

Tommy Kirkland for windigoimages.com

The Sunflower State is a big-buck gold mine; travel there during the peak of the rut armed with a good selection of deer calls and you just might strike it rich.

BY MARK MELOTIK, MANAGING EDITOR

With an almost too-loud report—sounding much like the sharp crack of a rimfire rifle—my first rattling sequence of the morning pierced the eerie gray post-dawn stillness. Much too still, I thought, for a prime overcast November day at the very peak of the Kansas rut. So it wasn't more than a few seconds later when—just for good measure—I hauled back and again whacked together the two halves of the Knight & Hale Pack Rack—a performance that to my ear sounded plenty convincing. Still more cause for optimism was my position at the edge of a just-cut sunflower field; I guessed the realistic “battling buck” sounds would carry quite nicely.

Satisfied I'd at least captured the attention of every buck in a solid quarter-mile circle I was in the final stages of swapping Pack Rack for bow when movement hard to the left caught my eye. What I glimpsed there—just 35 yards away—sucked the air from my lungs. And even right then, I could not—would not—have predicted that the outsized whitetail standing before me would be just the start of a literal big-buck parade. Or that I was experiencing what would soon become the most-exciting morning I've ever spent in a deer stand. And I'd thought I'd seen some pretty memorable mornings.

FIELD In Kansas

Although I've hunted Kansas just a handful of times it sits squarely atop my list of favorite whitetail states. The reasons why are many, but maybe most notable is its dependable population of out-sized deer that seem to respond more consistently to calling techniques. And I dearly love to lure big bucks via the call. From rattling to bleating and grunting, it's been my experience that Kansas bucks—even those cagey five-year-old veterans—have shown themselves suckers for well-practiced deer vocalizations. I'm no deer biologist but the reasons why seem fairly obvious: a solid buck-to-doe ratio and huge stretches of isolated, rural landscape laced with high-protein crop fields that see relatively little hunting pressure.

The above description pretty much typifies the wide variety of tracts owned and leased by Rader Lodge located in north-central Kansas. Owned and operated by longtime outdoorsman/bowhunter Jeff Rader, his operation based in Glen Elder began in 1986 as a pheasant hunter's paradise—and has grown quickly to include turkey and waterfowl hunting, fishing for walleyes, white bass,

and catfish, and, of course, bowhunting for deer. Last fall I was among a group of nine industry professionals to sample the area's bowhunting that all of us found exceptional. When it was all over five prime Kansas bucks hung from the meat pole—and virtually all of us saw and had opportunities at multiple bruiser bucks.

SOME TRADITIONAL PAYBACK

Maybe most satisfying was the burly 9-point arrowed by David Brinker—an avid Western traditional bowhunter who had been running up a string of bad luck with Eastern whitetails the last few years.

"I was just getting ready to get out of my stand when a doe appeared and walked



Ben Summers poses with his Kansas broken-tine brute flanked by camp mates David Brinker and Jared Pfeifer, who helped in the recovery.

under me,” Brinker remembered of the morning hunt that began his unique string of encounters. “I had a doe tag so I took the shot, but shot over her.” With no more apparent action on the way Brinker descended to retrieve his arrow and head back to the lodge for lunch—when he glimpsed a buck crossing a cut corn field some 200 yards away.

“I climbed back into my stand and did a rattling sequence—and could see it headed my way,” Brinker said. “At 50

yards it stopped directly behind me; then he turned and walked off and I rattled him back, this time coming to about 80 yards from a different angle.”

After the curious buck finally vamoosed for good, Brinker noted it carried a distinctive rack with a double eye guard on one side—a rack he would see again just minutes later on his drive back to the lodge. Unbelievably, the rut-charged buck crossed the dirt road right in front of Brinker’s truck—even giving him time to



One You Gotta Get

SEVERAL YEARS AGO IN November I used a Knight & Hale Pack Rack (www.knight-andhale.com) to rattle in the biggest Iowa buck I’d ever seen up close, a 5- or 6-year-old bruiser I guessed in the high-160s as an 8-point. And just a week earlier I’d used the ingenious, compact rattling device to lure in a mature Minnesota buck living in the state’s remote Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCA). After adding two different 170-class Kansas whitetails to my tally of Pack Rack-duped bucks, I believe this ground-breaking call deserves a spot in whitetail packs everywhere.

snap a picture with his cell phone.

That evening, Brinker was set up on the farm the “cell phone buck” had crossed into.

“I didn’t rattle or call because it was so windy that afternoon,” Brinker recalled, planning instead to sit tight, be patient, and let the rut do its thing. He didn’t have to wait long.

“Soon after I got into the treestand I pulled back my bow at a shooting lane 15 yards away; I remember thinking how great it would be for a buck to walk through there. About 15 minutes later, here comes a buck walking straight to that opening. He walked right into my sight picture and I hit right where I was looking. He made it just 75 yards and collapsed. It wasn’t until later I realized it was the same buck.”

MORNING TO REMEMBER

And what happened that fateful morning described in the opening graphs? Memories of Halloween 2011 a few weeks previous may have been starting to fade, but the buck now closing fast on my position carried a rack many would classify simply: Scary. Almost oddly tall and thick with plenty of crazy nontypical points jutting this way and that, I had an immediate epiphany glimpsing the whitetail that looked much more like a rangey 180-class mule deer. “It’s Twin Towers” I thought as I slowly rotated my feet right to make the shot. The buck was

alert, its coal-black eyes looking hard for the unseen “combatants”—and incredibly, right on course for an 18-yard broadside shot directly in front of me.

From my position—just off the field atop a 15-foot ladder stand in an old thick-trunked oak—patience was key. Although keeping me well hidden a huge branch just to my left allowed me to spy anything approaching from that direction but prevented a shot until the animal was directly in front of me. With the monarch just five yards from my shooting lane I pointed my Bear Takedown at my shooting lane and with three fingers put pressure on the string. It was mere seconds till “go time.” Although I’d be hard-pressed to recall my final thoughts before shooting most of my bow-bagged animals I’ll never forget this one: “I’m about to get a shot at a Booner whitetail with my recurve!”

Two more steps and the buck disappeared behind the oak branch—and then stopped. Uh-oh. Three very long seconds later the buck bolted back to the left, stopping just 30 yards away and broadside. Of course I’d known the wind was at my neck and blowing right toward the buck—but there was little I could do but



David Brinker had several encounters with this rut-charged buck before anchoring it with help from his trusty Blacktail recurve.

hope. It was simply not to be, I figured, as the buck now stood, looking back at me one more time, almost knowing the huge branch protected him completely.

When the buck scooted back into the woodline, I had to blink hard to see if I was dreaming. Gawd what a buck.

ENCOUNTER WITH A LEGEND

“Twin Towers” was a nickname I’d overheard earlier in camp—the name spoken by outfitter Jeff Rader in a conversation with someone else in camp. Somehow, I’d instinctively known the buck in front of me was him—and even stranger, I was right. Back at camp I would learn the unique buck had been glimpsed the previous fall near the same stand I now sat but not since; but I’m getting ahead of myself. The morning was still young.

Maybe 20 minutes after the exit of Twin Towers I watched a 140-class 9-point skirt the far edge of the sunflower field some 350 yards away—ignoring my best rattling and grunts—and 20 minutes after that a lone doe materialized at mid field to my left, also a good 350 yards distant. Suddenly, a big buck rushed out of the woods toward her, a huge mass of

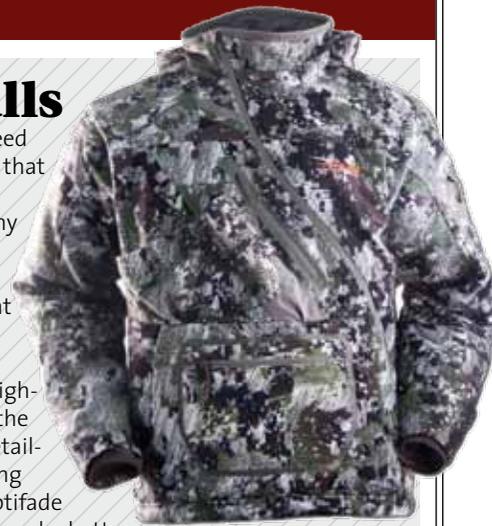
When Peak Rut Calls

WHEN THE WHITETAIL RUT is at its peak you need to sit a stand all day, and nothing lets you do that like a great arsenal of apparel.



Sitka began as a company dedicated to providing Western “on the move” hunters with lightweight gear designed to wick moisture and provide warmth in challenging high-altitude conditions, but the company’s line of whitetail-dedicated stand-hunting apparel (covered in Optifade Forest camo) might even be better.

If you hunt whitetails from zero to 40 degrees, do yourself a favor and check out the Fanatic Jacket (\$389) and Bib (\$369)—the jacket featuring a smart side zipper design that allows for a “kangaroo pocket”—a “built in” handwarmer muff you’ll never forget. The Primaloft insulation is toasty as it gets, and the jacket arms are tapered and articulated to eliminate bulk and increase range of movement for better shooting and climbing. The Bib offers smart pockets and handy side zips so you won’t sweat on the way in and out. New this year is the Fanatic Vest (\$189), a promising, versatile design that offers the same side zip/kangaroo pocket system—for smart layering or outerwear. www.sitkagear.com



bone easily visible above the buck's head even from that distance. Within a few minutes a second Pope & Young class buck had joined in the chase, and then, to my amazement—a third! And not one of them was the big non-typ!

I waited until all the bucks had stopped running before my loudest rattling sequence of the morning. At the opening “Crash!” the largest buck jerked his head my way and stared. Hard. Tense seconds passed but the buck came no closer. Dang.

For several more minutes I witnessed a virtual buck melee with all three bucks taking turns running the doe around the field. No deer came closer than about 300 yards; and then, suddenly, there were only two bucks. Throughout most of the chase I'd been holding various calls and now it was time for roll-call. Unfortunately, even with binos the extreme distance and a sudden light snow shower made positive rack I.D. impossible. Then I caught a break as both remaining bucks were momen-

tarily skylined against some dark cedars bordering the field's far side. Now I could see one was a 150-class 10 point, the other, a 130-class 8-point. Hmmm. Both of those bucks had looked a lot smaller than the third “missing” buck.

ENTER BOONER NUMBER TWO

Soon the freak snowstorm intensified, eventually accumulating about two inches, and the two remaining bucks exited the field far side of the field together—soon followed by the doe, several hundreds further to the left. Just as I'd given up hope glassing the far side of the field, I heard an ever-so-slight “tick” behind me. Turning slowly I looked into the eyes of the largest typical whitetail I'd ever seen on the hoof, a heavy 170s-class 10-point, maybe 24 inches wide—standing broadside just 15 yards away! Another advantage of the huge oak I was in was its surrounding carpet of crispy downed leaves. They made a silent approach from the rear virtually impossible. I figured I'd have plenty of time to flip around if I heard a backside approach—but hadn't factored in the freak, wet snowstorm.

The buck had me dead to rights but I had to try. Slowly I reached for my hanging recurve, while the buck simply walked off, to my right, screened just enough by large overhanging branches. I don't have to tell you it was torture watching that deer walk slowly out of my life. Another Booner—again under 20 yards—and still no shot? Incredible.

Initially, I had considered the big 10 yet another “new” buck relating to the field, but then made the connection. The big 10 had been the first on the field to chase the doe, and the only of the three to react to my rattling. When it had “vanished” it simply decided to leave the field (and unreceptive doe), and loop around through the woods to come see what all the fighting was about. He had crept in silently as big bucks so often do—and left unscathed, a skill 5- and 6-year-old bucks have mastered.

One of the great things about bow-hunting is that no matter how many frustrating days you have afield things can turn around so quickly, and with such utter incredulity, that describing them can leave you speechless...or babbling like an idiot. That evening, back in camp after an all-day sit (how could I not?), was one of those times. Combine a little rattling with a Kansas deer hunt during the third week in November, and you just might experience the same.

To contact Rader Lodge call (785) 545-3476 or go to www.raderlodge.com **EW**