

Destined

Trophy Whitetails

By Bill Winke

OK, here's the question I am going to answer because I have actually had someone ask me this: If your life depends on shooting a whopper during a 10-day hunt, where would you hunt and when would you go there? I never thought of whitetail hunting as life and death (except for the animal), but when you think about it in these terms, it gets ice-cold serious. You have to throw whimsy out the window and go straight to the hard numbers. Emotion will only get you killed.

Though I have hunted 16 of the best big buck states and three Canadian provinces for whitetails, I have certainly not killed giant deer in all those places. I have not even seen giant deer in all those areas. In fact, I haven't seen giant deer in very many of them.

So I can't rely strictly on my own experiences. Shooting a monster whitetail is a tough test, maybe the toughest in hunting. More comprehensive than my own limited experience is the Trophy Search Database maintained by the Boone and Crockett Club. You can go to the Club's web site and subscribe to this amazing resource.

I want to know where the big ones are coming from right now—not where they came from 10, or even five years ago. State game laws, hunting pressure and land-use practices change, and it is very important to stay on top of those trends. The best way to do that is to get your hands on the most current data possible. Enter the Trophy Search database.

My primary focus was on bucks that were shot in 2005, 2006 and 2007. Since my life depends on this and the person asking the question didn't stipulate between typical and non, I will definitely open up my search to include both. From these two lists, I was able to arrive at a few conclusions.

Looking At The Numbers

Setting up the search to produce a ranking by state and province, I learned that Wisconsin is the once—and still—king of mega-bucks (the animal, not the lottery). No surprise there. Second was Illinois; again no surprise, but then it started to get interesting. I expected Iowa or Kansas to be number three, but it was Kentucky. Then Saskatchewan followed by Indiana and finally by Iowa. Kansas was a lowly tenth after Minnesota, Ohio and Missouri. Times they are a changin'. I sure didn't expect Iowa and Kansas to be that far down the list. Makes me wonder what I am missing in Kentucky.



Author with his biggest, a Colorado buck taken in 2000. Big deer are where you find them. The right property is more important than the right state or even the right county. Though the odds favor some states more than others, in the end you must have access to hunt a property where such deer exist.

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Top Five Whitetail Locations From 2005-2007





Wisconsin is the one—and still—king of trophy whitetails. Five counties stand out above all others: Buffalo, Shawano, Trempealeau, Richland, and Sauk. The buck pictured at left scoring 171-1/8 points was taken by Paul R. Voss in Sauk County. Below, William C. Remington is pictured with his Buffalo County buck scoring 184-1/8 points.

When looking at the non-typicals, the numbers are slightly different. The top-10 is made up of the same states and provinces, but the order changes. Illinois is number one followed by Iowa, Wisconsin, Indiana, Missouri, Ohio, Kansas, Kentucky, Saskatchewan and Minnesota. Illinois was far ahead in this category. You can see the actual results in the attached tables.

This is not going to be easy. Let's put the do-or-die quest

in perspective. More record-book bighorn sheep were killed in Montana during the past three seasons than record-book typical whitetails in Illinois. When you consider the number of hunters that went after Montana sheep versus Illinois deer, you can see that the odds are very much like winning the lottery—the state lottery, not the mega-millions—but is still a very tough task. I may as well start taking measurements for that casket.

When you combine both categories for the top-10 typical and non-typical, the list goes this way: Wisconsin then Illinois. Both are well ahead of Iowa, which is in



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third place. Then comes Kentucky close behind, followed by Indiana, Saskatchewan, Ohio, Missouri, Minnesota and Kansas.

This list would definitely give you the impression that Wisconsin and Illinois are the places to be. Both are awesome big buck producers, to be sure, but there is much more to this decision. I am not concerned with trying to figure out which state is most likely to produce a giant buck. I am worried about which one is most likely to produce a giant buck for me. There is a big difference. It all comes down to the number of monster bucks per hunter and the ease with which the land can be hunted.

The numbers fade to become only a backdrop for the rest of this article; now I get into the actual places I would hunt.

Making The Decision

Remember, I am trying to look through and past the numbers to find a tree stand where I can shoot a giant buck or face the guillotine. The ideal spot is one with lots of big deer and limited cover in which they



can hide. It is not easy to find such spots, but that has become my survival plan. Let me give you an example.

I have hunted or traveled through most of the counties in my home state of Iowa. If my life came down to shooting a Booner in Iowa, I would start by narrowing my search to the counties in the southwest portion of the state. These counties are hunted less, yet they turn in very good numbers of trophy bucks. When you look at the number of trophies divided by the number of hunters, these counties are at the top of the list.



Illinois was no surprise as the second-best trophy whitetail deer state behind Wisconsin. Four counties rise above the others: Clark, Pike, Hancock, and Fulton. The buck pictured above was taken in Pike County and has a final score of 187-6/8 points. It was taken in 2004 by Mike C. Brown.



The farms in this area, for the most part, are comprised of open fields with narrow, brushy draws and thick, overgrown fence lines. In cover like this, I would have a very good chance of finding the same buck during the season that I located by driving the back roads during summer—the very best way I know to find a giant deer.

So southwest Iowa is one option, and it would be a good one for me since I am sure I can find someone there who knows someone I know who might take pity on my plight. But likely there are other spots.

Now let's look at the numbers a little closer to find the hidden gems. Saskatchewan shows up nicely on both lists. It is number six when you throw typical and non-typical together. I wonder how the number of deer hunters in Saskatchewan compares to, oh let's say Wisconsin? Saskatchewan produces slightly less than half the number of record deer, but Saskatchewan has only 70,000 total hunters (not all deer hunt). By comparison, Wisconsin fields roughly ten times that number of deer hunters alone each year. So you immediately see that while Wisconsin produces plenty of big deer, it is in part because there are a lot of hunters in the forests.

If I had to pick between Wisconsin or Saskatchewan on the whole, I would definitely choose Saskatchewan (and Alberta too for that matter, even though it didn't

make the top-10). This is because with heavy scouting and hard hunting, I feel I can find a record deer in either of these two provinces and have a decent chance of getting on him during the season—in the open farmland portions of these provinces.

There is likely a CRP (Conservation Reserve Program) field or irrigation ditch somewhere in Kansas that would be the very best of all places to shoot a monster. I have hunted Kansas a fair amount and while I don't pretend to know every corner of the state, I never found the promised land. I know many guys who have hunted the state their entire lives and have yet to shoot a trophy deer. I like the fact that hunter numbers are low in Kansas and the cover is limited. I will keep Kansas on the list.

Now for Illinois. I have also hunted Illinois a decent amount. Like most of the Midwest, you not only have to be in the right county, you have to be on the right farm. In fact, the right county is much less important than the right farm because most counties in Illinois, Wisconsin, Kansas, Iowa, Minnesota, Ohio, Missouri, etc. have the good genetics required to produce a whopper.

I am getting at a point that is going to hit me squarely between the eyes every time I turn around in this quest. It is not so much where you go in the Midwest, but who you know. The Midwest is definitely

insider country. You have to have connections or a very good outfitter, or you may as well be hunting in Florida. Well, maybe that is not exactly true, but you get the point. You have to be on the right farm and the right farm changes from one year to the next.

I am going to have to take matters into my own hands. Since I know more people in Iowa than in any other Midwestern state, I am going to choose Iowa, but if I knew more people in Illinois or Ohio, I would pick them. It is simple: go to the best states you can, where you have the most contacts. Without contacts, you will have to hire someone to guide you. I am not sure I want to place my life in someone else's hands like that. They don't have quite the same motivation I do.

I have not dropped Saskatchewan or Alberta from the list, but you are dealing with default monster buck management there, for the most part. I don't want to risk that. I want to hunt a farm where the animals are actively managed and where I know some Booners exist. It is a tough call choosing between my best connected state in the Midwest and Saskatchewan or Alberta, but I'm going to stick with the Midwest.

If I didn't have any natural contacts in the Midwest, I would definitely head to western Canada—Saskatchewan or Alberta—no questions asked. That would be a no-brainer.

Kentucky is the surprising third-ranked state for trophy typical whitetail deer. When we combine typical and non-typical whitetail deer, three counties stand out: Union, Casey, and Pulaski. This buck shown at right was taken in Casey County by E. Brad Calvert in 2005.



KENTUCKY

UNION

CASEY

PULASKI

When To Go

I would hunt both areas during the time when the mature bucks are the most vulnerable. In western Canada, I would schedule my trip for the time when the first does are coming into estrous. It is the single time when the mature bucks are most likely to make a mistake and travel during the day. The rest of the year (save for the summer), many of those same deer would be mostly or entirely nocturnal. In that part of the world, we are looking at roughly November 3 through November 10.

In the Midwest, regardless of when it fell, I would definitely hunt opening week of the gun season. In these areas, early November is almost exclusively the province of bowhunters. I would not trust my life to the 40 or even 50-yard range of a bow. I would have the very best legal arm for the state I was going to hunt and I would be able to hit a dime with it at 200 yards. I am only going to get one shot, if I am very lucky, so I had better not miss.

How To Hunt

How you hunt is nearly as important as where you hunt, so I would take this part of the formula very seriously. To give myself the very best possible chance, when hunting in the Midwest, I would scout well in advance of the season using trail cameras to pin down the most likely bedding area of the biggest buck I could find. If I couldn't find a Booner with my cameras, I would try a different farm. You will never shoot a monster if you are not hunting where one lives. It is that simple. The first step then, is to find the monster.

I would hunt that buck near that expected bedding area the first day. I would not leave my stand during daylight. Other hunters will likely bump the deer if he is not where I expect him, so he very well might show up on the morning of day two, day three or even day four. During the afternoons, starting on day two, I would be hunting the very best food source in that area. It is a long shot, but the buck might move toward food during the day to look for does or to feed, if the area isn't hunted too hard. If it is hunted hard, he probably wouldn't be there to begin with.

If the season is only a few days long, as it is in some Midwest states, I would make sure to leave myself at least one day to take the hunt to the buck. Regardless, after the fourth day, I would start to perform small, two-man deer drives—one friend bumping while I take up stands in the most likely exit routes. That strategy has the most potential for success.

If I'm hunting in western Canada, I will just do what the guide tells me to do. He understands his country and deer better than I possibly could. If I didn't feel he was going to do everything possible to put a giant in front of me, I would find someone else. I would rely very heavily on references and would not leave anything to chance. I would most assuredly make at least one trip into the hunting area to look things over for myself well in advance. That is not something any normal outfitter would permit if your life didn't depend on it, but I think they would make the exception if it did.

I would want to hunt natural movement for the first half of the trip and then I would want to push some bush to make things happen if natural movement wasn't producing the necessary opportunities.

In the end, I suspect I would not kill my Booner; the odds certainly don't favor it no matter how hard or smart I would hunt, but at least I would go down swinging. If you take this same level of serious contemplation to your own whitetail quest, you will surely shoot more giant bucks. Just don't bet your life on it. ■



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