

As we enter the last month of the year 2005 in South Texas, bucks are beginning to intensify their search for does. This courtship activity escalates to a feverish pitch sometime around mid December. As a result, some of the older, larger-antlered bucks, normally sedentary in behavior, become vulnerable as they become more aggressive in their attempt to occupy a niche in the breeding hierarchy of the deer herd. Their biological demand to reproduce forces them to physically compete with their summertime cohorts in order to ensure that the strongest and most fit animals do the breeding. During this time period, referred to as the rut, they become inquisitive and overly aggressive, checking out virtually every buck interaction they hear. This innate curiosity displayed by the buck can be used by the sportsman to his advantage. Horn “antler rattling” is not only the most effective tool in luring bucks up close--it is challenging and entertaining.

Nowhere in the country does horn rattling work as effectively as it does in the Lone Star State. Matter of fact, most authorities credit South Texas as the birthplace of rattling. But I assure you, this technique was used by Native Americans wherever whitetails lived long before white man ever landed at Plymouth Rock

The procedure itself is simple. All one attempts to do is mimic the sparring activity of two bucks competing for breeding privileges. The only tool needed is a set of antlers, preferably fresh ones, that retain a solid tone when struck or rubbed together.

The antlers I use are composed of ten points and are both right beams. By using antlers from the same side, I have the ability to clash them together without smashing the tips into my hands. I do recommend grinding the normally rough bases to a smooth finish to facilitate a firm yet comfortable grip.

Size of antlers employed is up to you. I prefer large ones, but any antlers, real or artificial, will suffice. The critical factor is confidence in the technique and in the area you are hunting. No one brings in a buck each and every time they rattle, so one must be persistent.

Where you rattle is critical. The first requirement is conspicuous sign of deer activity, such as tracks, torn-up brush, and more importantly, fresh scrapes. The presence of fresh scrapes verifies the presence of a buck or two in the area.

Selecting a position before initiating a rattling sequence is paramount to success. I select areas thick enough to prevent deer from detecting my movements. While rattling in South Texas, I often sequester myself in an area inundated by coyotillo with an abundance of dry leaf matter on the ground to enhance the volume of the raking sound I make with the antlers.

If you have ever witnessed a serious buck confrontation, you know that it is not a silent affair. When two 150-pound-plus mature bucks clash, there is a lot of brush cracking and limb snapping, with noises echoing out a considerable distance. As these gladiators go at it, seldom is the sound of clashing antlers heard as the animals' racks are actually solidly united. The victor is often determined by the animals' strength, not necessarily the size of its antlers. It's an endurance test with the lesser either falling or turning tail and running.

I once observed an amazing battle between two mature bucks take place on a ridge nearly one-half mile from where I stood. Throughout the timed 10-minute struggle, I heard antlers collide only once or twice, but the sounds of the combatants crashing through the brush resonated throughout the bottom, attracting curious bucks from

everywhere. Thus a deer's attraction to these mock battles does not depend solely on the antler alone. For this reason, I like to remain concealed to allow myself the flexibility to tear up as much brush and dry matter as I can between and during rattling sequences.

In South Texas, I prefer to rattle underneath the umbrella-shaped huisache trees. Once mature, these trees at a distance look like giant green mushrooms. The dead limbs and dry matter under these trees can be used to a rattler's advantage. There's usually an abundance of litter to enhance the raking noise, and smashing, twisting, and cracking of the older, dead, drooping limbs really verify to a cautious buck that the real thing is taking place. The deer's inability to see me under these trees stacks the odds in my favor.

Although I do have a certain procedure I follow, it varies dependent on the conditions.

I initiate a rattling sequence by pawing the ground with the antlers imitating the sounds of not only deer fighting, but of other deer joining the ruckus. This activity usually lasts less than a minute. Following a short pause, I will rub the back of the main beams together, then reverse the antlers and gently rub the tines together. This is repeated for a minute or slightly less.

Following another short pause, continually searching the forest or brush for movement, I will clash the antlers together loudly, and then grind them together, loud at first, then lightly towards the end of this minute-and-a-half long sequence. Following a two to three minute pause, I repeat this last sequence which can be repeated every five to ten minutes throughout the session.

I usually remain 15 to 25 minutes at each rattling site. However, if I know a big deer occupies the area, I will remain for several hours, rattling every 30 to 40 minutes.

Bucks often approach from the upwind side of the commotion, pausing just out of sight, but they will invariably work their way to the downwind side where their scent detection system, “their nose”, takes over. Once they circle downwind, your chances of seeing them is minute. One effective way to tricking an old hunter-weary buck is to employ the buddy system. To accomplish this task, simply station your partner preferably in a tree or some elevated position, and get yourself situated to rattle approximately 40 to 50 yards upwind. By doing this, your partner will be able to spot bucks circling to get your scent. This same technique, when employed by three people, is extremely effective. Simply place the additional man 40 to 50 yards upwind of the rattler, and he may very well see more bucks than the individual on the downwind side.

Another technique I like to employ entails the use of a grunt call, particularly when a buck is in view. For whatever reason, possibly the animal’s tremendous curiosity to the sound, a buck will remain longer if grunts are intermittently emitted. Holding a buck that extra second or two can make the difference when that decision to shoot is made.

One prerequisite to rattling success is the sex ratio of the deer herd. Obviously, a balanced sex ratio augments competition between bucks, thus favoring ideal rattling conditions. However, even in deer herds favoring does, a persistent rattler will experience some success. The important thing to remember is that there will be some isolated areas inhabited by does and bucks in equivalent numbers. These are the areas hunters need to search for, and if successful in locating them, dividends can be great.

Deceiving trophy caliber bucks is challenging no matter where you hunt, but it can be done. Every year sportsmen tell me they have little problem bringing in young

deer, but a real problem exists with luring in the older monarchs. I agree that two-to-four-year-old bucks scoring in the 130-inch range (based on Boone and Crockett scoring) react most to rattling, but only because they are young, naïve, and more importantly, abundant. Just like our best bass lakes, you don't boat a "hawg" on every cast. Why? Because few exist. Those big bucks scoring in the 150+ range first of all, are educated—after all, they have waded through the gauntlet of five or six hunting seasons, but more importantly, they exist in small numbers, thus decreasing the probability of locating, alone bringing them to the horns. But I have experienced rattling on well-managed country where big deer exist, and although they aren't pushovers, a sportsman who knows what he is doing will enjoy success.

Preseason scouting can also increase your rattling success. By spending time afield prior to the season, one can become more knowledgeable about deer and their habitat. Remember, you are hunting deer on their turf, and they know it well. After all, they live there day and night. There is no way we can learn all their patterns or secret escape routes, but the more we learn, the greater our chance of connecting in the fall.

Taking a big deer by rattling, like calling in a bull elk, is a dynamic event. It doesn't happen all the time, but it can happen at any time. Perseverance, that never-give-up attitude, is the paramount ingredient to success. Obviously, luck plays a role. But the harder you work at it, the luckier you get.