

Chasing the Rut

By: Mike Mitten

The whitetail rut is a fickle thing. My brother David says it's only as crazy and energized as what you see in front of you. You could be having a great day with many bucks chasing does all around you, while just a few hundred yards away, your brother or hunting partner could be bored and not seeing anything. In general, the breeding cycle is somewhat influenced by the photoperiod; however, actual rutting activity observed during daylight when hunters are afield is also subject to deer density, buck-to-doe ratios, age structure, and weather. This is why in some years I have traveled thousands of miles chasing the rut.

Deer density can be different in micro-environments as little as a mile apart. The variables are too great, but are most often influenced by food, cover, hunter harvest, predation, disease, birth rates, and weather. The buck-to-doe ratio and age structure can be easily manipulated through discretionary hunting.

In 2013, I could not go out west for my traditional extended elk hunt, so I opted for a couple of four-day weekends in Wisconsin for early season whitetail hunting. The breeding cycle tends to start a little sooner in northern Wisconsin than central Illinois. I had never hunted the western part of the state's high bluff country before, but its deep ravines and rock ledges quickly reminded my legs of September in the Rockies.

The deer season opened September 14th, and with no prior scouting I was off choosing a stand site where agriculture meets the tall ridge lines. Hoping to catch a bachelor group of bucks still together, I looked for deer sign and trails at the corners of soybean fields and at the headers of deep ravines. I had to resist the urge to explore the dense timber and river bottoms along the areas I intended to hunt for fear of spooking game. Once I had selected a few spots to hang tree stands, I left that area during midday to explore vast timbered ridges for secure spots to hunt later on during the rut, when food is of slightly less interest to cruising bucks.

During the first evening sit, I saw four does and fawns and two eight-point bucks. The largest I judged to be a 3 ½-year-old whose rack was tall and wide, but thin. He was a nice-looking deer, but with only one buck tag, I chose to wait. I passed up a six-pointer and another 8-point buck at 15 yards during the second evening hunt. I would have taken a doe, but was only presented close encounters with two fawns.

On the fourth day I found a spot where a CRP field, thick oak woods, and a standing corn field came together. There were acorns dropping and several apple trees with fallen fruit nearby. I located a place where a dry ditch ran down through the timber, creating a slight terrain edge that may have gone unnoticed if it weren't for a line of rubbed saplings. This transition area looked like a great place to hunt during the rut, but I could not resist sitting in the newly hung stand. It

was quite warm as I listened to acorns dropping through the canopy, striking dry leaves or bouncing loudly off of fallen tree trunks. Of course there were a few squirrels and mosquitoes to keep me entertained.

As the sun set, I heard the soft crunching of approaching footsteps. Three deer were coming through the woods, eating fallen leaves as they walked. I did not see any antlers and decided to try for the lead doe if she came close. It seemed like they were downwind of me, but the warm, calm, rising air must have kept my scent above them. They circled my tree and started heading to the CRP field, but just when I thought they would pass out of range, the lead doe turned and came back toward me. She had stopped eating and was just walking through. I readied for a shot and took her just after she cleared a dead fall and stopped broadside at 18 yards between two saplings. The wood hexshaft-footed arrow slipped between her ribs, in line with her heart. She only ran about 80 yards before bedding for the last time. The other deer were confused, and a second doe walked up to me before realizing I was the intruder to their world before fleeing.

Taking an early-season doe was a great way to start the season and put food on the table. I couldn't wait to go back and find out what other stories these ridges held for me, but first I hunted closer to home in Illinois. Unfortunately my Illinois hunting area experienced two years in a row of Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease (EHD). Heavy flooding in the spring caused increased water pooling, which unfortunately was followed by a mid-summer drought. The resulting mud flats created the perfect habitat to grow the virus-infected midges. Thirty deer used these drying pools more frequently, which increased their exposure rates. Some deer were unaffected; others got sick but survived, while still others died a horrific feverish death within three to twenty-eight days. Seven deer were found dead on our property and dozens more were discovered on neighboring property before the season started.

The disproportionate death of older bucks abruptly changed the age structure that my brother, the neighbors and I so diligently work for. As the early Illinois season progressed, my sighting of mature bucks was significantly less than that of previous seasons, so I returned to Wisconsin to try my luck in the stands I hung earlier with the rut in mind. As daylight broke the first morning in an upper ridge stand, I could see many rubs and scrapes within 70 yards of me. Unlike the thickets that I hunt in Illinois, the Wisconsin property is more open and timbered with maple, basswood and oaks. The brightness of exposed cambium illuminated the trail every 10 to 20 yards indicating the buck's direction of travel. Several scrapes were over 6 feet in diameter. This was a major staging area to the soybean field about 100 yards to the north. Deer were heading back to bed including several does with fawns that passed me at less than 15 yards. One doe stopped to sniff a licking branch above one of the scrapes, but she gave it little more interest than that before travelling on. Cool air brushed my skin, red and orange leaves of sugar maple showed brilliant pigment, deer were everywhere, and young bucks clashed sparing antlers; all of this was a gift for my effort. It didn't matter that the big buck did not show, for his story was told in the sign he left.

I played the odds, hoping to use the thermals to my advantage, by taking stand sites higher on ridges on sunny days and dropping to the valley floor on days of chilled air and calm winds. While hunting the ravine bottoms the shifting air currents can be treacherous and volatile. This might sound overly descriptive, but trust me; it's not to the buck that uses his noise for sustained

survival. When the winds did get shifty, I quickly ascended the hills to set up at ridge-top where they may be more predictable. Dual stand scenarios have saved many hunts for me when weather fronts roll in unexpected.

Does that were getting chased by 1 ½ -year-old bucks had mouths open and lines from branches grooved into their coats. It seemed every morning and evening the woods were a flurry of deer, but I never got a chance at the bigger bucks that made the rubs. I returned home and back to work, while anticipating vacation time to hunt.

During the first week in November, the Illinois rut was in full swing. Farmers were cutting out corn, which pushed deer back into the thickets. Bucks were after does with the same enthusiasm that I witnessed in Wisconsin. Often I will see the chases end quickly if a mature buck shows up. He will seek the security of heavy cover with his prize doe while keeping other bucks at bay. So, in a sense, a balanced age structure can dampen the tempo and longevity of chases, giving the impression to hunters that the rut is not as frenzied as previous years. To me this is a good thing since it's the mature bucks I am after.

I don't rattle antlers as much during the rut as I used to because it tends to bring in an increased number of younger bucks, and I don't always want that disturbance in the woods after I successfully reach my tree stand undetected. However, on the morning of November 10th, I was waiting in a tree stand set up in heavy black locust and honeysuckle thickets. It was windy,

which I like better for rattling because the responding bucks don't have the best pin-point of my location, so they can often overrun their noses and inadvertently come within bow range. So I crashed my antlers together mimicking a violent confrontation between two bucks with equal intentions. I rattled hard like this for about 15 seconds, silenced the antlers and picked up my bow with a nocked arrow. Almost immediately I heard branches break behind me. A flash of horn told of a fast approaching buck. I turned in the stand and got ready. First the



beam tips were revealed and then the tines as the heavy buck broke free from the brush and crossed into the shooting lane I created previously. He was one of the bigger bucks that I had seen this year, but since I found his antlers from two previous years I had a good idea of his age and maturity. He stood there with visible breath while searching for the battling bucks, or better yet the doe that caused the conflict. I pressed tight against the tree trunk with my arms pulled in close in an attempt to look smaller. Even though I decided not to shoot this buck, I still did not want him to locate my position. He was too alert for me to move toward my video camera so I

just watched him and learned from his reactions. Soon he backtracked into the thicket, while I began to relax. Then suddenly out of the corner of my eye I saw a second buck slipping through the brush to my right. I instantly knew this was the buck I was after, and had a history with. I had two sets of his antlers at home and several close encounters locked into my memory. He was 6 ½ years old, had forked tines on each side and a sticker below each of his brow tines, making him a 14-pointer. I could not see his body well, but the grey muzzle and white horns twisted a little as he maneuvered around the thick vegetation. He walked toward the first buck that was still standing off at 30 yards and looking for the fighters. In doing so he passed my tree at 17 yards. I had already turned and taken my three-point stance with two well-planted feet and my butt braced against the tree's trunk. My bow arm directed the arrow and followed the buck. He stopped momentarily but still left me no good shot. Both bucks left out of sight as the wind overpowered their footsteps. Not knowing their exact location, I waited two minutes before rattling the antlers again. This time a young 6-pointer came crashing in to investigate from the north, but the old buck with the heavy crown did not return.

I felt as though I narrowly missed out on a golden opportunity, because it's not often I see a buck of his maturity without a doe during this time of year. They usually cut a trail of a hot doe during the night and keep them for themselves in a quiet place during the day.

The weeks before the Illinois gun season were typical to those of previous years. Many young bucks were seen chasing does, cruising through the timber, and checking scrapes along field edges. Encounters with older bucks were rare, but still facilitated my reasons for getting up early each day.

It's not legal to bowhunt during the Illinois gun seasons, so at the start of the second season, I chose to hunt deer in Nebraska. The mule deer rut isn't usually as crazy as that of the whitetail, but because it starts a little later, it gave me a good chance to chase after some big forked bucks out on the prairie. Visibility was much different than back home in Illinois or Wisconsin, and after getting elevated I could see for miles. During the first two days, I saw over 60 mule deer per day and many nice bucks. On the third day, I was making a stalk on a bedded buck, when it got up and ran down the hill and disappeared into the washouts. I couldn't believe it. What just happened? The wind was right and I wasn't even close enough for him to smell me. As I climbed up out of the bowl, I looked across the valley and got my answer – a white Ford F150 was busting off cross country and behind some swells. I wondered who that was out here, and continued my climb. When I reached the ridge line I sat down behind some sage and began glassing again. Fifteen minutes later I could see that white truck bouncing along in the distance, then 20 minutes after that I saw the same truck up the ridge behind me, and two hours after that it was spotted parked way back toward the valley head where I came in from. I couldn't believe my misfortune, as my deer sighting declined to three animals and no bucks. Kicking off a little early, I hiked back to my truck, and still saw no deer. I drove around the back side of the ranch only to discover not one, but six identical white F150s parked in a row in the road ditch. As I approached I could see guys standing alongside their vehicles and a sea of colored flags dotting the prairie behind them. I pulled up and inquired as to what was going on. They told me they were part of a survey crew from Texas that was marking the land prior to a seismic team's arrival that would inform the area land owners for potential oil exploration. The answer was Christmas to my question about how long do you guys think you will be driving around the prairie.

I could not risk committing this much vacation time to an area with daily human disturbance. So with that, my Nebraska hunt was over and I headed back to Illinois. After driving all night, I climbed back up into the same stand from which I rattled in that huge 14-point buck. The temperature dipped to three degrees and the air was still. To avoid making any metal creaks, I was careful not to shift my weight too quickly in the stand. Fifteen minutes after legal shooting time I heard a deer coming. Looking to the southwest, I saw the buck with familiar forked tines. The heavy 14-pointer I saw earlier was working his way toward me. I had a perfectly good groomed trail right in front of me, but he chose to snake his way through the downed timber and honeysuckle brush. I carefully rotated in the stand and looked for any openings. I had previously trimmed a few limbs from behind me, but since the tree I was in was not that big in diameter, I left many for back cover. Finally the buck came up on the trail directly behind me at 15 yards. I knew if he continued on in the direction he was going he would catch scent of me. I got anxious as he moved ahead and stopped between two trees. His eyes were covered by the front tree, giving me a chance to draw. Looking right down I could see his vitals, but placing an arrow through the limbs might be difficult. Halfway through my draw I leaned back and made contact with the tree I was in with my left shoulder. Reverse canting the bow and tucking my chin in a little, everything lined up. The opening between the overhanging limbs and the two tree trunks presented a path for my arrow. I released, but was immediately shocked by the explosion of a limb only 10 feet from my bow. I was so focused on the limbs and trees down next to the buck, that my brain never computed the other limbs that my eyes must have seen. The deflected arrow struck the frozen ground just past the buck with a commanding thud. The buck jumped forward two yards and stopped. He was wired! I could not really enjoy his presence since I was still in disarray over the miss. Somehow I found myself with another arrow on the string, but I could not give up any more movement before the buck bolted off about 30 yards and slipped back into the grey timber. These are some of the uncertainties we experience as bowhunters, and the reasons we keep coming back.

I drove eleven hours to have that close encounter. I saw that buck three more times that year, and after a lengthy search, my brother and I each found one of his sheds.



Two days after missing the old buck I took a morning stand in an Osage tree that provided good visibility to grassy hillsides and brush-choked ravines. I again reflected on the words of my brother: "The rut is only as crazy as you find it." November was nearly over and usually this time of year some bucks are back to cruising greater distances looking for that late estrus doe. I saw a couple does and young bucks move past, but at 10:15 a flurry of hide, hair, antlers, puffing breaths, snorts and grunts plowed

into me as I sat in my tree. A hot doe with four bucks chasing her was trying her best to stay out in front. Branches cracking and leaves rustling brought music to my ears. The doe eventually ran under my tree and then cut out to the northeast with a spike buck a few feet from her rear. Two 8-pointers were next to come out of the thicket, and then a huge-bodied 9-pointer. The 9-pointer was the biggest, but he ran to the west, missing out on the direction the doe went. I immediately grunted at him, causing him to stop 60 yards away. My second grunt made him look in my direction and then charge directly at me, stopping at 10 yards. His rack was over 21 inches wide, but his neck caught my attention the most. It was difficult to judge the age of this deer with only one sighting, but his enormity and closeness convinced me to shoot. He took my arrow in the side and ran off in the direction of the doe and younger bucks. After pausing at 50 yards and snorting three times, the buck disappeared into the thickets. I sat watching quietly for two hours before getting down and tacking up the blood trail. He only went 100 yards before bedding down.

Even though his frame was long, he had nearly all his fat runoff rutting. However his neck was still extremely swollen and it measured 27 inches in circumference at the smallest point at the jaw. This buck would have dressed over 250 pounds a few weeks earlier. His eye-to-nose measured eight inches, while his antlers sported heavy beams. I don't measure my success in pounds of meat or length of tines, but physical attributes of every animal taken help me better remember the time spent. The similar shot distances I took during the last few days in November resulted in two different outcomes, but they were of equal reward. While dragging the buck back to my truck, I too realized the rut is only as crazy as YOU experience it.

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