

CRAIG BODDINGTON

PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
PHOTOS COURTESY OF AUTHOR

ACCURATE HUNTER

BUCK FEVER!

On the next to the last evening of a Kansas hunt, I was on a ridge in a tall tree when I heard the shot just before sundown. Our timbered ridges distort sound, and figuring out who shot is usually a guessing game with poor odds. This time, I was fairly certain it came from the stand we call County Road. That stand was a quarter-mile from me on the next ridge, offering a direct line for sound. It sits on what once was a county road before a bridge washed out decades ago.

The remnant of the old road is narrow, with thick timber on both sides. It's a great place, but you must be quick and decisive. Bucks rarely offer a long look. I don't like to look for deer in dark timber, so I texted my hunter to make sure it was his shot—and to find out if he had a buck down. Yes, he had shot, but he didn't know if he had a buck.

Boddington and Lee Murray with a tall, wide, and handsome Kansas eight-pointer, but you should have seen the one that got away a year earlier. A highly experienced hunter, Murray thought he was immune to buck fever, until the appearance of a monster buck unglued him.





For American deer hunters, any buck sighting can get us going. Likelihood of buck fever increases exponentially as antler size increases. This beautiful typical 12-pointer, on Boddington's son-in-law's Texas ranch, is a dream buck. He's too young to take, but just the sight of him gets the heart pounding.

I shinned down and headed for County Road. There was still some light when I got there. My hunter was standing on the roadbed, his hands shaking. He was nearly incoherent. He showed me where the buck was standing, 80 yards from his tree-stand. Then he pointed vaguely into the thick forest.

I asked, "Lee, where were the crosshairs when the trigger broke?"

"I don't know," he said.

We looked for blood until the light faded, broke out our headlamps, and looked some more. Nothing. Calmed by the walk in the woods, Lee said the buck was tall, wide, and heavy with dark antlers. It was possibly a typical 12-point, 200-inch deer. I wish we had bucks like that, but no one has seen such a deer on my place. Still, I had to give it some credence. Lee is a seasoned whitetail hunter from the North Woods. He knows big deer.

Blood shows well on our carpet of oak leaves, so we already knew the score. Even so, for a buck like that, we combed that ridge most of the next day. Nothing. That buck was never seen again, however big he might have been. Lee Murray came back

the following year. Biding his time on his last night, he took a fine, extra-wide eight-pointer. He made a brilliant shot just three minutes before legal shooting light faded.

Now we could laugh about it. With a lifetime of North American and international hunting, this guy knows how to shoot. On that previous hunt, he got buck fever—plain and simple. Once we could talk about it, it's actually a wonderful thing for a veteran hunter past 80 to know that an extra-large buck could completely unglue him. Trust me, it can happen to any of us.

CONTROL IS KEY

It's normal to get excited in the presence of game. Your heart rate accelerates, breathing becomes ragged, and adrenaline surges. It's an atavistic and prehistoric reaction, a natural part of being a hunter through the eons. If you don't get excited when considering taking the life of a beautiful animal, then I suggest you find another pastime, perhaps golf or tennis.

The trick is to manage these symptoms until you get the shot off. The inability to control them is buck fever. It can take many forms. The



Boddington's best-ever mule deer was taken in southern Alberta. He spotted this deer at long-range and the decision was made immediately. From then, and during the stalk and shot, he ignored the antlers and focused on the shot.

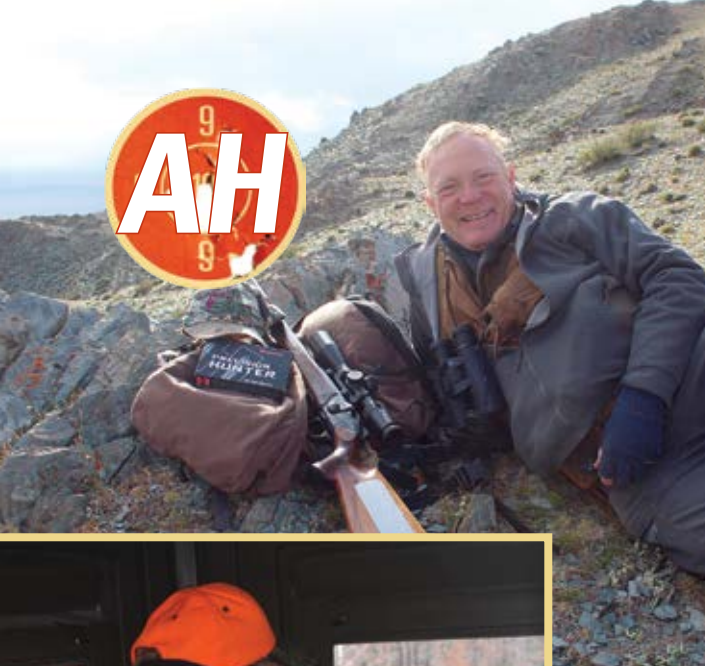
most common is shaking hands, maybe the shakes all over, which is not a good state for accurate shooting. Other forms include freezing up and the inability to press the trigger. In severe cases, hunters might eject every cartridge in the magazine, unaware they haven't fired.

Nothing gets me going like a nice buck deer. It doesn't have to be an exceptional deer, although the excitement increases with antler size. This is normal for American hunters. We plan and look forward to deer season every year. Despite time and effort, many of us don't get a deer each year, and very few take a good buck every

year. It's normal for the sudden appearance of a buck to get our juices flowing and hardly unnatural for a monster to freak us out.

We're all different. For me, the worst is conveniently afterward. After a shot, my hands almost always shake a little, sometimes a lot. For years, the North American animal I wanted most was a wolf. If you spend enough time up north, you're likely to get a wolf while pursuing other game. I didn't, but if you must know the truth, I had chances and blew them, which means I wanted one even more.

On the first day of my second January wolf hunt in



Coming off the rifle after just taking the biggest ram of his life, a massive Altai argali. For Boddington, the worst shakes usually come after a shot.



It's hard to imagine missing a short-range shot with a good rest from a sturdy blind. Boddington didn't miss this shot in Kansas, but he missed a similar shot in Texas just a few days later. Any shot can be missed!

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Alberta, I had three wolves coming down a frozen river toward a moose carcass. Alberta requires a license for wolves but no separate tag, and there's no bag limit. How I kept it together, I have no idea. Shooting way over my head, I got all three with the three shells in my Blaser. That was a good thing because my hands were shaking so badly that I was physically unable to reload.

I can usually react well to a fast-breaking situation. My jitters get bad when the "shoot" decision has been made, but I must wait—as in waiting for a bedded animal to make a move. My first desert bighorn in Sonora bedded on a little shelf. We came in 330 yards below him with no way to get closer. The curl of his horns shone like a beacon through a screen of palo verde. There was no way to get closer, and the only option was to set up and wait for him to get up. With my pack over a rock, my muzzle angled uphill at 30 degrees. It wasn't an easy shot, but doable. And there was pressure. This was a desert

bighorn—the fourth of my North American wild sheep and a solid 30 years after the first. There was more pressure on that shot than any I can recall.

In a situation like that, here's what I do to keep the nerves at bay. Almost as a litany, I tell myself: "Do what you know how to do." As if a pre-flight inspection, I check and re-check the distance. Is the chamber loaded and safety still on? I check the position and improve it if I can. Then, I focus on the shot and how to make it. Sooner or later, we all miss, but contemplating that result is *not* part of the checklist. Success is the only option. In sports psychology, it's called visualization. The skill to succeed has been acquired. Now, you have to constantly visualize using that skill properly. Basketball players don't imagine missing a free throw; golfers don't imagine missing a putt.

There is one cardinal rule that can temper buck fever on a difficult shot in rough terrain or a close, simple shot at a whitetail from a stand. Once the decision is made, ignore the antlers or horns. You can't eat the headgear, and it's the vital zone

on which you must concentrate. Try to forget the marvelous rack. Don't imagine yourself admiring it or seeing it on your wall. One of the surest ways for buck fever to creep in is to focus on the horns.

Instead, do what you can to control the shakes and concentrate on the shot. Focus only on the vital zone where the bullet must strike. Breathe slowly and deeply. Take your time, and do what you know how to do.

Some shots are more difficult than others, and any shot can be missed. Shooting from a treestand is more difficult than shooting from a box blind with a window for a steady rest. Either way, we don't have many misses on our Kansas whitetail hunts, but it happens.

People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. So, full disclosure, I missed a buck on my son-in-law's ranch last season. It was a mediocre management buck. I'm left-handed, and this was a right-handed shot. The trotting buck abruptly slowed, and I shot right in front of him. It was a dumb, poorly-executed shot, but not buck fever. Or was it? It can happen to anyone at any time. ■