

Honing Your Skills...

Still -





Hunting

the whitetail deer

Opening day arrived with a bitter northwest wind and single digit temperatures. My excitement level was high on the first “big game” hunt. I had on my lap a Ruger 6mm Remington rifle that was a gift from my grandfather. It was the first one to arrive into Kansas City.

By Richard T. Hale
B&C Regular Member

I am not sure who was more proud of it, my grandfather or me. I had been shooting coyotes and crows with it for two years, but this was the first year I was allowed to put in for a deer permit. My father motioned me not to raise my rifle as the group of deer passed at the bottom of the draw. The two bucks in the group looked small at the time but seemed larger as the week passed.

Deer in those days of the early 70s were scarce in Kansas. As I remember, the success rate for the 10-day rifle season hovered around 15%. Archery success was lower than that for the three-month season, including the rut. How archery gear has improved! The harvest was limited to antlered bucks. Permits were on a draw and for residents only. About half of the applicants drew permits although few received a permit two years in a row. These factors made the passing of any buck uncommon.

Hunting squirrels, almost daily, had taught me that mature bucks would let a kid with a .22 rifle get into range without spooking, under the right circumstances. I had seen a few bucks stand up and look when I approached, allowing time for a shot to be taken, if season would only arrive. I had even found a cast antler with 6 points on it. The remaining weekend hunts passed without another deer sighting. My enthusiasm for sitting and waiting on a deer was just about frozen out of me. A skinny 10 year old can only sit so long on a cold, windy day in jungle boots.

For reasons that remain unclear, I was released early from school on Thursday. Rather than sit and wait, I had decided to just take a rifle and go for a walk. I might not get a deer, but at least I would not freeze. The temperature had risen into the mid 20s, and the wind was still blowing. I knew the wind should be in my face, not across my direction of travel. At least it was not at

did not here the bullet hit and saw no reaction. The buck ran off. It had happened so quickly, I wondered if it had been a dream. The fired case and ringing ears said it had not.

For lack of anything better to do, I walked to where the deer had been. I saw no blood, but could see where the leaves were disturbed. I followed the trail down a steep hill into the brush at the bottom. I lost the trail and just walked along in the direction the deer had been traveling. After about 150 yards, the path crossed a deep ditch. The buck was dead in the bottom. I had gone from despair to elation in one breath. The rut had clearly taken its toll on his aged frame. The antlers were dark and heavy.

Returning with my father and a horse, loading and packing out the deer are cherished memories. The bright moonlight, the nervous horse with the unfamiliar load and the sounds of hooves on the frozen ground are still vivid today.

Still-hunting, now apparently seldom practiced, was once the way of the deer hunter. One of the two great classic deer hunting books, *The Still-Hunter*, by Theodore S. VanDyke did not consider other methods at the time. It remains a good reference and an interesting read. In my opinion, still-hunting has fallen from favor for several reasons. These would include high hunter density, high deer density and the fact that there are few to show the new generation how to do it. It is also hard to show on the ever-present hunting videos. When deer were scarce, we were more inclined to put some miles on to find them.

Today, it is possible to still-hunt deer with a high rate of success. In fact, in this era of tree stands, deer condos and even special built trucks to drive and shoot from on the move, still hunting might be the best way to kill a mature buck. It is not a secret that with our present system of 3-6 month deer seasons, mature bucks are increasingly nocturnal. If you remove the rut, the odds of a 4+ year-old buck passing by your stand during legal shooting hours are very slim. The hunter who accepts the challenge of going to the deer has a better chance of being successful and achieving more satisfaction from his experience as well. It has been my

THE HUNTER WHO ACCEPTS THE CHALLENGE OF GOING TO THE DEER HAS A BETTER CHANCE OF BEING SUCCESSFUL AND ACHIEVING MORE SATISFACTION FROM HIS EXPERIENCE AS WELL. IT HAS BEEN MY PRIVILEGE TO PURSUE DEER IN THE MANNER SIMILAR TO THAT FIRST HUNT, FOR OVER 35 YEARS. I DO IT BECAUSE I ENJOY THE CHALLENGE AND I FIND IT VERY EFFECTIVE.

my back. I moved along standing, walking and listening. For the first 3 hours I covered about 3/4 of a mile. Not so much deer hunting as just seeing what was going on in the woods. I saw some squirrels, an opossum, and a pair of coyotes team up and chase a rabbit with uncertain results.

I watched in the woods and into the frozen fields far below. What change from the miserable weekend. I

was warmer, seeing some activity, and having fun. Just after sundown, I saw a movement to my right front, in the woods. I stopped by an ancient oak tree. One

of the large bucks I had seen over the summer was walking along, into the wind and across my front. He was headed toward a harvested corn field. I raised the rifle and shot as he passed between two trees. At 60 yards I

The author's daughter Abby, with a nice 3.5-year-old deer taken this fall on a still hunt.



privilege to pursue deer in the manner similar to that first hunt, for over 35 years. I do it because I enjoy the challenge and I find it very effective. I have still-hunted successfully with all legal weapons in the various seasons in Kansas. Bow hunters, who in our area, hunt almost exclusively from elevated stands, often mention the thrill of a close range encounter with deer. I find being on their level, and closing the distance myself, to be the ultimate challenge.

Still-hunting is seldom done without other methods brought into play as the hunt unfolds. If a shootable buck is spotted, bedded down but out of range, it becomes a stalk. If one is observed moving along a trail or field edge, an ambush can quickly be set up. If a buck is deemed unapproachable due to wind and terrain, he can sometimes be moved to a shootable position with a little nudge. Once a deer learns an escape route works, he is likely to use it again. This habit has been the demise of quite a few otherwise nocturnal bucks.

The best weather to still-hunt in is a cool, rainy day with light, steady breeze.

Most of the deer will be on their feet as they do not seem to like laying down in the rain. I also do not think deer are as wary. They just do not get bothered as much under these conditions. I have, many times, seen mature bucks stare in disbelief or look away and look back to see if I was really there. A warm, sunny day with no wind is the hardest. Not impossible, but very difficult. A seasonally unusual wind will often cause a deer to make mistakes it would not otherwise. In our country, snows during deer season are normally of short duration. Our longer lasting snows generally come in January or February. If the pressure is on, the older bucks will just lay up and wait it out for a day or two. This is a great time to put on the painters suit and white cap. Surprisingly enough, I think the hardest deer to approach is a mature buck that is alone. In groups, they tend to rely on the other deer to watch out. I have often had them see me and look to the other deer for confirmation.

A mature buck will often fail to react to what he apparently sees, but never what

his nose tells him. If you make a noise, just wait awhile, It normally takes two mistakes to spook a deer. Odd noises are a part of a deer's life, just not a pattern of them. It is important to work out a method of dealing with the unwanted animals you will run into in the course of a day's hunt. Squirrels, blue jays, turkeys and crows can all cause a problem. The art of dealing with them is what makes the hunter. As a general rule, the more the deer are moving, the less you should move.

In hilly terrain, deer bed at or just under the height of contour. This is the line you should be working. Try to use every change of elevation, ditch, bush, etc. for cover. The small things count. When you must move in an open area, stay as close to good cover as you can. Within one step is best. Stop and look closely prior to exposing yourself in an open area.

When working as a team, it is best to stay about two steps apart. Further is going to miss a lot of action for the shooter and the spotter needs to be able to step one step and then lean to look or hide. Two

ASSOCIATE REMEMBERS B&C

Recently we were notified that Jack Gray, 88, of Arlington, Washington, passed away and that he had provided for a \$50,000 charitable distribution to the Boone and Crockett Club from his IRA.

After contacting his family we learned that Jack was an avid hunter and outdoorsman, making several trips to the Yukon and Northwest Territories and he was only one sheep shy of a grand slam (desert). Jack's sister, Joanne said "Jack's recent donation reflects the fact that he thought an awful lot of the Boone and Crockett Club."

Jack is now listed as a member of the *Roughriders Society*. The *Roughriders Society* recognizes those individuals who have integrated their estate plans to include the Boone and Crockett Club. Funds from *Roughriders Society* Members are held for long-term investment in the Boone and Crockett Club Foundation Endowment. This donation shows how easy it is to leave a lasting wildlife legacy for future generations!

If you would like more information about the *Roughriders Society*, please contact Jodi Bishop at 406-542-1888 ext 212.

BECOME A MEMBER OF THE ROUGHRIDERS SOCIETY



PENSION PROTECTION ACT RENEWED

In 2006, the Pension Protection Act providing tax incentives for charitable gifts from donors who are 70½ or older was signed by President Bush. Recently this Act was extended until December 31, 2009.

Under this Act, you can use funds from your IRA to make a charitable gift to the Boone and Crockett Club (up to \$100,000) free of tax obligations. Prior to the law, gifts from IRAs caused some donors to pay more in income taxes than if they didn't make a gift at all.

Funds must be transferred directly from an IRA to the Boone and Crockett Club Foundation. Pension, profit sharing and other forms of retirement funds such as 401(k)s, and 403(b)s **do not** fall under this legislation.

It is wise to consult with your tax professionals if you are contemplating a charitable gift under this Act.

If you would like more information, please contact Jodi Bishop at 406-542-1888 ext 212.





One of Bozena Shaw's trophy deer taken from the herd of bucks described in the story.

moccasins are very quiet but leave a telltale scent trail. I do not like carrying a daypack. They just catch on too many things. The small amount of things I need during the day can be carried in my pockets. One of the greatest problems I have with hunters I take out is getting them separated from their gear.

My friends from Florida, Howard and Bozena Shaw, had returned to Kansas to visit and try again for an exceptional deer. The Shaws are very experienced hunters and have taken many nice deer on their ranch in south Texas. I knew if they shot a deer in Kansas, it would need to be better than they would be likely to find on their ranch. We had decided to hunt the early muzzleloader season, and return for the general rifle season if not successful.

Several over mature bucks had been observed during the summer and things looked promising. The first two days of hunting from various hides had been rewarded with sightings of several nice bucks.

TODAY, IT IS POSSIBLE TO STILL-HUNT DEER WITH A HIGH RATE OF SUCCESS. IN FACT, IN THIS ERA OF TREE STANDS, DEER CONDOS AND EVEN SPECIAL-BUILT TRUCKS TO DRIVE AND SHOOT FROM ON THE MOVE, STILL HUNTING MIGHT BE THE BEST WAY TO KILL A MATURE BUCK.

Just not the heavy homed giants we were looking for. Then, as it usually does, deer activity stopped. We were down to the last hunt of the muzzleloader season, with no tags filled.

Over a nice lunch, my wife and I talked a reluctant Bo into trying to stalk the two deer I had seen over the summer. With their experience in deer hunting on their ranch in Texas, I could tell both Howard and Bo had their doubts. The fact

that we were not seeing any deer otherwise, won the day.

We started about 4pm that afternoon. Temperature was around 85 degrees. The wind was very slight. I decided to hunt a ravine with a small creek winding through it. The reasons were that it would be cool and it had been undisturbed for quite a while. Due to the light wind and land contours, we had to walk about a mile to get into position for the final approach. Visibility in the early fall can range from 10 feet to 50 yards in the forest. Staying close, we crossed the creek numerous times as it wound back and forth. After traveling down the ravine for about two hundred yards, I saw an ear move, then a leg. As I looked around, the deer materialized. We had moved into a group of seven mature bucks with well-developed antlers. The closest was about 15 yards and the farthest one was about 45 yards. They were strung out in a half circle and a little confused. They had heard nothing, smelled nothing and seen little. One of the close ones was a very nice typical with long points and very long beams. He was 5 years old and had gained more than 30" of antler over the year before. The other really big deer was dark antlered, with a lot of extra points, and would score better as a non-typical. He was the farthest away and much harder to see due to coloration of his antlers and lack of a white throat patch. In this case, time was on our side. Thinking Bo would prefer the big deer with all the

points, I covered her sights and turned her toward him twice. She just could not make him out over the open sights, then required during the muzzleloader season. As the deer began to move off, she shot the big typical at 17 yards. It was a great deer and I am sure she never regretted it. The dark antlered non-typical was shot a few weeks later on a similar hunt. He and I were alone at that time.

I am convinced these deer would not have been taken by stand hunting. They just did not move out of their dark sanctuaries during daylight hours. I am certain Bo and I valued them as much as trophies taken with other methods, regardless of the weapon used. Next time you find yourself on stand in whitetail country, you may want to consider this still-hunting technique for its challenges, rewards, and the sheer enjoyment of matching wits of the great whitetail on an eye-to-eye level. ■

steps allows the shooter to hide behind the spotter and present a smaller profile. I now think it is more successful to hunt as a team rather than a solo hunter.

I do not think it is possible for a human to comprehend all the nuances of the wind and their importance. I do the best I can, realizing I am destined to fail often. I use smoke and topographical maps to chart the wind in its various directions. Remember a light wind follows the path of least resistance. A stronger wind will push its way into a tree line or over a hill. A line where a chain of hills breaks will often act as a funnel and carry the wind and scent away. Knowing how wind flows along a creek, ravine or chain of hills will allow you to make approaches that would otherwise be impossible.

Soft quiet outerwear is a must. Face paint or a mask and gloves really improve the odds. I wear L.L. Bean rubber bottom leather top boots most of the time. The older ones have a thinner sole. The newer ones give more foot support and last longer, but make more noise. The rubber bottom prevents leaving a scent trail. Russell