

Tax Dollars and WHITETAILED

Does it pain you to settle up with Uncle Sam? Maybe you'll feel better knowing that your tax dollars have built some of the finest whitetail hunting on grounds open to all.

By **A.E. Walsh**

Photographs courtesy of Author

Ideally we could all hunt legendary whitetails on hallowed ground; however, the reality is that many will never have the opportunity. In fact, it's becoming harder and harder to find private land to hunt, with or without a famous moniker. For many of us, our best options lie in the public grounds set aside and managed with our hard-earned tax dollars. The problem is that there are a lot more of us than them, and it's no secret that quality whitetails tend to shy away from the oft-overcrowded state and federal lands. At least that's the perception.


Scattered across our fruited plains and purple mountain majesties are whitetail opportunities that rival any found on private land. With a little research, a few phone calls and the persistence to overcome the odds, your record-book whitetail could come from public lands.

Where to Begin

The first step in finding your next wall hanger is to take a look at your situation. Do you have all the time and money in the world? (Then your best bet may be a trip to one of the legendary outfits mentioned above!) Or are you on a limited budget, both in terms of finances and time away from home? Does the challenge of the do-it-yourself hunt pique your interest? If this is the case, there are millions of acres of state and federal lands for you to try your hand.

The next step is deciding how far you can get without making trouble for yourself. Consider more than just the time and expense involved in the hunt itself (travel, licenses/tags, lodging, food, etc.); factor in the costs of thoroughly scouting the area, as well. After you've defined your constraints, pull out a map and isolate the area you are willing/able to venture. With the exception of a few major metropolitan areas, you'll be surprised how much publicly accessible land falls within a day's drive. (Later, I outline a few public hot spots scattered across the country that are consistent producers of big bucks. Chances are one of these is within a reasonable distance from your front door.) For some, this may include forays into other states; others may be immediately surrounded by opportunity. While traveling out of state may add to the sense of adventure, something to keep in mind is that it will also add to the cost, as non-resident licensing fees are always higher. Generally speaking, the farther you go, the higher the price tag.

Once you've considered how far you can roam, contact the state fish and game agencies that govern your radius and inquire about public lands open to deer hunting. Although much of this information can be easily gleaned from the internet (see sidebar for a listing of all state wildlife agencies), dialing directory assistance is always an option. Every wildlife agency I've talked to is more than willing to point you in the right direction, and if you request to speak with a deer biologist, often they can tell you which specific areas and hunts are producing the biggest bucks. Chances are there will be more than one.



Private property that is hunted hard can be your best ally in the search for trophy whitetails. This buck, formerly on leased ground, jumps a fence on to public lands. A stand set up at these boundaries can prove lucrative.

OPPOSITE: With a blue pen for typical records and a red marker for non-typical records, the author lays out a map of past record-book entries by county. This gives him a better sense of an area's potential by identifying density patterns.

Part of the challenge will be determining which land has the best potential for a trophy-class animal. A valuable resource is the Boone and Crockett Club's record books. Given that the three determinants of a deer's trophy potential are age, genetics and forage, the "locality killed" column is a good indicator of the quality of game in the area. Genetics and quality of forage generally remain consistent over time, so a big-buck country should carry these necessary components from year to year. Also, poke around to see if there's a state record book that may give you additional insight into specific areas. Be aware of the dates of harvest; while older trophies may speak to potential genetics in the area, additional research into the forage condition is necessary to insure changes aren't adversely affecting the trophy output. Lastly, when considering an area's trophy potential don't get caught up in the biggest buck. A county with several B&C record holders will almost always outshine those with one single whopper.

Planning for Public Bucks

Once you have an idea of which area to hunt, it's critical to get as much information about the hunt area as possible. Remember, public grounds are more of a "free for all", so the more recon you can do, the better your odds of not only outsmarting a trophy-class buck, but your fellow hunters.

Of particular benefit are aerial photos, especially if you are not intimately familiar with the land. For a nominal fee (between about \$5 and \$20 from www.terraserver.com) you can get satellite photos of varying scales to get a bird's eye view of travel routes, bedding areas and natural funnels. Even more important, you'll get an overhead view of roads and trails most likely used by hunters, and therefore areas to avoid. Topographical maps are equally useful and available from Terraserver.com, as well.

Although not always possible due to distance and time, try to schedule several scouting trips at different times of the year. Take notes on rubs, trails, bedding areas and food sources, and then when you get home plot them on your satellite and topo maps. Look especially for lone mast trees near bedding areas (the acorns will tend to be sweeter from a single oak), as well as trails in and around heavy cover (the thicker the better). These will be likely spots for an ambush. On public land, this ground work is the key to gaining the advantage.

Familiarize yourself with the regulations, even if you are a resident. Many (most!) wildlife areas operate under slightly different regulations than the statewide proclamation,

INSIDE THE NUMBERS

ON-LINE TROPHY DATABASE
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Search By Category

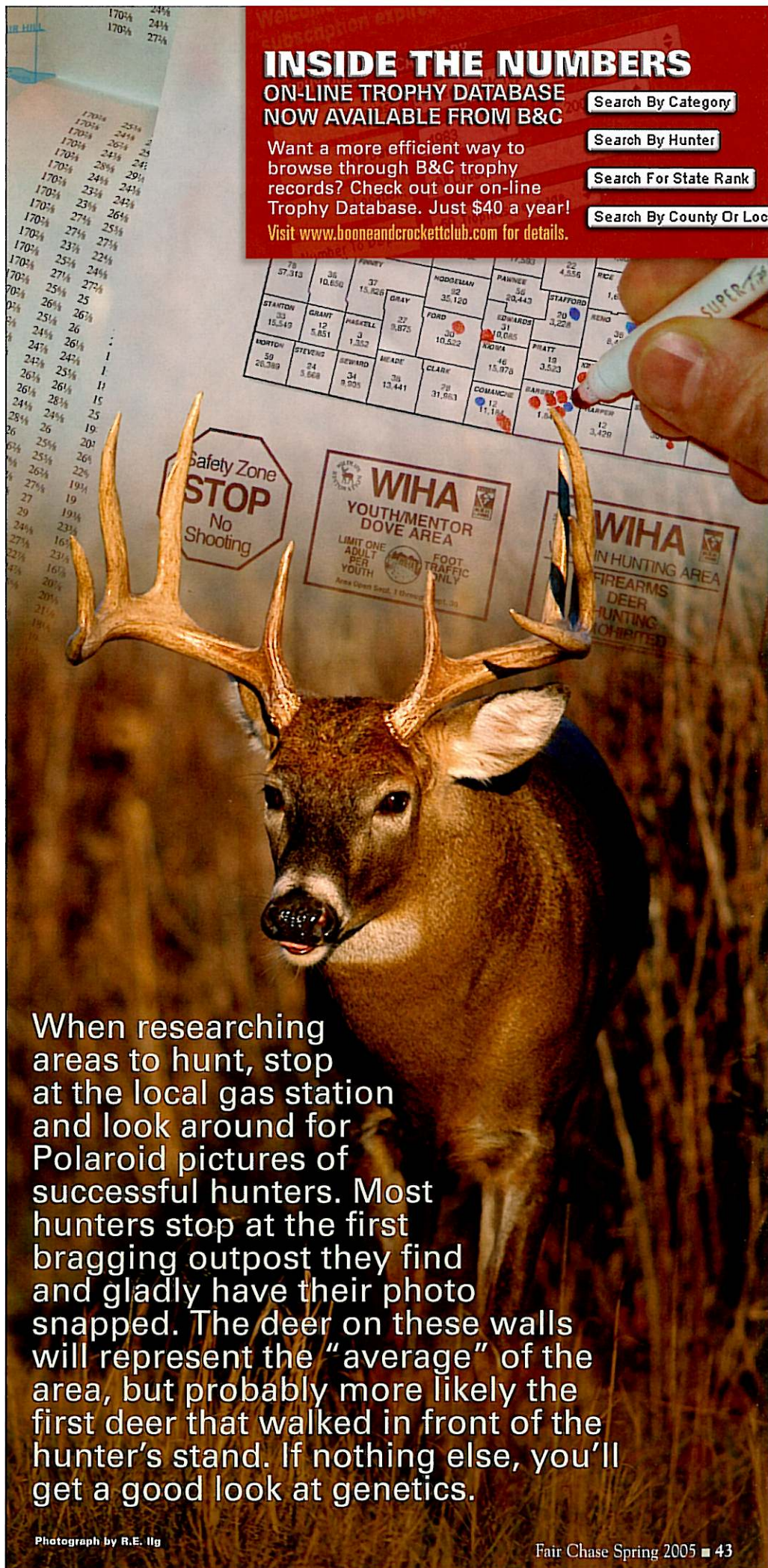
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Want a more efficient way to browse through B&C trophy records? Check out our on-line Trophy Database. Just \$40 a year!

Visit www.booneandcrockettclub.com for details.



When researching areas to hunt, stop at the local gas station and look around for Polaroid pictures of successful hunters. Most hunters stop at the first bragging outpost they find and gladly have their photo snapped. The deer on these walls will represent the "average" of the area, but probably more likely the first deer that walked in front of the hunter's stand. If nothing else, you'll get a good look at genetics.

The Self-Guided Hunter...

IMAGES FROM ABOVE

Hunting whitetails on public lands is hard enough, but doing so blind is begging for Lady Luck to take over. While there is a tremendous amount to be gained walking an area, it isn't until you can see the lay of the land from the bird's eye perspective that you can truly strategize for the hunt. Although obvious land features such as trails, habitat types, roads and waterways are apparent at ground level, their relationship to each other is the key to building your game plan.

Until recently, finding aerial photos was hit and miss; You could spend many hours and even more dollars hoping the government at one time had reason to snap a photo of the very ground you wanted to hunt. Now countless private-enterprise imaging satellites circle the globe in continuum, snapping detailed photos along the way.

Terraserver.com is a clearinghouse for such technology, allowing users to retrieve satellite images by coordinates, city, county, zip code or address. Once you retrieve the image, easy-to-use navigation controls allow you to fine tune your search to get the image that is most useful to you. These high-definition images are available in resolutions as low as six inches—meaning you could discern an object as small as six inches in the photo.

Once you have retrieved the image, you have two options. **Terraserver.com** will have a print of the photo made (in black and white or color, depending on which satellite takes the image) and shipped to your door. The cost for this service runs between \$19.95 for an 8" x 8" print, and \$149.95 for a 36" x 36" poster. If you have a high-quality printer at home, or a local print shop to customize your work, you can elect to receive the image electronically. For a 2,500 pixel 72 dpi satellite image, prices can be as low as \$4.95, going up to \$69.95 for a 6.25 million pixel image.

These satellite images are worth their weight in gold when scouting any unfamiliar grounds, but especially land where competition runs high. For more information, go to **Terraserver.com**.

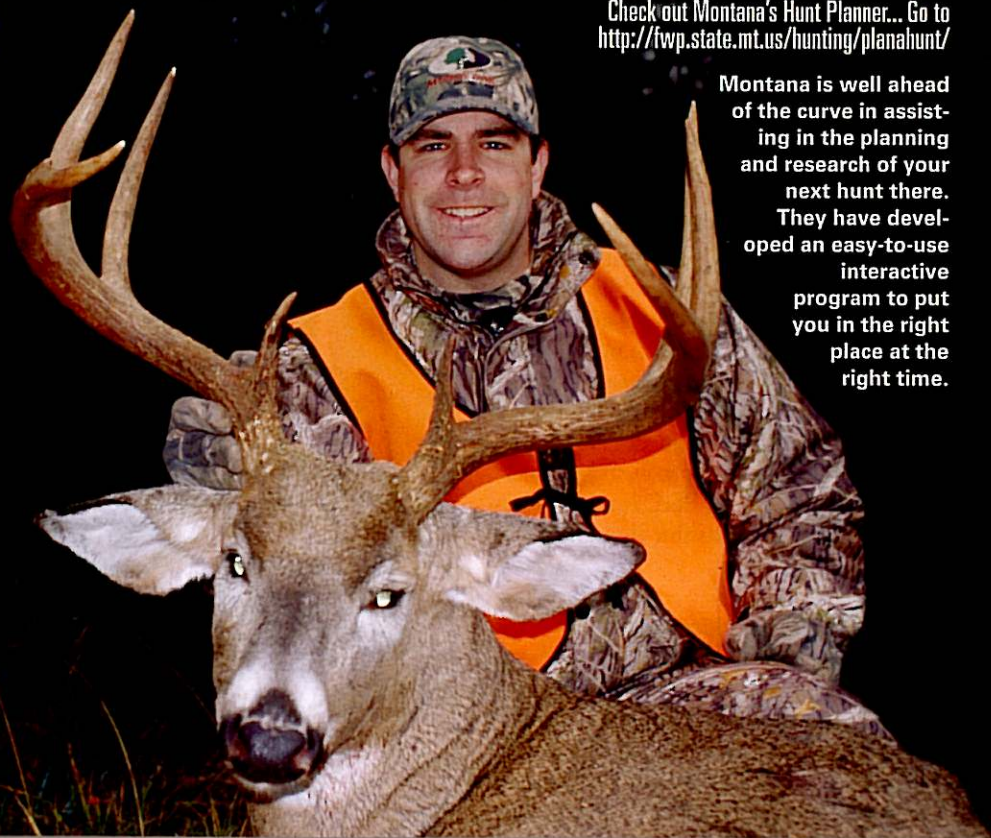
so don't get yourself into trouble. At the same time, look for opportunities to improve your chances: some public grounds—in an attempt to reduce hunter traffic—offer special lottery-type hunts. These will tend to be less crowded and often are during prime hunting times.

When the hunt finally arrives, treat it as though you are sitting on a potential

Two kinds of hunters fill their deer tags on public lands: the lucky and the diligent. Of course... it never hurts to be a little of both. The author is pictured here with a fine public-land buck.

Check out Montana's Hunt Planner... Go to <http://fwp.state.mt.us/hunting/planahunt/>

Montana is well ahead of the curve in assisting in the planning and research of your next hunt there. They have developed an easy-to-use interactive program to put you in the right place at the right time.



World's Record. How many of us would cut corners on our approach trails, our scent containment or noise management if we thought we could kill such a buck? On public grounds the deer will be hypersensitive to the slightest changes in their environment. Make no mistake, these deer are hunted as hard as any, and the only way they survive is by being even more vigilant. You'll need to approach public land whitetails with the same caution as you'd give to a potential World's Record.

Regional Hotspots

On public land there may not be big bucks around every corner, but it sure helps to know around which corners to look. Here's a quick look at some regional hotspots, found using the above outlined techniques. For the sake of credibility I took it a step further and confirmed my suspicions with people in the area who could speak to the quality of game. On public lands there are no guarantees, but the more you know about an area, the better the chances your hunting expectations will be met.

Illinois: Land of Giants

Publicity has been the Illinois deer hunter's best friend and worst enemy. Countless num-

bers of non-resident deer hunters stream into Illinois each fall in pursuit of the monster bucks known to roam the land. Pike County, nestled against the Mississippi River, has developed a well-earned reputation for producing trophy-class deer season after season. And while there's no denying Pike County's propensity for bomber bucks, the public land in the county (some state and some federal), tends to get over hunted and the mature deer head for the security of private lands. In fact, the overwhelming majority of trophy bucks coming out of Pike County are taken on well-managed private property.

If Illinois is an option, consider sleeper destinations in McHenry or Lake Counties. Nestled against the Wisconsin border, these counties sport outstanding public hunts on the Moraine Hills and Chain O'Lakes State Parks.

The Moraine Hills State Park offers 1,400 acres of regulated hunting. Although the acreage is relatively small, the number of hunters is managed with a statewide firearm permit lottery. Successful applicants are assigned an area to hunt, so congestion is not a problem. Outstanding genetics, a plethora of suitable habitat, and forage fit for a king, the deer of Moraine Hills are big-bodied brutes with serious headgear. Nearly a half-dozen

records-book whitetails have come out of the county in the past 10 years.

At the same time, McHenry County is quietly becoming a consistent big buck producer. The Chain O'Lakes State Park does not have a firearms deer season, but offers one of the finest whitetail opportunities for the archery hunter. The state of Illinois has created a virtual whitetail spa by reserving 6,000 acres of swamps, grasslands, woodlands, and ponds to retain the area's heavy-antlered bucks. Of that, 2,500 acres is open to archery hunting (1,250 during the late season). All hunters must check in prior to entering the area, which means most will remain within a short distance to the check station. This is the perfect opportunity to use research to get to areas others would not put in the effort to reach.

For more information on these hunts, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources has compiled "fact sheets" at: www.dnr.state.il.us/lands/landmgt/hunter_fact_sheet/index.htm.

Des Moines River Show Boats

It's no secret that Iowa has some outstanding bucks, especially in light of the 307-inch beast taken by 15-year-old Tony Lovstuen in Albia, Iowa. So big was the news (and the deer!), that lease fees for private ground have quadrupled in some areas of Monroe County, home to Albia. While the family tree of any 300-inch deer is worth investigating, you'd be better served following the Des Moines River southeast to the Illinois and Missouri Borders. Five counties stretching along the river from the city of Des Moines—Warren, Monroe, Van Buren, Lee and Des Moines—sport gaudy citation in B&C's records books. More than 50 All-Time records have been entered in this pentad, of course the most famous being the Albia Buck from Monroe. Public hunting lands offering deer hunts include:

- Des Moines County (698 total acres): Augusta; Blackhawk Bottoms; and Tama Beach.
- Lee County (parts of Shimek Forest): Donnellson; Farmington; and Lick Creek.
- Monroe County (2,186 total acres): LaHart; Miami Lake; and Tyrone.
- Van Buren County (4,956 total acres): Lake Sugema; Shimek Forest; Keosauqua Unit; and Van Buren Wildlife.
- Warren County (882 total acres): Banner; and Hooper.

While any of these counties are likely to produce a monster buck, the areas bordered by corn and soybeans will attract the better deer. (Again, this can be determined easily with satellite photos.) Much of this land—privately held and hunted by

the landowners and their guests—acts as a refuge when the pressure increases in the public lands. Look for deer trying to escape to the more lightly hunted private lands. Conversely, if a particular piece of private property is chock full of blaze orange, position yourself to intercept the retreating deer.

Iowa maintains an up-to-date big-buck record using the B&C scoring system. For a complete listing of these deer, check out www.iowadnr.com/wildlife/files/iadeer_racks.html.

Southern Charm

Known more for quantity than quality, the South is quietly turning out some bruisers on public lands. The best deer hunting is found in the Black Belt region, aptly named for the nutrient rich soils extending in a crescent from Virginia to Texas, but more famously across Alabama and Mississippi. While this region became renowned for cotton production in the 1800s, economic changes have introduced soybeans and peanuts as major cash crops. This translates to an excellent high-protein diet for the area's deer.

Of particular interest is the Black Prairie Wildlife Management Area in Mississippi's Lowndes County. A quick stroll through the records book shows as many deer coming out of this county than any other in the region. Why? Because in addition to the aforementioned quality of forage in the area, strict antler-point restrictions (four-points or better) greatly reduce the number of young deer taken, and hunter numbers are limited by a random drawing.

Some biologists believe the region's rich soil contributes to the higher-than-nor-

mal rate of non-typical trophy-class deer taken across the middle of the state. For a state that's not necessarily known for outsized deer, it's surprising that there are several non-typical deer over 200 inches recorded in the area, including two in Lowndes County. If the thought of taking a trophy-class non-typical interests you, this may be your best bet in the South.

For more information on the 5,333-acre Black Prairie Wildlife Management Area, go to www.mdwfp.com/scr/Wildlife/HuntDetail.asp?ID=8. Contained is an area map as well as detailed regulations for the unit.

Kansas Walk-In Program

Kansas is a bit of a pioneer in the realm of public hunting for deer. What makes Kansas so unique is that the lands they offer up are anything but public, rather private grounds leased by the state but opened to the general public. The Kansas Walk-In Hunting Area (WIHA) program began in 1995 and contains land as diverse as numerous. There are more than a half-million acres of land under this program featuring everything from rolling hills and river bottoms to woodlands and agricultural fields. For this reason, it would be impossible to pick just one WIHA, so instead look at the Northeast corner of the state, especially the area north of Manhattan, Kansas. The 19,000 WIHA acres of Clay, Riley, Pottawatomie, Geary and Morris Counties are situated between and around Tuttle Creek and Milford Reservoirs and represent the highest concentration of record-book deer taken.

Riley County is the strongest of the group, but less than 1,000 acres is divided amongst five parcels. This could make the hunter-to-deer ratio too high for reasonable odds. The open, rolling grasslands, crops, and pastures in the area make for hit-or-miss opportunities, so lands absent of deer one day may be covered up the next. Spend lots of time glassing fence rows, wooded stands and brushy edges, as this is where deer hang up during the daylight hours. Also utilize aerial photos to determine possible escape routes from adjoining properties.

Another area for consideration is in south-central Kansas. Between Comanche, Barber and Kingman Counties, an abnormally high number of B&C deer have been taken. These three counties offer almost 17,000 acres of WIHA lands within a short drive of Wichita, Kansas, making logistical planning easy.

To explain the WIHA program in greater depth, Kansas has posted a comprehensive booklet and short video on their website. Go to: www.kdwp.state.ks.us/hunting/WIHA_Atlas/WIHA_Atlas.html. ■

STATE WILDLIFE AGENCIES

A big part of gathering information is coordinated through the state's wildlife agency in which you intend to hunt. Luckily, the state of Montana has recognized this and put all of the agencies in one place.

To get links to all 50 state wildlife agencies, go to <http://fwp.state.mt.us/links/otherstates.html>

Many big deer on public grounds die of old age, having escaped hunters by staying in good cover. These skulls were picked up within 200 yards of each other on public land in Kansas.

