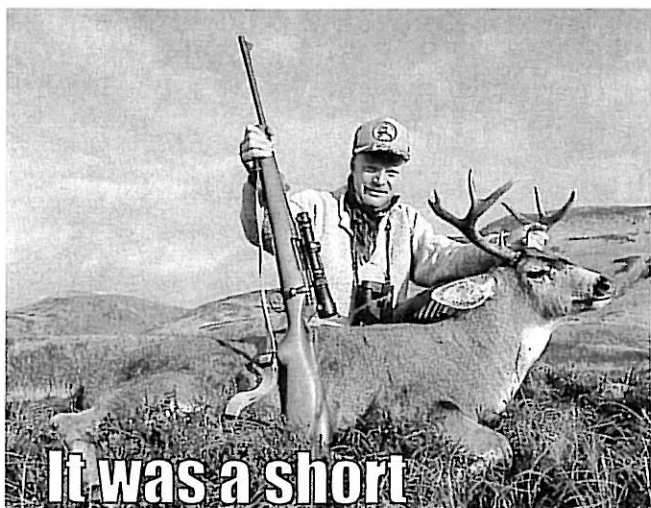
ware of hunting later than mid-November. Sitka blacktails drop their antlers very early, and after mid-November you run the risk of a lot of antlerless bucks!

This was the story on the first Sitka blacktail hunt I planned--which never actually happened. I was going up to hunt with Leon Francisco, a great brown bear outfitter, and the hunt was planned for around Thanksgiving. A few days before departure Leon called and canceled the hunt, telling me that it was an early winter and the bucks were shedding antlers like mad. I was disappointed, and to this day I've never met Leon Francisco (let alone hunted with him)--but I will never forget the professionalism required by that phone call.

A couple years later Jake Jacobsen called. Jake is an Alaskan Master Guide, but he's an Arizona native and we'd hunted Coues' deer together several times. Jake asked if I'd like to go Sitka blacktail hunting with him, not as a guide but just to hunt together so he could collect some winter meat. It sounded good, and indeed it was.

We hunted with some friends of Jake's on the King David, a well-appointed salmon boat. From Kodiak we cruised to the southern tip of the island, catching some halibut and ling cod on the way. Thanks to the boat, we could anchor in a different inlet every night and hunt different country every day. It was a short hunt, just a week, and to date is my only experience with Sitka blacktail deer. However, I know I saw more than 500 bucks in that week!

Given that this was my only experience with this deer, this is what I think I learned. First, they're real different. At that time of year, early November, they were extremely visible on the open slopes--not at all cover-loving like the Columbian variety. Their body build is also altogether different. Well-adapted to their harsh climate, they are big-bodied deer that put on a lot of body fat. In profile they look like barrels with legs,



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tance to go for deer hunting. The Sitka blacktail is entirely different in both appearance and habit from the Columbia blacktail. He deserves his own place in the record book, for there is absolutely no correlation in antler size between the two mule deer subspecies. Moreover, the Sitka blacktail--at the right place at the right time--offers the finest deer hunting in North America. And moreover still, the Sitka blacktail hunt is one

much larger (at least on Kodiak) than any Columbian deer that walks. Live weights of 250 pounds are not unusual for mature bucks.

They have long hair, as you'd expect, and the capes are luxurious and colorful with the double white throat patch very common. Perhaps unfortunately, their antlers are not so spectacular. The trick is to hunt them for what they are, not what you're used to or what you wish they could be (Coues' white-tails are much the same). I think I saw 500 bucks, certainly 100 bucks per day on the five days we could hunt. I know that I never saw a clean four-by-four. They exist, but are very rare. I saw two or three four-by-threes. One was a very nice buck and I shot him; the other two had the points but nothing else. I doubt that I saw more than ten three-by-threes. I shot two of these. One was my first buck, a very nice typical "eight pointer" --three-by-three plus eyeguards. The other was my last buck, a real monster that easily exceeded the B&C minimum of 108 points. All the other 480-odd bucks were lesser animals; a few three-by-twos, a very few spikes, and hundreds of forkies of various persuasion.

The lesson here is that, at maturity, forked-horn antlers with eyeguards is probably normal for most Sitka blacktail bucks. It takes a lot of looking to find better, and it takes a lot of luck to find the clean four-by-four with eyeguards that we seek in other mule deer subspecies.

But what a hunt! I have never seen so many deer, nor so many bucks, nor had so much fun stalking them and sorting them out. Early on, in August and September, the brush is high and visibility is more limited. By November, when I hunted, the cover was down and the deer were extremely visible. It was a glassing hunter's delight, with deer somewhere on virtually every slope we glassed. The hunting was not easy, and it was cold, but it was a truly fabulous experience.

Although it's possible, and you hear a lot about it, we had no trouble with bears. The secret is

to hunt in pairs and agree upon who has the shot. When a deer is taken, bone it on the spot, make up your packs, and walk away. The real danger comes from returning to a carcass the next morning. You really don't want to do that, especially if the kill site is obscured by brush and you can't glass it from a safe distance!

The last deer I shot, the big one, came out of a little draw about 200 yards below us, and I just flat missed him. We relocated him, with some difficulty, far up on a bare slope. He was standing with a doe, and as we watched he bedded in the tall grass, now completely invisible. I traded my now-outdistanced .35 Whelen for Jake's .300 Winchester Magnum,

and we waited. Finally he stood, facing us, and I held a few inches into the wind and shot for his white throat patch. That's where the bullet took him. To date he is my finest North American deer, and one of my most memorable shots. The aftermath was most memorable as well.

We had no sooner walked up to the deer than a big brown bear, hearing the shots like a dinner bell, appeared on the ridge above us. Fortunately this bear was a gentleman. He sat on his haunches, the wind rippling his long fur, and waited for us to finish our chores and make up our packs. Then we headed for the beach and he sauntered down the ridge to claim his share. ▲▲▲

**THE KING DAVID
MADE AN IDEAL CAMP;
WE ANCHORED IN A
DIFFERENT COVE EACH
EVENING AND HUNTED
DIFFERENT COUNTRY
EVERY DAY.**

