

THE ALL-AM WHITETA

FOR MILLIONS OF AMERICANS THE WHITETAIL
DEER DEFINES THE HUNTING EXPERIENCE ...

AND A DARNED GOOD DEFINITION
HE PROVIDES!

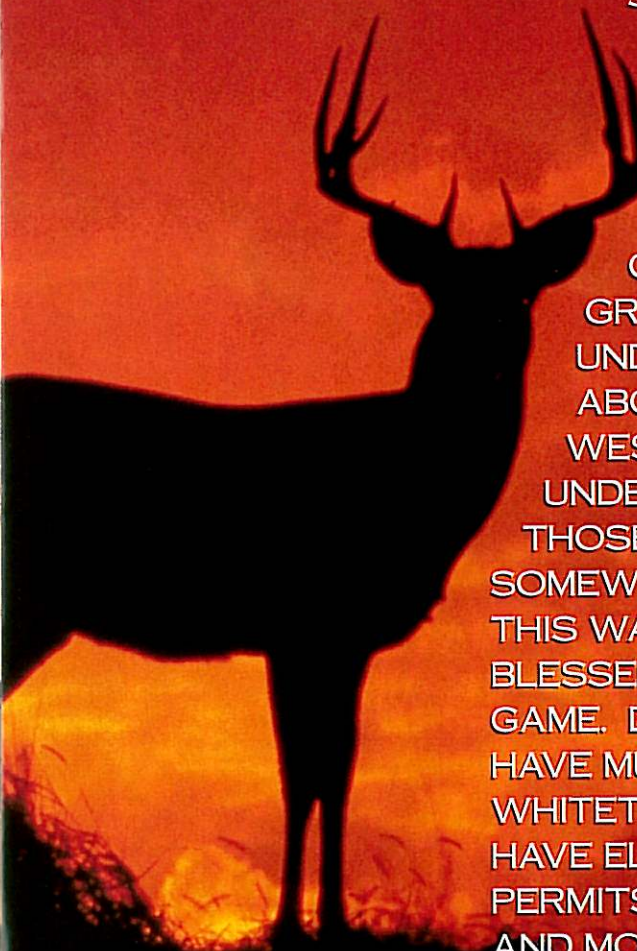


By Col. Craig
Boddington, USMCR
Professional Member
BOONE & CROCKETT CLUB

SENIOR FIELD EDITOR
Petersen's HUNTING

Background photograph by
Denver Bryan

AMERICAN ATL DEER



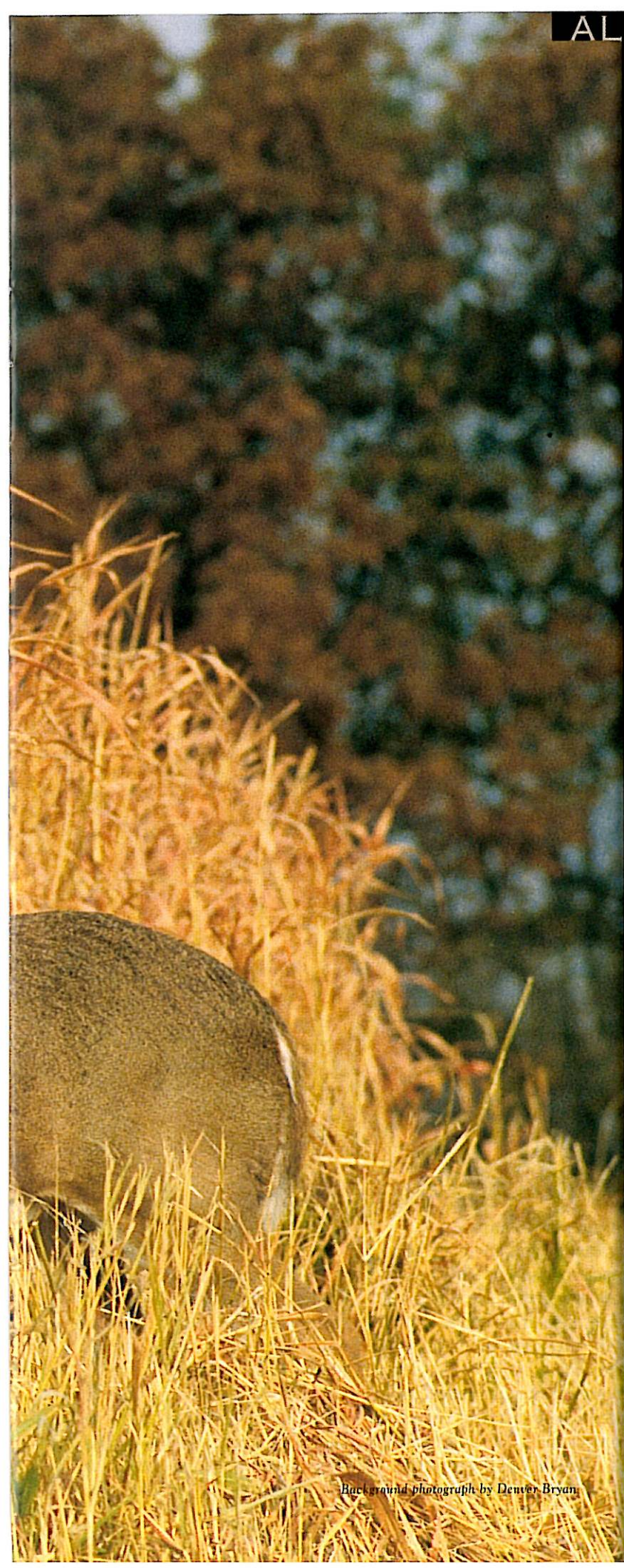
THE WHITETAIL DEER IS MORE THAN JUST ANOTHER OF OUR NORTH AMERICAN BIG-GAME ANIMALS. HE'S A PHENOMENON THAT'S AT THE CENTER OF A CULTURE, AN INDUSTRY ... ALMOST A RELIGION. THOSE OF YOU LIVING EAST OF THE GREAT PLAINS WILL ABSOLUTELY UNDERSTAND WHAT I'M TALKING ABOUT. THOSE OF YOU WHO LIVE WEST OF THE ROCKIES MAY NOT UNDERSTAND THIS AT ALL. AND THOSE OF YOU IN THE MIDDLE MAY BE SOMEWHAT DIVIDED. BUT LOOK AT IT THIS WAY: IN THE WEST WE'RE BLESSED WITH A WIDE VARIETY OF BIG GAME. DEPENDING ON THE AREA, WE HAVE MULE DEER, BLACKTAILS, MAYBE WHITETAILS, MAYBE COUES' DEER. WE HAVE ELK AND BLACK BEAR, AND PERMITS FOR MOOSE, GOAT, SHEEP, AND MORE. IN THE EAST WE HAVE A LITTLE BIT OF BLACK BEAR HUNTING AND A VERY FEW MOOSE PERMITS ... AND WE HAVE MILLIONS OF WHITETAIL DEER. THE WHITETAIL DEER IS BIG-GAME HUNTING FOR MOST HUNTERS IN THE EASTERN HALF OF THE UNITED STATES.



THE EASTERN ADAGE IS "HE WHO SITS THE LONGEST GETS THE DEER." THERE IS MUCH TRUTH TO THAT IN HARD-HUNTED WOODS.

PAUL SPENARD AND BODDINGTON WITH A BIG TURKEY AND A VERY NORMAL TEXAS HILL COUNTRY WHITETAIL. THIS AREA PRODUCES FEW MONSTERS, BUT IT'S FUN HUNTING WITH LOTS OF DEER, TURKEYS, JAVELINA -- THE WORKS!

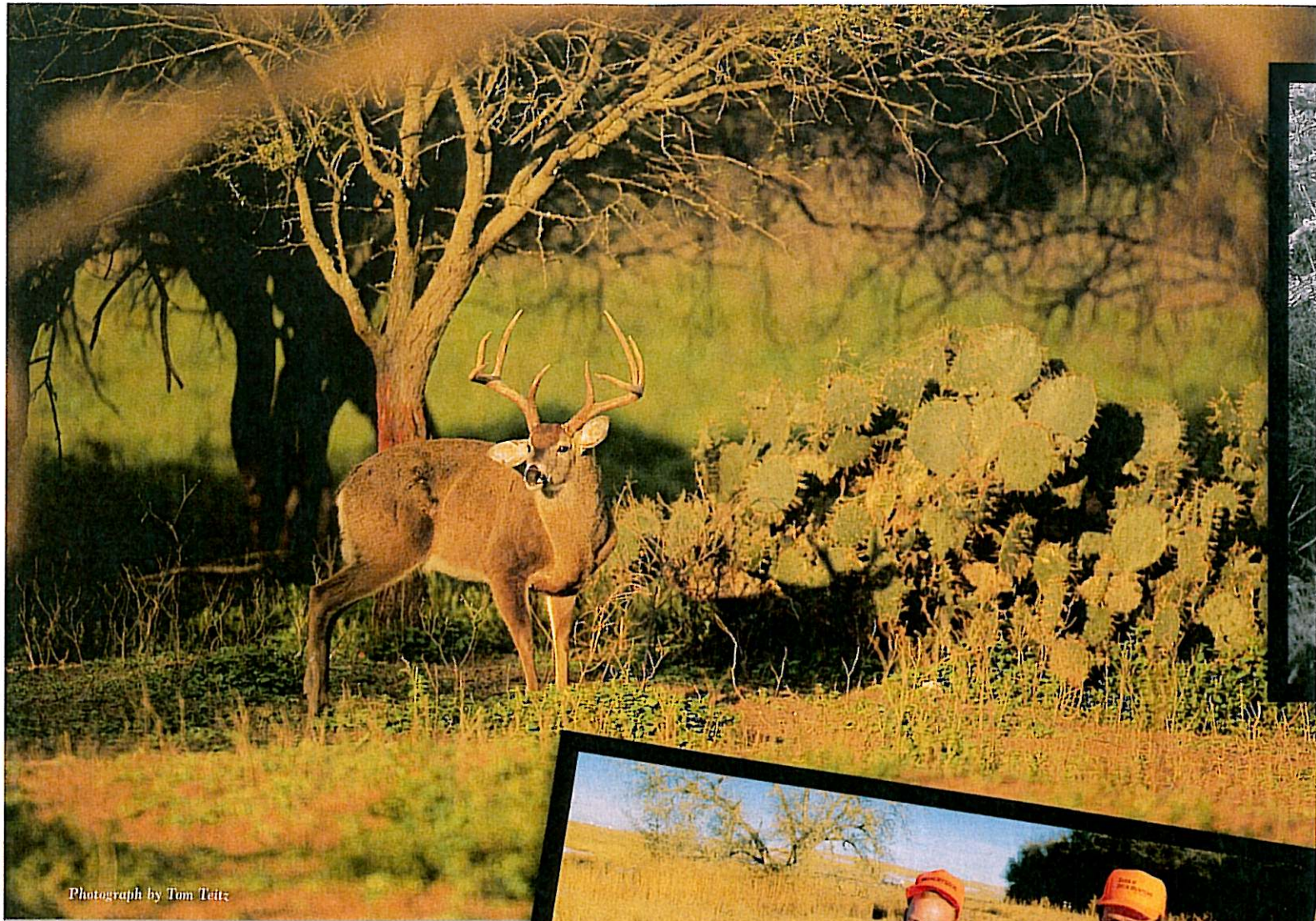




This would be important anyway, but it's especially important because hunter densities pretty much follow the population curve. There are more hunters in the East than the West . . . but I wonder to what extent this is because of the whitetail deer? American hunters have always pursued the game that was most available. In the 1920's and 1930's, when big game was at its lowest ebb, waterfowling was the most popular pursuit among American hunters. Uncontrolled market gunning coupled with the great drought of the Thirties ended the great days of waterfowling, but conditions were changing. F.D.R.'s "soil bank" made untold acreage ideal for upland birds, and then there were thousands of acres of small farms that lay fallow during World War II. Millions of G.I.'s returning from the war found unprecedented populations of upland birds. The Forties and Fifties were the years of the quail, pheasant, and grouse hunter. But slowly, slowly the whitetail deer was coming back. And suddenly he was there.

Land use changed again, with big, clean farming spelling an end to the great upland bird hunting I knew as a kid. But the whitetail deer didn't care. As late as the 1950's most areas had mere remnant populations. My own home state of Kansas didn't have a modern deer season until 1965. When I was growing up we never saw deer, and even the sight of a track was cause for celebration. Of course we know what Midwest whitetail hunting is like today! I don't know exactly when the whitetail population explosion really kicked off. It varied a little bit with the area, but by the 1960's it was in full swing in the eastern half of the United States. From remnant populations that had retreated into the deepest swamps and forests, the whitetail deer exploded. He proved himself to be incredibly adaptable, and given a little bit of protection he turned out to be best-suited to the edge habitat created by man's agriculture. Thanks to his crafty ways, it turned out that the new legions

Background photograph by Denver Bryan

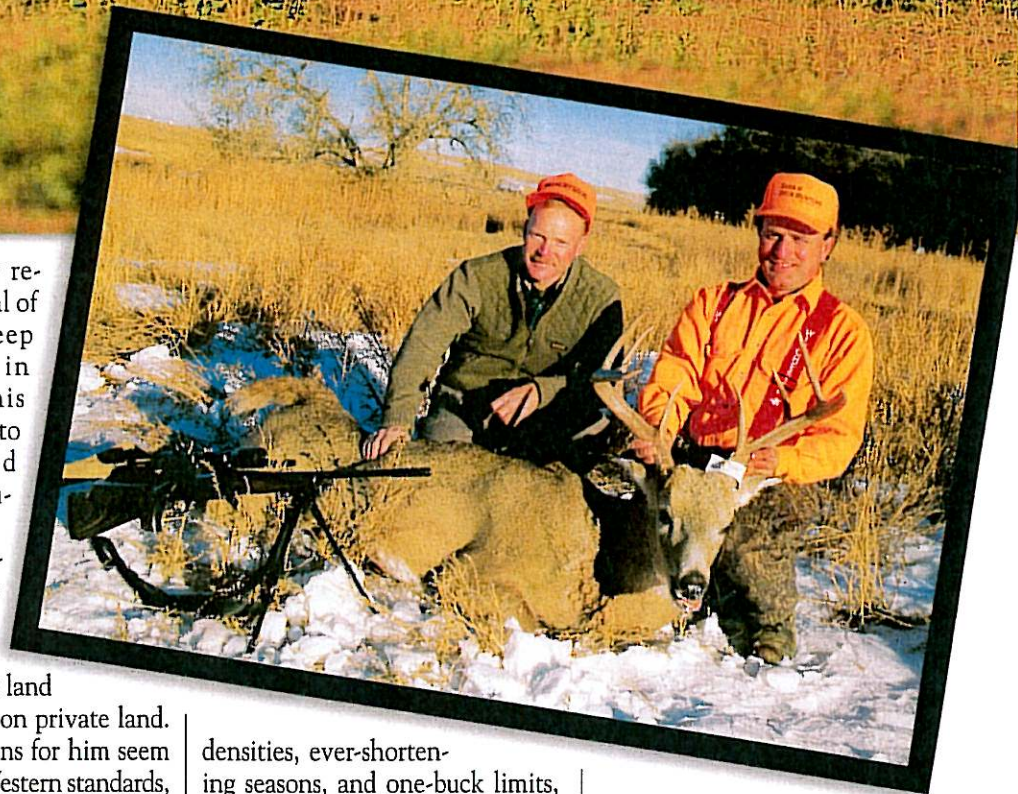


Photograph by Tom Teitz

PAT DURKIN AND THE AUTHOR WITH A LOVELY EASTERN COLORADO BUCK. THIS IS ANOTHER WHITETAIL THAT DOESN'T SCORE WELL AT ALL, BUT HE'S VERY HEAVY AND HAS LOTS OF CHARACTER — A GREAT BUCK.

of whitetail deer required a great deal of hunting to keep their numbers in bounds--and this has translated into unprecedented hunting opportunities.

The whitetail deer is wonderfully democratic. You find him on public land and you find him on private land. Many of the seasons for him seem absurdly long by Western standards, and some of the bag limits seem downright obscene. Alabama, for instance, boasts a "buck a day" limit through a season running three months and more. Some South Carolina counties open in August and close in December—and the tradition there is "no limit on bucks." We in the West, accustomed to much lower wildlife



densities, ever-shortening seasons, and one-buck limits, cannot comprehend such bounty--but what we mostly don't understand is that these limits and seasons are set for the most hunter-educated game animals in the world. A few very good hunters with equally good places to hunt take a lot of deer under such rules. But in general the odds still ride with the whitetails!

We have something like 10

million deer hunters in the United States, and of course most of them pursue the whitetail deer--of which there are at least 25 million today. Without a doubt the whitetail deer wouldn't exist in such plenty if not for the conservation efforts of hunters. But I'm not sure we as hunters appreciate the debt we owe to the whitetail. Hunters are a

This is in stark contrast to California, where I've lived for much of the last 20 years. California was once a great hunting state, and we still have some pretty good deer hunting here and there. But we don't have the whitetail deer. Our hunting opportunity has continued to decline, and many California hunters have given up. As a percentage of population California hunters aren't even worth talking about anymore. In a recent season deer tag returns showed just 30,000-odd deer taken by California hunters, this in one of the largest western states that used to have one of the largest deer herds. We could lose hunting in California and there are few of us left who would care. We don't have the whitetail deer. Ask the million Pennsylvania deer hunters who hit the woods on opening day whether deer hunting is important to them or not!

Any sport that has 10 million active participants is likely to have created a considerable industry, and indeed the whitetail has. There must be at least four dozen "designer" camouflage patterns. There are treestands, ladder stands, self-climbers, tripods, ground blinds by the score. Virtually any centerfire I can think of that's well-suited for whitetail would also be effective for a variety of other big game--but look at the tremendous improvements in shotgun slugs and both barrels and special-purpose shotguns designed for slugs in recent years. These may have other uses, but they were designed for the eastern whitetail hunter obligated by local law to use slugs. Even the current spate of in-line muzzleloaders was sparked primarily by whitetail hunters who wanted to take advantage of special muzzleloading seasons. And I'd be willing to bet at least 90 percent of the bowhunting industry revolves around whitetail hunting.

Then there are the "high-tech" products, those gadgets and gimmicks we all buy so we can be just a little bit more successful: calls, lures, cover scents, decoys, synthetic rattling antlers, you name it.

Within reasonable limits, it seems that anything you can think of that just might help bag a whitetail is marketable. And you know what? Most of these things work!

As a westerner I grew up hunting with legs and binoculars, in that order. These days I hunt mostly with binoculars and legs--in that order. There are certainly places where you can hunt whitetails this way. But not where the vast majority of our 10 million whitetail hunters hunt them! Whitetail deer aren't easy anywhere, but in the forests and woodlots and edge habitat all across the eastern half of the United States they are quite possibly the most difficult quarry on Earth. This is not entirely because the whitetail deer is a magical and super-intelligent creature. He likes to bed in heavy cover, and he has keen senses--all of them. But with the heavy hunt-

GUNWRITER GARY SITTON WITH A LOVELY SOUTH TEXAS WHITETAIL. THIS IS A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF A BETTER CLASS OF TEXAS DEER -- NO MONSTER, BUT A VERY PRETTY AND FULLY MATURE BUCK.

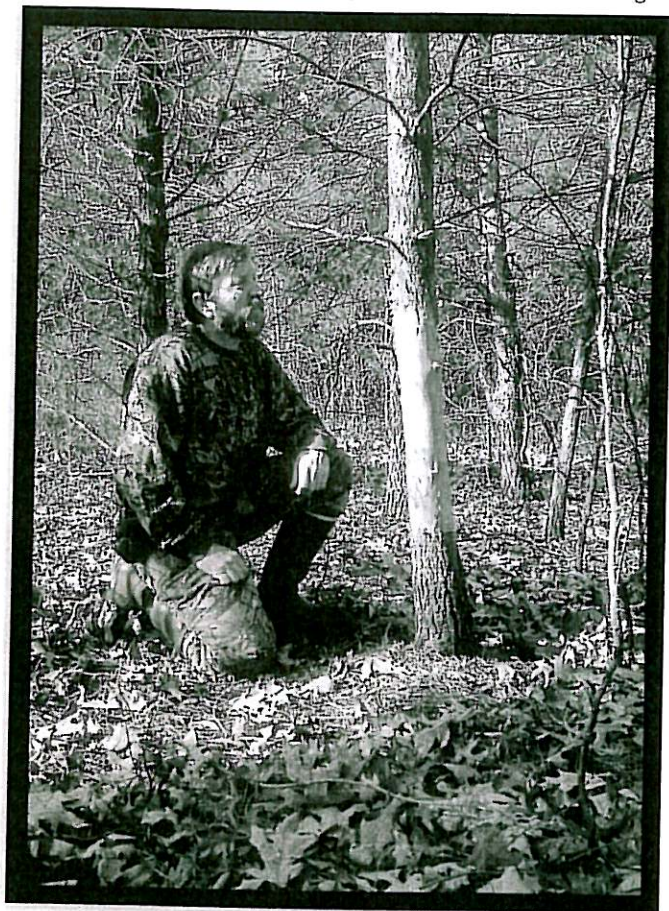
TEXAS IS THE CENTER OF ANTLER-RATTLING FOR WHITETAILS. THE METHOD WILL ACTUALLY WORK ANYWHERE UNDER THE RIGHT CONDITIONS -- BUT IT DOESN'T WORK ALL THE TIME ANYWHERE. NOR DOES ANYTHING ELSE.

much smaller percentage of the population than we have ever been . . . but without the whitetail deer we would be a much smaller minority yet. It's the whitetail, and only the whitetail, that has kept hunting strong in Pennsylvania, New York, the Deep South, the Great Lakes region, Texas, and more. Waterfowling, sadly, has become a sport for those who can afford duck clubs. Great upland gunning is a thing of the past. But whitetail hunting remains available to all. Unlike waterfowl and upland birds, whitetails thrive in the National Forests as well as on private land. Hunting opportunity is uneven and varies dramatically--but the key point is that there is opportunity to hunt the whitetail deer available to all. Opening day of deer season remains the major event of the year across a tremendous amount of whitetail range--and I simply can't imagine an end to hunting in areas where the whitetail is king.



ing pressure common to this region we provide the eastern whitetail with the most advanced education of any game animal on Earth. Due to the intensive harvest his num-

bers require, we make it so that relatively few bucks live to reach full maturity. Those that do are entirely different creatures, and they are indeed almost bullet-proof. They become primarily nocturnal and, homebodies that they are, they know every inch and every hideout in their home range.



thick stuff after them, but nothing is more difficult--and although you will probably hear the occasional snort and see a white flag now and again, sizing up antlers and shooting is even more difficult than just shooting! So eastern hunters--the majority of all whitetail hunters--play the waiting game. And they sweeten the pot with all the guile available to them.

The amazing thing is that all of these high-tech tactics work. It's just that the whitetail is unpredictable enough that none of them work all of the time! Some are very sensitive as to time of season. For instance, a mock scrape requires rutting activity. Antler rattling works very well when it works--but it works best just at the onset of the rut, and even then there must generally be some competition among the bucks for available does. Decoys are also uneven--but when they work they're awesome. Do I really believe a cover scent can fool a whitetail? Not for long, but sometimes long enough to offer a shot! I find calling extremely effective, and not especially sensitive as to time of season--but it won't work all of the time, and you'll usually never know why. But all of these things and more can work--and depending on the time of season the serious whitetail hunter uses all of them. Here are a few quick examples. I've done a lot of whitetail hunting in Texas, and of course I've always tried to time the rut exactly--but timing the rut is not a game for nonresidents. No matter how hard you try, invariably you'll be a few days off one way or the other. Texas is the center of horn-rattling, although it can work anywhere. But I had rattled my heart out on a bunch of good ranches, and I was getting very skeptical. John Wootters himself rattled in the first buck I ever saw come to the "horns," and it was just like you read about. He was a pretty fair buck and I could have shot him, but I was mostly fascinated by the aggressive behavior he showed as he strode into the clearing and started thrashing a mesquite. Since then I've seen it work a few

times, never consistently. But about three years ago Charley White rattled up six bucks one afternoon from one stand. You bet it can work--but not always.

A few years ago I was hunting the low country of South Carolina. It was October, fairly early, but there was some pre-rut activity going on. I was sitting in a treestand overlooking a food plot, and there was an active scrape line going off to my left. In spite of a perfect setup, there was absolutely nothing happening--but it was a very hot, muggy, and still morning and I wasn't too surprised. About nine o'clock, when I was ready to die from boredom, I pulled out a grunt tube and blew a soft series. Using any technique when you're bored and hopeless is dangerous, because you're almost sure to overdo it. So I looked at my watch and made sure 20 minutes passed before I blew the call again--sparingly. Right after the third series a nice eight-pointer swaggered in from my left, looking for the intruder. He was 30 feet from my tree when I shot him. Another time, in Alabama, I set up on the edge of some cover overlooking a little plowed field, a likely enough place for a buck to cross based on the topography. My host and friend, Gene Dismukes, had given me some of his "Diz's" deer lure and insisted I try it. So, expecting nothing, I poured some of it onto the ground about 50 yards in front of the stand. I think it was about eight o'clock when a nice little buck came trotting across the field. There was all the time in the world, so I let him come. He hit the scent stream from that lure, slammed on the brakes, turned into it, and had his head down and was pawing at the stuff when I shot him. Mind you, it isn't always that easy. In fact, it almost never is. But there's nothing wrong with having a full repertoire of tricks and tactics at your disposal. With the whitetail you usually need them!

To tell the truth, you also need a good place to hunt them, especially if you're interested in big, fully mature bucks. A far bet-

Hunters who consistently take mature whitetails anywhere east of the Great Plains are indeed hunters without parallel . . . and they need all the help they can get.

As a westerner I was very slow to come to appreciate some of these gimmicks--the scents and lures and calls and whatnot. In fact, I figured it was all bunk and I could hunt whitetails just like everything else. Again, there are places where you can do this . . . but not where most folks hunt whitetails. The whitetail loves agriculture, and he will almost always come out to feed if there's grain or soybeans or alfalfa or some other treat. But educated whitetails--especially big educated whitetails--are likely to come out only at night. You can go into the

NO MATTER HOW GOOD THE COUNTRY LOOKS, DEER HAVE TO BE THERE BEFORE YOU CAN HUNT THEM. WHITE-TAIL HUNTING IS FIRST AND FOREMOST A MATTER OF LOCATING FRESH SIGN. THIS IS A GOOD, FRESH RUB -- SURE SIGN THAT A BUCK IS IN THE AREA, AND NOT TOO FAR AWAY.

ter whitetail hunter than I am said it better than I ever could: How you hunt whitetails probably isn't nearly as important as where you hunt them! You can study the record book as well as I can, and if you do so you'll quickly discover that there are just a few noticeable hot spots. Wisconsin and Min-

nesota have always produced large numbers of big bucks. Western Canada is very good, and these days the Midwest is truly astonishing--Iowa, Ohio, Illinois, Kansas, northern Missouri.

This is no secret, but it's also worth noting that a

big buck can turn up darn near anywhere in their vast domain. To a degree this depends on your concept of a big buck. If you mean a buck scoring 200 typical points there are very few places where you have even a ghost of a chance. If you mean a buck scoring the all-time minimum typical of 170 points there are few more spots. If you mean 160 points, the minimum for the three-year books, then there are quite a lot of places. And if you mean a nice, heavy-antlered buck of 4-1/2 years or more, then such a buck can turn up anywhere. We hunters, being human, tend to believe the grass is always greener somewhere else. Usually it isn't, and it definitely isn't with the whitetail. Put this in the bank: The best place to hunt whitetail deer is in your own backyard. This is assuming first that you have whitetail deer where you live, and second that you can find a place to hunt where

INSET: THIS IS AN OLD-FASHIONED PERMANENT STAND ALONG A NEBRASKA RIVER BOTTOM. THESE DAYS IT TAKES PRETTY UNSOPHISTICATED WHITETAILS FOR A SETUP LIKE THIS TO WORK -- AND THIS ONE DID.

BELOW: THIS IS THE AUTHOR'S BEST-EVER WHITETAIL, A VERY WIDE-RACKED, 10-POINTER WITH GOOD TINES AND REASONABLE MASS. DON'T BE MISLED; BUCKS LIKE THIS, AND BIGGER ONES YET, OCCUR IN TEXAS -- BUT THEY AREN'T FOUND BEHIND EVERY BUSH.



**INSET: MANITOBA
OUTFITTER "TRAPPER"
DON McRAE WITH A
PAIR OF SHEDS HE
PICKED UP IN HIS
HUNTING AREA. LIKE
MANY GREAT BUCKS,
THIS ONE WAS NEVER
TAKEN... PROOF THAT
THERE IS ALMOST NO
LIMIT TO HOW BIG
WHITETAILED CAN GET.
BOTTOM: CRAIG
LEERBERG AND
OUTFITTER DARRELL
TURNER WITH A LOVELY
ALBERTA BUCK. THIS IS
A BUCK WEIGHING OVER
300 POUNDS, CARRYING
A MASSIVE RACK WITH
LOTS OF CHARACTER.
HE ISN'T RECORD
CLASS, BUT HE'S A FINE
WHITETAIL FOR ANY-
WHERE. THIS IS THE
KIND OF BUCK YOU CAN
GET IN CANADA -- WITH
A BIT OF LUCK.**

you don't have to fight the crowds. Given these two conditions, the best chances for trophy whitetail are close to home. You can scout the off-season and find out what's really there, and you can find out where the deer are living and exactly what they're feeding on at different times of the year. And you can be patient and bide your time. In most states you can hunt the bow season and the blackpowder season and finally the rifle season. You can wait for the peak of the rut to go into your secret spots, and if the wind is unfavorable you can sit out for a day or a weekend. When you travel far from home you can do none of these things. Whitetail hunting, at its best, is an insider's game--and most of the really great whitetail deer have been taken by residents hunting close to home.

These are the facts, but human nature being as it is, sooner or later most serious whitetail hunters are likely to convince themselves that the buck of their dreams lies in some distant state or province. And some of us that covet a big whitetail don't live in whitetail country, so we have little choice but to venture afield. The search will probably not be easy, and the record books are somewhat misleading. There are quite a few areas that produce good numbers of big whitetails... but few of them are user-friendly for outsiders. Research, for instance, points to Wisconsin and Minnesota as two likely spots. Both of these areas, however, have short and intensive seasons and virtually no outfitting industry. Not easy.

The farmland of western Iowa and southern Illinois is fabulous, and there are a few outfitters springing up in these prime areas. But you'll probably have to hunt with shotguns, muzzleloaders, or archery tackle. That isn't such a bad deal, but it does substantially decrease the odds on the typically short hunt a nonresident is relegated to. Kansas is fabulous... sort of. At long last my home state is offer-

ing a few nonresident tags, and I can go home to hunt deer again. But there are no tags in that wonderfully vulnerable river bottom country out west. The areas that are open are good, but not materially better than the woodlot country elsewhere in the Midwest.

Then there's Canada, legendary home to monster whitetails. They're there, all right. Saskatchewan, Alberta, Manitoba, eastern B.C.--all places where you can find the whitetail of a lifetime. But you should have a clear understanding of the odds going in. Very few of even the best outfitters reach 50 percent success, especially when you're talking about truly big whitetails. The hunting up there is very weather-sensitive, and the actual deer densities are very low... as low as one deer per square mile in some of the best trophy country.

If it sounds like I'm down on Canadian whitetail hunting, I'm not. The monsters are there, and well they should be. Three-hundred-pound whitetail can grow bigger antlers than deer half this size! But it's realistic to understand that a Canadian hunt is a post-graduate whitetail hunt; it's going for the long ball, and I believe that's what you should go for. In three trips to Alberta I haven't fired a shot yet. I've turned down some bucks I wouldn't turn down anywhere else--but I haven't yet seen the kind of buck I went there to find. I'll go back, and perhaps someday I will!

Without a doubt Texas is the most user-friendly state for non-residents to hunt whitetails. The deer there are an industry, and whitetails are managed wonderfully on good private ranches. Which is not to say the whole state is trophy country--it depends on what you're looking for. Throughout the Hill Country and Edwards Plateau you can enjoy a fun hunt where you'll see lots and lots of deer. You probably won't see any monsters, but not everybody is looking for a monster. Down along the Gulf Coast you'll see a little better class

of deer--still a fun hunt in much different country, and real big ones are rare. But you can see a lot of deer and enjoy a fine hunt. Or you can go to the famed Brush Country of South Texas and get serious. You'll undoubtedly see a lot fewer deer, but the upper end gets a good deal larger. My own best-ever whitetail came from Texas, but keep in mind that genuine monsters aren't lurking behind every bush. In the real trophy country you're out of the sure-thing business, and the best hunting is very rut-sensitive. But if you do good research in both picking a time and an outfitter the chances for a very nice buck are pretty good. The real drawback to Texas hunting is that the best trophy ranches are just plain expensive, definitely not for everybody.

It's impossible to talk about the whole world of whitetail hunting in one article--it's just too big. But a wonderful and often-overlooked region is the entire Great Plains, east of the Rockies and west of the corn belt. It would be great if you could get a western Kansas tag, but you can't if you don't live there. You can get a tag in western Oklahoma, eastern Colorado, western Nebraska, eastern Wyoming, the western Dakotas, and eastern Montana. All of these areas are good, and there's a good outfitting industry in Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana. Most of the whitetails are on private land, but provided you're willing to do some research there's also good opportunity for do-it-yourself hunting.

The upper end of the bucks in this region is generally not as big as the best Canadian bucks, but it's pretty darned good. Deer densities are generally not high, but they tend to follow the river bottoms. Mind you, that isn't exactly the same as living in the river bottoms--many of the best bucks have figured out that's where hunters look for them, and these days we often find big whitetails out in the sagebrush. The good thing about this region is that it's both huntable and very lightly hunted.

In some areas you can glass for whitetails just like pronghorn and mulies, and in other areas you can stand-hunt along the river bottoms--but it's an awful lot of fun.

A couple of years ago, through binoculars, Kevin Howard and I watched Deer & Deer Hunting's Pat Durkin and outfitter Tom Tietz stalk a wonderful whitetail on some open sagebrush ridges--darn near a spectator sport. We got that one. Two days earlier we bedded a buck up in some high rimrock, and when we got there we just couldn't find him. He came out of some rocks right under my feet, but it wasn't my shot. He hung in midair right next to me, a big, beautiful 10-pointer, and then he was off like a broken-field runner, speeded along the way by some parting salutes.

This region has become my favorite area to hunt whitetails. The last couple of seasons I've been hunting with and guiding for Tom Tietz in Colorado, and I've been hunting with Mike Watkins' Tro-

phies Plus outfit, straddling the line from northeastern Wyoming to southeastern Montana. I also hunted in western Nebraska two seasons ago and found wonderfully unsophisticated river bottom bucks. All of this region is excellent, so there is tremendous opportunity--but keep in mind that almost nowhere are the licenses easy to come by. Part of the reason it's good is because the hunting is limited, so you have to do your homework and plan ahead. Sometimes way ahead--it takes a couple of years to get a good eastern Colorado tag, courtesy of the preference point system. I think it's worth the wait.

The truth, however, is that hunting whitetails on the Great Plains, or on a good ranch in Texas, or even hunting those scarce monsters in

Canada, is simply not the same game as hunting those hard-hunted Eastern whitetails. In fact, it's hardly like hunting the same animal. You need to hunt those hunter-educated, virtually unkillable bucks in the Eastern forests and swamps to really appreciate these places. Which is no doubt why so many hunters from great Eastern whitetail country travel West every year. I'm still not sure the grass is really greener, but I don't really blame them!

