

A 100 Year Old Man

On the morning of November 19, 2012 I had a really interesting, thought provoking experience. As most of you know I've been a whitetail fanatic for over fifty years. That morning I passed up an old veteran buck which I believe was the oldest whitetail I've ever seen. I obviously have no way to prove it but he looked absolutely ancient. The big nontypical I shot in 2011 was judged to be 9 ½. This buck could have been his grand daddy. His antlers had degenerated to next to nothing. I'm certain barely a shadow of his prime years. They were basically massive spikes with a bunch of heavy beading, no main beam but a slight bladed tiny fork at the top of his one antler.

All alone, I watched him come to me from a hundred yards through the open hardwoods. He was a "slow walker" but not because he was waiting for thermal currents. He was obviously in pain. It took him a solid fifteen minutes to walk a hundred yards. I considered doing a mercy killing because he looked in such poor shape. I took video footage of him at fifteen yards that hopefully you'll all get to see someday. You could see the age/pain in his face and eyes. He was gaunt and having a hard time simply walking with arthritic hips and a kyphotic (humped) spine. I knew he wouldn't make the winter but you have to respect an animal like that. I wondered what he looked like when he was in his prime; how much he weighed; how big his rack was; how many trophy bucks he'd sired; how many times he survived sub-zero temperatures with winds howling at 25 MPH while he hunkered down under a pine as his only protection with a basically empty stomach; how many red coats he made it by; the gang bangers, the in-line muzzleloader guys with their "primitive" weapons with thumb hole stocks, bipods and scopes who can shoot them in the head from 200 yards. Not to mention the late season antlerless rifle shooters who pop the biggest antlerless deer from 200 yards only to find it's a shed mature buck. Then there are the packs of deer running dogs, coyotes, bobcats, increased vehicular traffic and the rednecks who just closed the local bar heading home with a spotlight out the window.

Harsh conditions, drought, severe heat/humidity while wearing a fur coat, floods, ticks, chiggers, flies, etc. He was a true survivor. I also guarantee he watched me in the woods many more times than I watched him over the years. I had plenty of time to think about the situation.

In 2006 I was after a beautiful buck I'd nicknamed Rocky. I, in fact, wrote an article about that pursuit for PBS and even donated a chapter in my book, *"Once Upon A Time"* after having eleven (yes eleven) encounters, including four close calls that season. I later found out one of the neighbors ultimately killed Rocky during the late gun season and he ended up measuring 173 inches typical.

Because I only had a single Iowa buck tag in 2006, and had my heart set on Rocky, I passed up several outstanding trophies that year. One I recalled was very special. It was hard for me not to kill him but my constant close calls with Rocky kept me on track. He was a basic 4x4 frame but he had extreme

mass at the bases and a conglomeration of multiple extra points protruding forward between his brow tines and pedicles. It appeared he had a "cluster" of extra points around his bases. I remember thinking the potential damage an aggressive rack like that would do to a stout rubbing tree. I estimated him as likely 5.5 years old and in his prime. In fact, I took some video footage of him one afternoon as he passed by me at 18 yds. He was a heavyweight contender too, likely to dress out at 250 solid pounds. I actually passed him up twice in 2006 while I hunted Rocky, both times as he followed a pretty doe with obvious intentions.

Later that winter while visiting with the local neighbor/landowner I brought the subject of that particular buck up. Because of his unique antler configurations he also knew of him. He informed me they almost got him in an organized drive but he got away and they "ran him out of the country." I didn't see the stud the following two years in his old turf. I figured maybe one of the fragments of flying lead maybe unknowingly found its mark after all. Or like so many other specific bucks we watch, he just melted away.

Around 2009 we started seeing another "similar" buck in a big block of timber almost a mile north of where I hunted Rocky. I probably should have recognized him but enough years had passed, the land had been bought and sold and I no longer had permission to hunt it. Frankly, I forgot about the 2006 buck. I don't think this "new" buck just showed up as much as the fact we started hunting where he lived more frequently. We even nicknamed the new heavyweight "Knarly". His body size was enormous. I had several close encounters with Knarly in 2009 and 2010 but I only had one tag left and I was in hot pursuit of Hurley. I remember thinking if Knarly and Hurley ever went head to head it would be a great match. Although Hurley's rack was bigger, Knarly had the bigger body and more mass in his beams. In fact, I feared there would absolutely be broken tines skipping through the leaves.

Could this ancient buck I was now looking at possibly be the same buck I passed in 2006? Could multiple close calls with the gun hunting and organized deer drives on the adjoining farm actually "run him out of the country"? To give up his original home turf to timber less than a mile away that was bowhunted only by a couple fat guys? If my original estimate was correct and he was in fact 5.5 years old in 2006, that would calculate out that I was looking at an 11.5 year old true survivor.

As I watched I felt genuinely sorry for him. I've had to put good dogs down in the past. I hated it. I even thought about justifying the kill. But the meat would likely not even be palatable. I have a thing about old animals. I have absolutely no desire to shoot an elephant because he'd likely be older than I am. That's just me. I have a soft spot in my heart for old animals. Yes, I managed the farm he lived on.

We gave him the chance to grow old by keeping it limited to bowhunting only. I was torn. I know we are supposed to be stewards of the land and the game. Maybe I'm getting soft in my older years. Even though I now had an extra tag in my pocket I felt sorry for him. Maybe I got too good of a look at his face and his eyes.

I ultimately decided to let him walk, to live out his life as nature intended. As I watched him slowly walk away I honestly got choked up. I'm still not sure I made the right decision. But I'll tell you one thing for sure, God did good when He made bucks like that and granted us the opportunity to pursue them. Thank you.

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