

Dorothy Was Right!

By Mike Handley

By the time I reached the pick-up point well past sundown, headlights were igniting the tall grass at the edge of "Buckzilla Woods," so named for a 200-plus-inch whitetail a friend videotaped there the year before I fell in love with Jefferson County, Kan. As soon as I opened the little SUV's door, I blurted, "This was my best day of deer hunting EVER!"

Mike Nickels beamed, I think. It was hard to tell, since the beams from the trio of lights attached to the brim of his cap were hitting me squarely in the eyes. But I'm fairly sure I saw dimples.

"Well, tell me about it," he prompted.

I took my time, composing my response while depositing my bow in the backseat and stripping off my gloves, skullcap and neck-gaiter and stuffing them on the dashboard.

"I don't know where to start," I replied, torn between regaling him with a chronological account of my first full day or cutting straight to the chase — my last two blissful, yet frustrating hours in the stand. I opted for the latter, visions of a 170-inch 10-pointer overloading my memory card.

Somewhere near 4 p.m., I happened to glance at a hillside and caught the flash of antler. Eventually, what began as a Tinkerbell light materialized into the largest rack I've ever seen on a deer while hunting. The buck wore a clean 5x5 crown: 8-inch brow tines, foot-long P-2s and -3s, P-4s of at least 6 inches, and all of them atop an 18- or 19-inch wide set of main beams that were wrist-thick at the bases.

As if that weren't enough, the buck easily weighed 300 pounds — far beefier than the 17 others I'd seen earlier and bigger than the three I saw afterward. I saw 20 bucks that day, the majority with respectable to bodacious racks. The only ones that didn't have me clipping my release to the bowstring were a couple of yearling spikes and one juvenile 6-pointer that ultimately cost me a shot.

The granddaddy was a sight to behold, and I beheld it for a solid hour. I spoke to it. Whispered sweet nothin's. Belched out challenges. It approached to within 50 yards, and it wanted to come closer. But it didn't want to leave the hot little doe playing in the creek like a toddler in a plastic bathtub. I've never seen a deer act the way she did.

The only thing missing was a rubber ducky!

A couple of years ago, I wrote of a surreal experience I had grunting and bleating to bucks in that same setting. I was the "buck whisperer" that day, on the ground, when I twice lured a 2 1/2-year-old buck to within a startling 5 feet. I stopped talking to it out of fear that it might actually gore me.

But for the splash-happy doe, it was almost déjà vu all over again in 2007.

My tube call is capable of producing both bleats and grunts, and I employed it to the fullest. Every bleat caused the buck to stare at me, while its ears rotated like tandem satellites. The grunts caused it to puff up like a Chia deer and stamp its feet. One minute it wanted to love me; the next, to kick my butt.

But — it — would — NOT — leave — its — girlfriend.

When the doe eventually tired of cavorting in the creek 40 yards from my ladder stand, she took off on a dead run back uphill. Her suitor gave me one last look before giving chase. When they were gone, I felt like I'd given birth. The temperature might have been plummeting, and the wind blowing scissors, but I was literally sweating.

I'd been so enamored of and locked in on the monstrous 10-pointer, I hadn't even noticed that a yearling 6-pointer had crept in and was lying in the leaves 15 yards in front of me, chewing its cud with its eyes closed.

Within minutes, I saw another buck barreling up the creek bottom toward me. It probably would've passed within a few yards of my tree had it not caught the hot doe's scent in her bath water and veered sharply onto her trail — not at all bothered by the tarsal-rich odor of its brutish predecessor. The new arrival was a shooter, too; another 5x5 that might've tallied in the mid- to high 140s.

As soon as that buck disappeared over the hill, the 6-pointer rose and began slowly ambling to the creek. Soon after it crossed, I saw yet another 10-pointer following the exact same path its twin had scorched a few minutes earlier. Oblivious to the little cud-chewer maybe 20 yards to my right, I began bleating in hopes of getting the 5x5's attention BEFORE it caught a whiff of the recently departed estrous doe.

My plan worked. The 10-pointer passed right by the hot crossing and was coming to me. When its head passed behind a small tree, I drew my bow ... in full view of the 6-pointer I'd forgotten. The young buck snorted and ran about 20 yards before stopping for a double-take, and my target stopped and glared in my direction.

I was rushed, my nerves were frayed, but I took the shot. Unfortunately, I'd neglected to change my mind's 25-yard plan. The buck hadn't yet reached my predicted window; it was at 30 yards. My arrow sailed barely underneath it, and the animal didn't give me a second chance.



All this happened during the last two hours of Nov. 14, and I haven't even mentioned the 16 bucks I saw leading up to that period. I'd had a perfect textbook opportunity at a record-book 8-pointer about an hour after sunrise. It was exhausted from chasing does, oblivious to my presence and standing broadside at 17 yards — looking for the doe I'd pretended to be. I could practically see the saliva dripping from its extended tongue.

In any other state, I'd have had trouble letting a book buck go along its merry way. But I was in the Land of Giants. If you care anything at all about antlers, you don't settle for 130-inchers in Kansas. And besides, I'd already collected venison a few days earlier in Nebraska.

I'd hit the peak of the Kansas rut, at least inside the Buckzilla Woods. It was so unbelievably awesome that I was convinced the other guys in camp that week would think me a liar. I wanted to stand on the kitchen table and wow them with everything I saw (including the dive-bombing of hapless squirrels by myriad redheaded woodpeckers).



After learning of my new friends' less-than-stellar experiences that day, I decided not to depress them. However, my tales didn't seem too preposterous by the end of the week. We all experienced the rut at its finest, and we all had shot opportunities.

I've hunted some of the best whitetail real estate in North America, and I have my favorite places: Nebraska, Illinois, Texas and Louisiana, to name a few. Most all of these hot spots are in some way connected to a big deer I've shot. Kansas is at the top of my list not because I have a glass-eyed memento hanging on my wall (yet), but because I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I could wind up with a real monster.

Every time I go there, I meet wonderful new people and measure deer that would reduce most of us to blithering idiots if we saw them on the hoof.

Editor's Note: If you'd like to see why the writer is smitten with this place despite a five-year jinx, give Mike Nickels a call at (785) 393-9308 or e-mail him at nickelsfarms@gmail.com. Mike, the only outfitter in Jefferson County, Kan., operates Old School Guide Service out of McLouth. He'll tell you when and how to apply for tags.