

BIG BUCK PSYCHIC

A loud, earth-shattering crack of thunder echoed across the hush of the flat temporarily disturbing the fawn but the animal returned to nibbling on the regrowth it found quite palatable. Moments later, its urge for milk, generously available from its dam, overwhelmed the young animal. It turned in every direction looking for its dam, but without visual contact, it began to "bleat", a natural way of communication between a dam and its offspring. Without a response, the fawn began to negotiate its way through the dense understory. Using its olfactory system, "sense of smell" to relocate its mother. Twenty yards away, the youngster discovered its dam lying awkwardly in a mat of buffle grass. Excited, the fawn ran up to the doe and rammed its nose into the doe's udder to satiate its unquenchable thirst. The doe remained stolid and motionless. The buck fawn sensed something wrong when vocalizations alien to him began to be heard. Abruptly, a pair of humans appeared. Taken by surprise, the fawn bounded a short distance away. Protected by the foliage of a low-growing hogplum thicket, it watched the two predators carry off its life support system-its dam. Witnessing this event would only magnify the inherent fear this deer would exude in the future of its ultimate predator-man.

One short year later, at the age of 18 months, several physiological changes had occurred, including the fact that its first set of antlers developed, and it was becoming interested in other does.

Sometime over the long, hot Texas summer, the yearling buck formed a bond with several older bucks. This male bonding insulated the youngster from many of the dangers in the wild. It was so attached to the largest buck that its mannerisms mimicked that of his mentor. The young buck learned how to avoid humans by regulating its time around human activities. For example, the rancher would drive through the pasture daily, tossing range cubes to cattle. Following this routine, the buck would slip out from cover and consume any of the remaining cubes missing by the cattle.

Things began to change in the fall as the young buck noticed older bucks becoming increasingly aggressive toward each other. Although he remained part of the fraternity, he was harassed whenever he did not follow the rules to a "t". The time was mid-December, and the young buck's urge to pursue a doe was rapidly eclipsing even his sense to eat. But the adult bucks prohibited the youngster any privileges. He could tag along, but that was the extent to its first year of adulthood.

One crisp cold December morning, the youngster watched his large-antlered cohort defend its rights over a doe when the

sound of a truck could be heard. Unlike the normal, evasive response displayed by the older buck, it simply remained stationary, almost statuelike, as the doe before it nibbled precariously on the nearby vegetation. Once again, the loud crack of thunder removed something the yearling did not wish to relinquish. This time the large-antlered buck slumped to the ground, and the yearling buck ran only a short distance away to watch for a second time the impact man would have on its life.

Scenarios like these happen often in the wild, and it's only practical that young deer witnessing such events become extremely elusive. The fact is, wild deer are born with an inherent fear of humans, a characteristic that intensifies by the number of interactions the two have.

Even in penned deer, the wild nature of this ungulate is rarely erased. At one time, back in the late 70's, I was raising whitetails in captivity for research purposes. The fawns were born to wild does in seven-to-ten-acre enclosures. During the fawning season, pens were walked every day to locate and capture newborns, which were immediately transported to a fawn-rearing facility. To assuage the difficulty when handling of adult deer, I was establishing a tame herd, or at least deer that were more manageable. After conducting this project for several years, I found that a few deer would imprint on man and become gentle, but others failed to lose their fear of man and

remained wild and hard to control.

In the wild, deer are vulnerable to a limitless number of intrusions while exercising their normal daily patterns.

Everything from cars to coyotes have an impact on the way they live and survive in the wild.

It's also important to note that deer are individualistic, demonstrating variable personalities. Although I employed hunting in my opening scenario, the same impact could have been the result of predation by coyotes, dogs, or even collisions with vehicles. The point is, the animals must adapt in order to survive. Simply because a deer witnesses a fellow deer hit by a car doesn't mean it will never cross a road again. But the animal may very well avoid the road when the roaring sound of a vehicle is heard.

The same can be said of hunters shooting deer over food plots. Dispatching several deer on a grain field does not mean that all deer will avoid the area. But you can bet it will alter their behavior around and on the plot, even when it is visited.

Deer have, for the most part, an uncanny ability to decipher when and where to make their appearances. Another example is the mid day activity period during the rut. Based on research conducted on one of my South Texas operations in which only mature bucks were radio-monitored, a mid-day activity

period during the rut was noted. Now, is this coincidence, or is it a learned practice? One could say it is a direct result of the fact that fewer hunters are in the field at this time. Who knows for sure, but I would like to give the deer credit for this evasive maneuver.

It's obvious that in order for deer to survive, they must literally survive in man's back yard, and they are doing that quite well. But what about deer in the outback, somewhat, if entirely sheltered, from the presence of man?

I had the privilege of managing a large ranch in excess of 100,000 acres back in the mid 1980's, which exercised ultra conservative hunting. Because the landholding was immense, the deer herd was protected by peripheral hunting pressure, and deer inhabiting the core lived a sheltered life. Not long after acquiring my responsibility over this landholding, I established a major telemetry study on mature bucks. Not only was I attempting to determine habitat preferred by deer, but how long they lived--vital questions to individuals attempting to increase the number of mature bucks. In conjunction with the central theme of the study, collateral data was obtained on individual bucks.

Now, one would think that visually relocating a radio-collared deer would be easy--not so. The radioed deer made few appearances. Matter of fact, one buck, "Double Main Beam",

occupied an area heavily utilized by ranch hands. Yet, over the five years he was monitored, the buck was spotted only four times. It's important to note that this buck was really never hunted or pursued in any manner except for the time he was captured.

The most amazing thing I ever witnessed, however, involved a yearling buck in a separate study. Collared as a fawn, I had to relocate the yearling by helicopter in order to retake the animal for various research data. Once we located the animal's position based on the telemetered signal, we circled at some 75 feet above the ground. The buck never moved, so we retriangulated the deer's position and hovered for several minutes within 25 feet of the ground, but no luck. Convinced the deer was dead, we hovered over the area with the skids at times touching the blackbrush below us. Failing to observe the collar, we were about to part when out from underneath the helicopter bounded the obviously healthy yearling buck. How could a deer, or any creature this young, hold this long unless it is part of its inherited self. The point is, all deer have personalities which force each one to respond differently to the same situations. This one feature may be the reason why deer have adapted so well and continue to increase.

Some individuals even contend that there are unkillable deer. These are animals that live a lifetime without contact

with predators, man or beast. Whether it be some inherent trait enabling that animal to avoid disaster or simply luck remains a biological secret.

The question remains--if deer are so capable of avoiding man, how can we hope to take one of these precious creatures. The fact is, not all deer are the same. Some, even large super bucks, at times are extremely vulnerable and more importantly, predictable. I have witnessed two bucks supporting racks in excess of 180 inches that were totally predictable, but again, this is the exception and not the rule.

As for the unkillable buck, it can and probably does exist, but most, if not all, bucks are vulnerable during the rut. It's as natural as eating--a buck must breed. It is his natural biological function to ensure the continuation of the species. Thus, pursuing big deer takes patience, and with a little luck, particularly during the rut, that once-in-a-lifetime buck may very well present himself. After all, it happens every year.