

Rivers Bend Outfitters

Fishing & Hunting in the Columbia River Gorge

Blacktails -- The Rest of the Story

The day was a bona fide toad roaster -- T-shirt deer hunting if I ever saw it. It was a hot start to the Oregon blacktail season. Three days of sitting a stand had been as dry as the weather. The bucks -- in fact, all of the deer -- were reluctant to move out of their shady, cool north-slope bedding thickets during daylight hours, and the ground cover was as noisy as 60 tons of corn flakes. The alternative of still-hunting for blacktails is tough under any conditions; in this dry weather it was downright impossible.

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Then I happened upon a spectacular pair of last winter's sheds. As I bent to pick them up it wasn't hard to visualize a big buck jumping that fence and his antlers tumbling to the grass as his front feet pounded the deck. My thoughts brought a smile to my face and reminded me of an incident from my misspent youth.

One dreary, drizzling January morning down in southeastern Oklahoma I was driving my old Dierk's forestry pickup along the Lebow Trail headed to a pulpwood cut. As I rounded a high cut bank, a big whitetail buck bounded down into the road practically on top of my rig. I had to slam on the brakes.

More startling was the sight of his antlers. They cascaded to the roadway when his front feet hit the trail. He bounded out of sight as I came out of my truck to gather up those 10-point, ivory- and amber-stained antlers. I marveled at their symmetry, noted a speck of blood on a burl, then tossed them in the three-foot deep gearbox in the back of my rig where they landed among several gallons of tree marking paint, coveralls, snake chaps and assorted rain gear.

The year floated by and September found the weather unseasonably hot. As such it bode no fun for the deer season to come. Rifling through the paint box one day while hunting a new nozzle for my marking gun, I found those fine, matching 5-point antlers that big buck had left in the road. I grasped them and rubbed the litter off on my pants leg. I carried them over to the borrow ditch where I had spread my lunch and sat munching my sandwich looking at that wonderful ivory crown of antlers near my feet.

Just for the heck of it I picked them up and began to smack them together. I had rattled deer up before, but deer season and the rut was still months away, and I'm not sure why I rattled those antlers. I kept it up for a while and then laid them aside and began to finish my lunch. I was gazing around when I heard a red squirrel chirring off to my right and as I turned to look for him I saw a big whitetail buck step into the road, look both ways and start walking my direction.

He angled across to my side of the road and jumped into the leafy brush. I picked up the antlers again and began to rattle in earnest. Directly I caught a slight motion and glimpsed that buck slipping through the cover. I stopped rattling and waited to see what would develop. He came up within about 30 yards and stopped to stand staring through the tangle. I was fascinated by all of this and realized he was looking for the rattling source. Then he locked onto my eyes and spun to race away. To say all this fascinated me would be the understatement of the year. But I had learned something: Deer will sometimes respond to rattled antlers even if the rut is not on.

RATTLING UP BLACKTAILS

Better than 30 years have passed since that incident but I have seen that same situation time and again over the years. I have rattled up whitetails, Oregon blacktails (one Boone & Crockett candidate) and Washington mule deer bucks not only when they were still in the velvet during the late summer but also during the rut and long after the rut had passed in the dead of winter.

Bucks that come during the rut are easily explained. They come in the hope of stealing a doe the unseen bucks are fighting over or to join in the fracas. But deer that put in an appearance when the rut is not in flux came in a much more reserved manner. No charging rush, no aggressive stance and no hair turned all the wrong way, they come stealthily, slowly, cautiously, easing toward the noise of the antlers in deliberate, measured steps. Sometimes the deer have slipped in so carefully that they were watching me long before I saw them. Curiosity is the reason and more than a few times that curiosity has filled a tag for me.

Deer, like cats (and pronghorns), suffer from an instinctual curiosity that knows no bounds. If you don't believe that, believe this: Regardless of the reason those bucks came in, it is a technique that will work on occasion. I have the mounted antlers to prove it.

With the continued drought in the Pacific Northwest, the coming season may well be one in which the hunter may want to remember the following little trick.

Last fall I was unable to draw a deer tag on the east side of the Cascades so I held a blacktail tag west of the Cascades. I had spent a couple of days still-hunting some heavy cover and holding a stand with little success. I was sitting on the tailgate of my old Cruiser eating a bagel, a chunk of cheddar and drinking a Diet Coke when my roving eyes landed on a set of rattlin' horns laying amongst my gear. That aroused my interest and stimulated some thoughts. After my Spartan lunch, I looped those antlers around my neck and took off up an alder-choked skidder trail.

I hiked a mile or so around Mt. Hood, crawled into a clump of alder that overlooked a thicket-choked drainage of a vast timbered acreage and laid my rifle across my knees. I began to earnestly rattle those antlers, whack some nearby alder saplings and rake the ground. I enthusiastically kept it up until I began to feel silly, and then took a break. The rut was a month away.

I had just started to lift the antlers to rattle again when I saw an almost imperceptible motion downhill in the vine maple. I slowly lowered the antlers and when I saw parts of a head and antlers I readied my rifle. What luck! It was all patience now; all I had to do was wait. He wasn't racing to see what the rattling was all about; he wasn't charging in to a fight, but simply easing toward the rattling. And with the maze of

tangled alder and vine maple stems and limbs between us, I still had to find a hole in that jungle to shoot through.

He stood peering through the tangle between us, looking this way and that, swiveling his ears up, down, back and forth, searching for those clashing antlers. He finally moved forward a few feet and stopped with his chest exposed in a small alley in the saplings between us, then turned his head to stare downhill and away from me.

That was my cue. As slow as rust, I raised the featherweight Ruger .338/06, slid the safety forward and when the heavy duplex reticles settled on his shoulder, I caressed the trigger and drove a 210-grain Nosler backed by 56 grains of RL15 across the 60 yards that separated us. He dropped like a rock at the shot, thrashed a bit, and then lay still. I watched until I was certain he was down for the count, and then eased down to my buck.

He was great 3-point blacktail. And as usual, when shooting a .338, there was profuse hair and blood sign to mark the bullet's impact. I would be quick to offer that one does not need an elk rifle to shoot 150-pound blacktails. But, after the shot, locating a deer in gloomy thickets where it is too dark to read a newspaper at high noon or the ferns are 3 feet deep, the shaved hair and liberal blood trail offered by big bullets can be a godsend.

I grinned smugly to myself and shook my head thinking of how I came to be tying my tag on him. It may be a goofy technique, but like all deer hunting tactics, sometimes it works. Where I was raised, that's all that counts! Then it was picture time.

I grant that this method is certainly anything but a normal, rational hunting technique, but it does work, as do some other whippy techniques I have used over the years. And just for the record a "bone bag" or "rattlin' box" will work too. I prefer rattling with real antlers that I have sawn off of a buck I have killed.

PREDATOR CALLS

Many years ago I was hacking out an article about calling predators. My early photo files were limited, and I decided that a clincher to sell that piece would be some quality pictures of a coyote or bobcat running pell-mell to the call.

Taking a break from the typewriter, I got into my old Suburban and drove about 15 miles to the heavy timber behind my home in The Dalles. I then hiked about a mile around the edge of a recent clear-cut to a spot near the far timbered edge. I made a blind in a jumble of slash left from the logging, prepared my cameras, laid out my pistol and settled in. I usually started with an old Herter's call I had altered slightly to sound somewhat like a coyote howling and yodeling. And that's how I started this time.

I hadn't been blowing the call long when my startled eyes beheld a dandy blacktail buck burst from the timbered fringe across the cut and come hauling the mail headed directly for me. Now this was a bona fide trophy blacktail with four heavy points to a side. I was fascinated when he drew up about 25 yards away with every hair turned the wrong way. I was so startled by this strange reaction and the suddenness of his actions that I did not have the presence of mind to photograph him before he wheeled to race away! When I realized what a photo opportunity I had blown I kicked myself all the way back to the rig.

Since that time I have called in several deer using predator calls. And this technique works all year long, not just during open season, so the opportunity exists for some photography and deer study. Some of those bucks got a free ride home with me in the back of my rig with a tag around their antlers.

Noting their overall reactions, I have come to believe that they respond in a protective posture believing that other deer were in danger or under attack.

Not so many years ago, when an Oregon deer tag entitled the holder to hunt anywhere in Oregon and deer season ran longer than a fiddler's dream, I was hunting blacktails over in the Tillamook National Forest of the Coast Range. It was early October and the weather was salubrious. In fact it was downright unseasonably hot and dry. In general, deer hunting conditions were lousy.

With the dry weather the yellow jackets were ferocious. If those little scavengers weren't dive-bombing my face they were biting or stinging my fingers. My partners and I had watched from stands, tried drives and even did a little still-hunting, all to no avail. We had actually seen more bears and coyotes rambling around in the daylight hours than deer! Campfires were outlawed due to fire danger, but as we set around the pressure lamp that night we speculated on the best way to kill a buck. No one came up with a solution. Before I went to bed I tucked a couple of predator calls into my shirt pocket.

I held a good stand at the bottom of a long canyon the next morning, long before dawn's early light, and then moved as the warming uphill drifts started. I found a good hide in a downed treetop and then withdrew that set of predator calls from my shirt.

I set the variable call on its loudest mode and then began to huff and puff in earnest. I had no luck on my initial set-up and after a half-hour or so moved on up the ridge. On the next stand I had just started to call when I saw a deer emerge from the timber across the canyon and move into a small grassy park. I spit out the call and brought my binoculars to focus on that deer.

It was a big, branched-antler buck that I judged to be about 200 yards distant. He looked up and down hill and then across the canyon. I lowered the glasses and reached for my rifle that lay across my knees. I was carrying a superbly accurate flyweight Ruger 77, 7x57 that day sighted-in to place its bullets three inches high at 100 yards. I leaned into a stout sapling for a rest, hung the crosshairs on his ribcage slightly behind his shoulder and drove a 140-grain Hornady bullet backed by 52 grains of IMR4350 across the canyon.

I heard a faint, distant "thut" and saw that buck hump-up and then wheel to fall tumbling downhill in the grassy park. As I jacked in another round, he slid down the grassy slope and disappeared into the brushy edge below. I waited to see if I could hear or see anything to indicate he had regained his footing, but he did not. I found him dead just inside the cover. This was one of those slab-sided, 200-pound, huge blacktails that sported a rack that later measured into the lower ranks of the Boone & Crockett records.

The difficulty of deer hunting, whether it be for blacktails, whitetails or mule deer, is often compounded by the weather and other conditions beyond our control. Regardless, the thinking hunter needs to be innovative enough to fill that tag knowing

he will never see that deer season again. Experimentation can be a good thing that opens our eyes to unusual possibilities. I have taken several bucks over the years using these two tactics on mule deer, whitetails, blacktails and anything in between such as predators.

Sometimes that means adopting techniques or strategies that may seem absurd or irrational. I once knew an old brush rat that lived on a little stump ranch back in the piney woods of LeFlore County, Okla. He started deer season every year wearing an old, sweat-stained ball cap and a pair of black, high-topped tennis shoes. And that was all that he wore! He claimed that a deer didn't know what a human being was if it wasn't wearing clothes. Yeah, I know ...

But that old codger tagged a deer as regular as the mail. How do you argue with such success? And no, if you're wondering, I never did get around to trying that technique to see if it worked for me. By the by, he carried an ancient Model 01, in .401 Winchester that lobbed a slug about the size of your thumb and about as slow as molasses.

There is another solid tip that will fill a lot of tags! Seems like everyone I know today has eight or nine rifles, two for deer, one for bear, one for... Well, you get the picture. In days gone by I knew very few hunters that owned more than one rifle. They hunted everything with that one rifle. They were dead shots, too, totally familiar with the trajectory of that rifle's cartridge. They knew exactly where the bullet would land at any given range. Though it flies in the face of what most gun experts say today, the hunter who carries but one rifle doesn't have to think about which rifle to take, readjust himself to different riflescopes, safeties or think about the trajectory of whatever cartridge that day's rifle has in it.

I realize the two weird strategies I have used and outlined here are strange ways to hunt deer. But just because they fly in the face of normal techniques and conventional ways to hunt deer doesn't mean they won't fill a tag. I know they work. They represent the rest of the story, but not necessarily all of it.

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