

PATIENCE IS KEY

UP CLOSE AND
PERSONAL

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Photos Courtesy of Author

Kansas can be cold in November. I was finding out just how cold as I lay on my belly in the sand. Nice whitetail antlers were rocking gently about 30 yards in front of me as the bedded buck chewed his cud. I say about 30 yards because my normally dead-accurate laser rangefinder had frozen and was no longer working.

My fingers were also icy inside thick chopper mittens. I hoped they would still work when the buck finally decided to get up. I had been lying in the same position for more than two hours after crawling across a ridge and into a slight depression. There are not many trees in the Sand Hills of southern Kansas, but wild plum bushes dotted the landscape and provided a little cover. A vigorous belly sneak had kept me tolerably warm for a while on this sub-freezing and windy day, but my stored-up body heat was now long gone.

The buck in front of me was like an old friend. I had seen him almost every day for more than a week, and I had stalked him five times without getting closer than 100 yards. If the fickle breeze did not ruin things, I bumped into other deer or ran out of cover. But finally a stiff wind had driven the buck into a sheltered pocket below a ridge. I was able to maneuver close, and then I had to wait.

Some bowhunters and guides have told me they like to make noise or toss a rock to get a bedded deer to stand. In my experience, this impatient tactic almost never

works. Even if the animal does not blow out at high-speed, it is on high alert when it gets up. This usually means a missed shot after the critter jumps the bowstring.

Just before dark, the deer's body language changed. His ears flicked forward and he rotated his head repeatedly to scan terrain. When he finally stood, he was looking directly away with ears back and body slouched. I willed my frozen body to move, rolled to my knees, clutched the icy bow, and drew. The deer never moved as I aimed at his quartering body and released.

The arrow hit with a solid thump and the buck leaped ahead like a cutting horse after a calf. Halfway up the sandy slope, he suddenly pitched on his gorgeous white-ringed nose. The heavy 5x6 antlers later scored more than 160 record-book points, placing him well up in the Pope and Young record book. The long wait had paid off.

More than any other factor, I believe that patience is the key to close-range hunting success. Patience is the key to finding a big animal you want, and key to hunting that animal until you score. If you do not persist you might settle



Chuck's Alberta "Sticker Buck" was a public-land dandy that required extreme stalking and waiting patience.

for smaller antlers or horns and not be completely satisfied. If you do not keep on stalking, over and over, or keep on sitting on stand until you get a shot, you might never succeed close-up.

My dad was a serious gun hunter his entire life, but the old man was never long on patience. He tried bowhunting a few times to share the woods with me, but one or two busted stalks and he was done. "If I can't shoot a deer in three days with my .270, I really don't want to keep hunting the same area," he would say. "I want action, and I want it now!"

Pop was a skilled rifleman, and he generally bagged his buck in a day or two. That buck wasn't always very big, because Pop was not willing to wait, but he always had fun. I happen to differ but to each his own.

By comparison, the most famous Native American archer in history had the patience of Job. Ishi taught California residents Saxton Pope and Art Young to hunt with bow and arrow, and would sit for hours in the crotch of a tree or on the ground in wait for a deer to walk by. Ishi's maximum game-killing range with his crude 45-pound bow was about 50 yards, yet he lived in the wild for nearly six decades on meat that he had shot.

The famous Pope and Young Club is the namesake of these two friends of Ishi. Like Ishi, they loved the thrill of getting really close to game.

My dad proved that close-range hunting is not for everyone. But getting close can almost always be accomplished with enough patience. Mindset is one key. You should never give up, no matter how disappointing an individual hunting episode might be.

When bowhunting I always adopt what I call "pessimistic optimism." I continually tell myself that things

probably will not work out, because they seldom do; be it finding a huge buck or bull, or getting inside good bow range, my expectations are low so that I am never disappointed. But in the back of my mind I know that sooner or later a monster will appear or a close-range shot will materialize. This seemingly contradictory attitude keeps me happy, even when hunting is temporarily sour.

Take for example the Alberta mule deer that my guide called "Sticker Buck." Sticker Buck was not such an original name for a very special animal that lived on Crown land. Gun hunters and bowhunters alike had tried unsuccessfully to get within shooting range of this big, mature deer. His antlers spread beyond 30 inches, and the array of "sticker points" on the big 5x5 mainframe made the rack unmistakable.

I hunted Sticker Buck in his public domain, competing with resident and non-resident archers in the wide-open prairieland of southern Alberta. Finally, after spotting the famous deer twice in one day, I stalked him behind a ridgeline and eased up a steep bank just below where he was bedded. Massive antlers and ear tips were all I could see from 35 yards away. What followed was a very long wait on a very awkward semi-vertical slope.

Just before sundown, Sticker Buck finally stood up. He meandered out of sight over a knoll and I scrambled to the top with hopes of a close-range look. The buck was 45 yards away, quartering toward a big draw where he would disappear forever. I drew with stiff muscles and sent an arrow toward the deer. The broadhead sliced both lungs for a very quick kill.

As I watched Sticker stagger across a coulee and go belly up, I enjoyed the thrill

that only comes from a close-range kill. The big deer's rack was 32-2/8 inches wide with a gross score over 210 and an official P&Y score of exactly 203. That's enough to make any patient hunter grin! ■

Patently waiting on stand is one way to eventually bag a nice animal.

