

# SO YOU WANT A

# BIG

# WHITETAIL?

It takes the right place, the right time, and plenty of patience—and even these aren't always enough!

By Craig Boddington  
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The morning wasn't just frosty, it was downright cold! I was sitting in a ground blind at the intersection of two cutlines in a central Alberta woodlot and my feet, long sensitive to cold, were hurting. I have no idea what the temperature was, something below zero, and as midmorning approached, I knew my fidgeting and shifting weren't going to cut it much longer, I would have to start moving.

I blew my grunt call a couple more times, instantly hearing a branch crack. Then hoofbeats crunched in the crusted snow. Slowly I swiveled my eyes to the left, toward the sound. A very nice whitetail buck had exited the dark woods and was prancing toward my blind, now less than 50 yards away. He was dark-colored and big-bodied, a grown-up buck with a rack that was ear-wide and heavy, but he was just an eight-pointer with medium point length. He cantered right up to the blind, stomped and snorted, then turned and trotted into the trees.

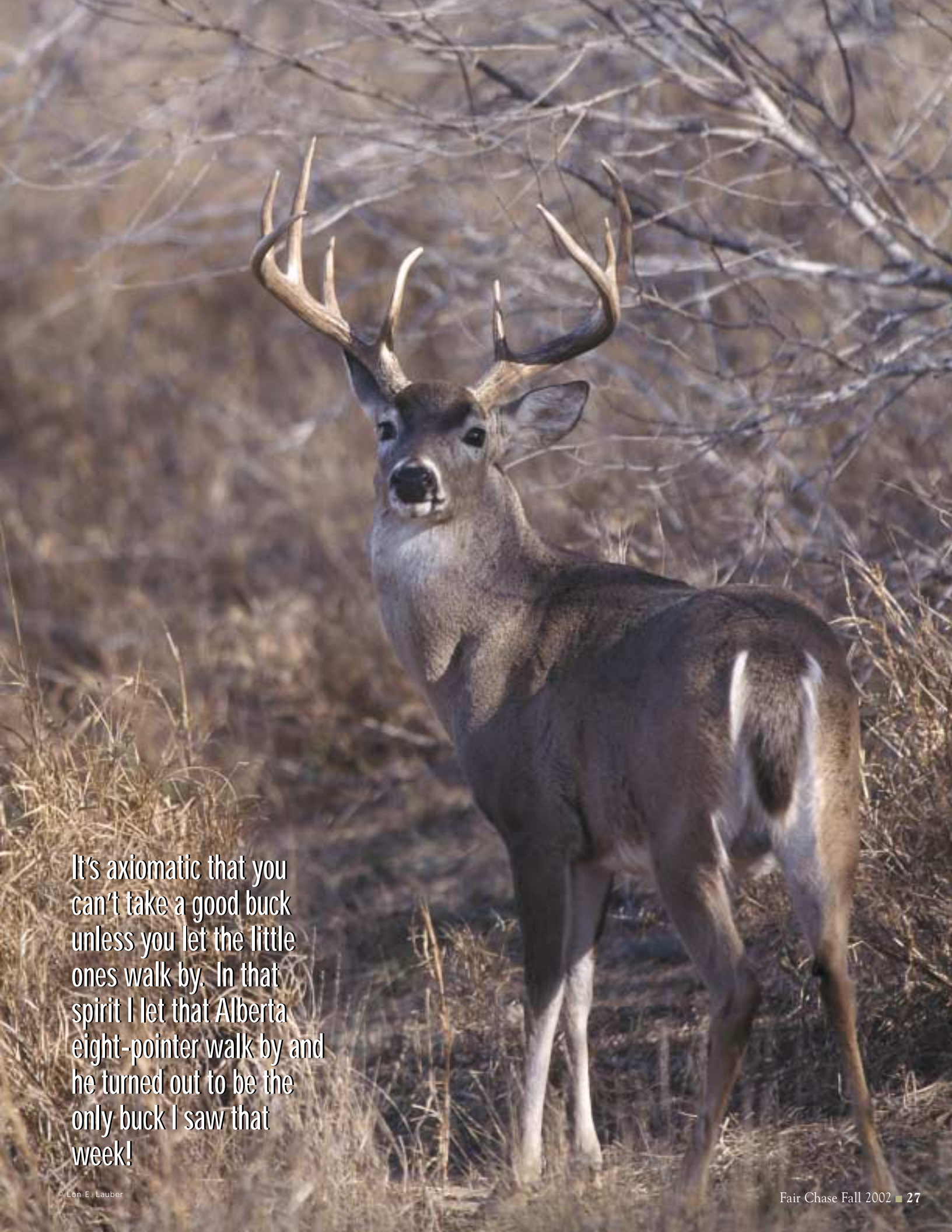
This was early in the hunt, so I never raised the rifle, nor considered doing so. He was definitely a mature buck, but he wasn't the buck I was looking for. He was also the only buck I saw during one of the longest, coldest, and most bleak weeks I have ever spent hunting! Had that buck appeared on the last day rather than the first, I'm not altogether sure what my reaction might have been. I'd like to think I would have done the same thing, but I'm as much a victim of human nature as the rest of us, so I'm not at all sure!

Among the ten million or so North American hunters who pursue whitetail deer, there are quite a few genuine experts. I have never claimed to be one of them. While I am not a whitetail fanatic, I do accept that the whitetail, though widespread and plentiful, is one of the wariest and most challenging of all the world's game, and for these reasons I love to hunt them. Although the size of a buck's territory varies considerably with terrain and deer density, the whitetail is a homebody. So there is a strong home court advantage in hunting this animal. The better you know the local conditions—food, movement patterns, rutting activity, the more successful you are likely to be.



In wooded areas stand hunting is far and away the most effective hunting technique for whitetail deer. A stand gives you the very best opportunity not only to get a good shot, but also to judge antlers and age before you shoot.

HEADLINE INSET: The view from a ground blind. The brush is thick in Saskatchewan, with the best chance for a shot along cutlines like this.



It's axiomatic that you can't take a good buck unless you let the little ones walk by. In that spirit I let that Alberta eight-pointer walk by and he turned out to be the only buck I saw that week!



**TOP:** In terms of score this is probably my best whitetail buck, taken in South Texas during the rut. He was horning a mesquite far down a cutline or sendero, so I left my stand, made a quick stalk, and got a shot.

**RIGHT:** It took me several trips to get my first Canadian whitetail. This isn't unusual; deer densities are low and hunting is difficult—but these huge-bodied bucks are wonderful! This is a mid-150s buck, the kind that really shouldn't be passed up.

I haven't lived in whitetail country for much of my career, so I have rarely had this advantage. On the other hand, I also haven't been tied to any one area or habitat type. Lacking whitetail deer in my own backyard, I've hunted them in a lot of different backyards, and of course I've tried to pick the best backyards I could find.

### The Right Place

Choosing the right location is important with almost all trophy hunting, and the whitetail deer is no exception. His range is huge and he supports equal opportunity. Almost anywhere across his vast range there are opportunities for at least resident hunters, if not everyone, to hunt whitetails on public land at very little cost. This is what has made the whitetail deer the most important game animal on earth, the backbone of hunting in North America. This business about a home court advantage is important, so if you are fortunate enough to live in country that produces numbers of

good whitetail bucks—and you have access to good country—you're home free. You can scout throughout the year and hunt throughout the season, and over the course of your hunting career you will take some very nice bucks.

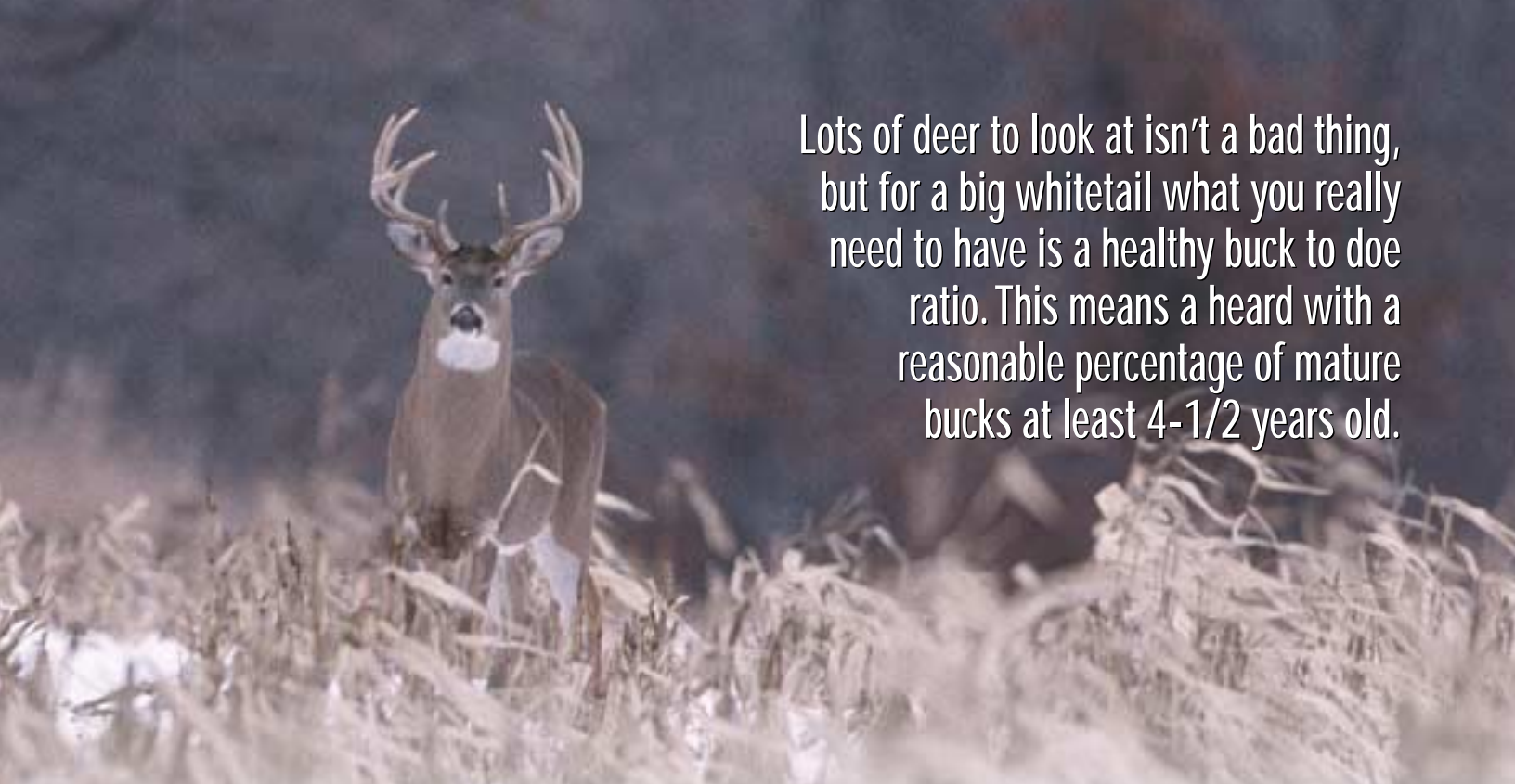
Unfortunately, this will not happen throughout the whitetail's range. Mind you, there are good, mature bucks with nice racks literally everywhere the whitetail deer occurs. However, there are other factors that come into play. There are fully 38 subspecies of *Odocoileus virginianus* in North America alone, and they are not equal. Southern subspecies are not as large as northern subspecies, and although nutrition and minerals are important, no matter what the conditions, Florida whitetails cannot grow racks to compare with those of Canadian bucks that are three times larger in body size.

Management and hunting conditions are perhaps even more important. Many whitetail herds are managed for quantity rather than quality. Many, especially in the South and some parts of the East, are overpopulated. This can create wonderful hunting opportunity, but overpopulation limits nutrition and thus restricts antler growth. High buck harvests limit the numbers of bucks that live to reach full maturity. So it doesn't really matter what the area's trophy potential is if only a small fraction of the local bucks live to reach that potential. It's still like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Then there is hunting pressure. In many parts of the country—including

some areas that do produce great whitetails, like the Upper Midwest—there is intense hunting pressure during a relatively short firearms season. Bowhunters may have an opportunity to scout, pattern, and effectively hunt big bucks, but all bets are off when gun season opens. In good areas there will be big bucks taken, but when armies of orange-clad hunters take to the woods it is impossible to predict who will get a shot at them!

This is not all gloom and doom, not at all. There are many areas where hunting pressure is relatively light and where whitetails grow big. Alberta and Saskatchewan, and to a lesser extent, Manitoba, have become meccas for serious whitetail hunters for exactly these reasons. The Great Plains region offers very good conditions, not only big deer with a very good age class distribution, but also habitat that is open enough so even the cover-loving whitetail is fairly visible and vulnerable. Elsewhere, on an ever-increasing basis, more and more local whitetail herds are being managed for quality. Texas is justifiably famous for its deer management, and although Texas deer are small in body size, well-managed Texas ranches regularly produce whoppers in the antler department. Throughout the East and Southeast, quality management is becoming more and more common. This is usually on a very local level, such as hunting clubs or leases that increase doe harvests while limiting buck harvests and enforce minimum antler restrictions, but it's effec-



Lots of deer to look at isn't a bad thing, but for a big whitetail what you really need to have is a healthy buck to doe ratio. This means a heard with a reasonable percentage of mature bucks at least 4-1/2 years old.

tive. The net result is there is more opportunity for trophy whitetail hunting than ever before, but if you want a decent chance at a big buck you have to seek out some of these opportunities.

It's a numbers game, but not necessarily a matter of deer numbers. Pennsylvania, for instance, has one of the biggest deer herds in the country, but also has one of the highest harvests, with close to a million hunters afield during a short season. There are Boone and Crockett-qualifying bucks taken now and again, but figure your odds at getting one! Wisconsin is almost always one of the leaders in producing record-class whitetails, but, again, the season is short and hunting pressure intense. You need a special place to have a decent chance at a big one. By comparison to most states the overall harvest in Saskatchewan (and total herd size) is very small, and indeed the deer densities are very low—as low as one deer per square mile. However, like neighboring Alberta, Saskatchewan produces quite a few record-class bucks every fall. Figure that number as a percentage of the total harvest, factor in a relatively small number of hunters, and it is easy to understand why so many serious hunters of whitetail deer go north!

With whitetail deer “the right place” isn't just one place, and isn't tied to just one region. Lots of deer to look at isn't a bad thing, but for a big whitetail what you really need to have is a healthy buck to doe ratio. This means a heard with a reasonable percentage of mature bucks at

least 4-1/2 years old. Then you need a place to hunt where pressure is low enough so that the deer will behave naturally, so that if you hunt smart and well, you have acceptable odds for seeing one of those bucks.

#### The Right Time

The rut is extremely important in whitetail hunting. This is when big bucks are most likely to come out of the woodwork and make a stupid mistake like allowing humans to see them in the daylight just once. Even so, I believe the importance of the rut is considerably overrated.

There are two reasons for this. First and foremost, it is very difficult to hit the rut “just right.” This is especially true for nonresidents, who generally must plan to hunt a given place at a certain time months in advance. Residents have it better; they can hunt at a leisurely pace, watching the signs, and then concentrate their hunting when the rut really turns on. Provided, of course, their local season is open during the rut. Some are and some aren't.

Nonresidents have it much tougher. Of course, wherever you're going to hunt there is historical data suggesting when the rut should kick off. In Canada it will almost certainly kick in sometime in mid-November, maybe a bit later in the northern U.S., and in the Southeast and Texas the “real” rut will usually be late December and or even January. Within these general time frames, however, weather and other factors mostly invisible to humans

can kick off an early rut, or a late one. Sometimes there are “quiet ruts,” where the supposedly golden period comes and goes with very little of the frantic mating activity you hope to see. And even when the rut is truly at its peak not all days are the same. One day you'll see rutting bucks running everywhere . . . and the next day there's nothing happening.

This is often weather-related. There's nothing worse than unseasonal heat to shut off a rut, but rain or snow will do it, too, and so will a serious cold snap. I think that's what happened on that Alberta hunt I mentioned at the beginning. It was one of those, “You should have been here last week” sort of deals. There had been tremendous rutting activity, but when our hunt started the mercury plummeted and, as strange as it seems, the deer simply quit moving, with very little activity for several days. So, while hitting the rut is wonderful, in my experience it's very difficult to hit it just right.

The second reason why the rut is overrated is because, during this period, buck activity is extremely random. The good news is that you might see a buck almost anywhere. The bad news is that the buck you have scouted and patterned so carefully may have followed a hot doe for miles, and may not return to his normal haunts for days. Whitetail hunters love the rut because, when it's really on, there's a chance that a buck no human has ever seen will make a mistake. It's also the time when hunters can make the most mistakes and still be successful! But it isn't perfect.

Personally, I like the pre-rut period better. It lasts longer, is far more predictable, and deer movement is much more predictable. During the pre-rut bucks will be making rubs and scrapes and will be returning to check them, but their feeding and bedding patterns will be reasonably normal and they're less likely to wander far from their home territories. Sooner or later the pre-rut will blend into the actual rut, and either period is very good.

Not so good is the post-rut period, which is when many deer seasons are held.

**BELOW: Although a cover-loving animal, the whitetail is amazingly adaptable. This is excellent whitetail country in western Kansas. I know this because one of my very best bucks came from the rough canyon in the background. INSET: A nice Great Plains whitetail, taken in eastern Colorado. The Great Plains and Rocky Mountain Front areas don't produce North America's biggest bucks, but there are good numbers of mature bucks and the country is open and relatively huntable.**



Just after the rut the bucks are worn out, and they retreat into the heaviest cover to lick their wounds. Daylight movement is often limited, and tricks that work during the pre-rut and rut—like antler-rattling, calling, and lures—are much less likely to get a response. From the trophy hunter's standpoint, the post-rut period is also the worst time for broken antler points, since you are now looking at the results of all the mating battles.

All that said, no matter where, when, or how you hunt, there is a bit of luck involved in taking a really good whitetail. Even if you're doing all the right things, there are many places for a big buck to be other than in your sights. So, by definition, if you get a shot at a good buck, you were in the right place at the right time. This can happen at any time of the season anywhere whitetail are hunted, but you can stack the deck a fair amount by researching not only the best areas, but the best times of the season for a given region.

#### The Right Buck

It's axiomatic that you can't take a good buck unless you let the little ones walk by. In that spirit I let that Alberta eight-pointer walk by and he turned out to be the only buck I saw that week! With whitetails you won't be successful all the time; with big whitetails you won't be successful very often.

Like all trophies, a "big whitetail" is somewhat in the eyes of the beholder. If your definition of "big" means a buck that

will make the minimum score for the all-time Boone and Crockett records book, then you could be on a quest that will take a lifetime and may not end in success. Even in the very best places, a buck "netting" 170 typical or 195 non-typical is just one buck out of several thousand taken; in some places such a buck is literally one in a million. Perhaps this sounds like sour grapes because I have never taken such a buck. However, I don't live in whitetail country and I hardly concentrate on whitetail deer to the exclusion of all else. So, realistically, it is extremely unlikely that I will ever take such a buck. This is okay because "a book buck or nothing" is not my trophy criteria. It's okay with me if that is your credo, but you need to be prepared for a lot of frustration, even in the best areas.

I don't always trophy hunt for whitetails. This depends on the area and circumstances. There's nothing wrong with a fun hunt, and everything right with corn-fed whitetail in the freezer. However, when the conditions are right and I have the time, I look for my idea of a good buck, I go for a grown-up, fully mature whitetail with reasonable antlers. I like antler mass, generally just one indication of maturity, and it's nice if the rack has spread, beam length, plenty of points, tine length, and symmetry as well. But if it has all these things in adequate measure, then it's a Boone and Crockett buck, so I'm usually willing to make some compromises so long as it's a mature buck.

**The Great Plains region offers very good conditions, not only big deer with a very good age class distribution, but also habitat that is open enough so even the cover-loving whitetail deer is fairly visible and vulnerable.**



Even this can be an unreasonable goal in many places, but in good areas this is what I hold out for. It doesn't always work. For many years I wanted a good specimen of one of those huge-bodied Canadian bucks, making several trips to Alberta without ever firing a shot. I passed up a number of young bucks, the kind I might well take elsewhere, but not the kind of buck I went to Canada in search of. I passed up a couple of "almost bucks" as well. One was that eight-pointer that I was sure I didn't want. Two others were bucks that walked around the end of a frozen slough on another Alberta hunt. In retrospect I probably blew it; both were pretty good bucks, but at the moment I just couldn't make myself sure of them, and I let the moment pass.

This is part of the problem with hunting whitetails. You can't stockpile them; a big buck will probably offer just one opportunity, and that opportunity will probably be fleeting. You have to know what you're looking for, and when opportunity knocks you must open the door fast, and then shut it with a well-placed shot. Although I've made some mistakes, over the years I've done this pretty well. I don't have any genuine Boone and Crockett whitetails, but I do have a small collection of pretty darned nice grown-up whitetail bucks—from the Great Plains, from Texas, even from the Deep South.

In 2000 I hunted Saskatchewan for the first time, over on the east side with the Melnychuks. It was cold, which I hate, and it was stand hunting, which I can do but am also not crazy about—especially when it's cold. I was in a very good place at a very good time, with the hard rut just kicking in. I saw and passed several bucks every day, some I would have passed anywhere, and some I might have taken anywhere else. On the fourth day I was sitting in a box blind, looking down a long outline that was also an active scrape line. At about 9:30, when I was sure I was going to freeze to death, something made me look back over my shoulder across an open field.

The sun had just come out, and there in the sunlight, gleaming against the dark treeline beyond, was a buck and a doe. The rack was high and appeared to be heavy. My impression was that it was huge in both body and antler, but there was no time to count points or anything else. I had almost let them pass, and they were just a few yards from cover. I crunched my body around, got the rifle up, held a touch high on the shoulder, and fired.


I found the buck dead just inside the treeline. It was indeed a big-bodied, fully

mature buck, but it was not huge. The height of the rack and the sun on the antlers had fooled me. Was I disappointed? Hardly! He was a perfect 10-pointer, rough-scoring about 158 inches, well short of the records book, but a very nice whitetail and a fine example of the Canadian whitetail that I had wanted for so long.

Saskatchewan has been pretty good to me. In 2001 I hunted there again, this time with Wayne Schigol's Great Grey Outfitters in the north-central part of the province. The conditions were far worse; it was the first week of the season and unseasonably warm. Worse, I had to cut the hunt short for some Marine Corps business. So I expected failure, and after several days of seeing very little, I was well on my way to achieving the same. That night it snowed, and the next morning, with snow still swirling down, a huge-bodied 10-pointer stepped in front of my stand.

This time I had all the time in the world, and I took it. From the body build and facial shape I was sure this buck was at least 5-1/2 years old. It was perfectly typical and very heavy, but not huge. I looked at it this way and that, finally deciding that it would hit the "camp minimum" of 150 inches by rough score, intended to conserve younger bucks and allow them to reach their full potential. As soon as I was sure I shot, and I watched it collapse in a spray of snow just at the limit of my vision.

I'm not wrapped up in records book score, and this will be one of very few stories I have ever written in which I quote it. It's important here because this particular buck scored 153, hardly a giant but a good, solid, respectable buck anywhere whitetail deer are hunted. For me this is the "right buck" to take and the right buck to look for. You can set your own standards lower if you wish. Obviously this depends on the area, but the real secret to me is to seek a fully adult buck. Given the maturity, any whitetail buck is a great trophy, score be damned, and I've always thought it a horrible shame to take a really nice 2-1/2 or even 3-1/2-year-old buck that has potential to grow much larger antlers. You can also set your personal standards higher, but don't count on eating a lot of venison. Even in the very best areas, if you pass a mature buck scoring somewhere in the 150's, there is a good chance you have just passed the biggest buck you're going to see. Of course, if you let him go there might be a "Booner" running right behind it. So you have to weigh your odds and make your choice. Right now! ■



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