

by JEFF COPELAND

Bowhunting a

Bruiser

LIVING THE DREAM.



A sampling of on the ground images show the type of deer that awaited the author.

I'VE ALWAYS DREAMED ABOUT HUNTING BIG BUCKS IN THE MIDWEST. Since I was a kid, I have read accounts of hunters sitting patiently as they watch rolling hardwood hillsides and brushy draws in search of massive-bodied, heavy-antlered bucks. I have been startled awake many nights from the surge of adrenaline caused by these dreams as a ghostly-white set of massive antlers materialized in the edge of a dark timber ridge. This was my first opportunity to hunt in Missouri, and little did I know that I was about to live the dream. After visiting with some friends who hunted there with much success the year prior, I booked my trip to Oak Creek Ranch in central Missouri.

Having never been to that part of the world before, I was really taken by surprise with the terrain. The ranch was a beautiful piece of land comprised of big rolling hardwood hills, lush valleys and fertile creek bottoms. My excitement level about this hunt rose off the charts

in late summer when ranch owner, Donald Hill, sent me an email with an attachment of several photos of bucks the guides captured with their scouting cameras.

My level of enthusiasm dropped a bit when I arrived for my hunt greeted by the unseasonably warm (about 20 degrees

above normal) temperatures that the area had been dealing with for the past couple weeks. By mid-October, bucks are putting on lots of fat and growing out their winter coats in preparation for the upcoming rut and inclement weather that fall brings to the region. Because they are getting so fat and wearing their winter coats, when the days are warm, it really stifles their movements. The best hope for a bowhunter in these conditions is to catch a mature buck at first or last light. They just don't move much the rest of the day.

After a tough clear, warm morning hunt, while eating lunch, we noticed cloud cover forming. Checking the latest weather forecast, we found that the clouds were slated to continue to build through the afternoon ahead of an approaching cold front. The heavy clouds would keep the evening temperatures down considerably from where they hovered the past few days, hopefully allowing for earlier evening movement from the bucks we were hunting. Armed with this new glimmer of hope, we decided to get out to our blind early in the afternoon. Following our morning hunt, we looked around the food plot we were hunting. The ground was littered with tracks and rubs marred the timber along the edge of the plot, and it was clear that numerous bucks used the plot.

Arriving in our area early, we parked the truck behind the dam of a pond situated down the hill from the food plot we were to hunt. As we gathered our gear and prepared for the hike to our blind, we heard a noise



▲ The author's buck grossed 166 2/8 B&C

in the timber a little ways up the road. Looking up, my guide whispered, "That's one of the bucks we're after." I caught a glimpse of the big nine-point as he followed a doe through the timber, away from our location.

Quickly, we collected our gear and decided to slip down through the timber, opposite the direction the buck and doe ambled, and come into the food plot from the other end. As we approached the plot, we saw that the overcast sky apparently did indeed have the deer up and moving much earlier this afternoon, as three bucks and five does stood feeding in the far west end of the oat patch. Oak Creek implements a stringent management strategy that allows bucks to maximize their growing potential before they can be harvested, and none of these bucks made that grade. Not wanting to spook them and potentially alert the buck we were after, we used the rolling terrain to hide our movements as we crept quickly across the food plot to our blind in a small grove of persimmon trees near

a little hilltop in the northeast end of the plot.

As we settled into the blind, I began replaying the events of the day so far. Due mostly to the unseasonably warm temperatures, our morning hunt had been a bust. Only a couple does had fed briefly after daylight before heading off to bed for

"There's a nice buck in the edge of the timber," I whispered. The guide peeked through the window and said, "That's one of the bucks we are after."

the morning. After leaving the blind, we rode through some of the heavy-timbered areas of the property on our way back into the lodge and spotted several really nice bucks bedded in the thick dark timber.

One of the bucks we spotted was a really big nine-point with a thick, light-colored rack. He wasn't bedded very far from our food plot, and knowing he was likely responsible for some of the rubs we spotted around the edge of the food plot

gave me a little shot of adrenaline. It was painfully obvious the weather had been affecting our hunt, but with the cooler cloudy conditions, we were hopeful that this evening would be a different story. Sure enough, about an hour after we were settled, deer began entering the food plot and feeding a couple hours earlier than we had been seeing over the past few days. Our guide had us pretty full of anticipation, telling us he had been scouting this big nine-point and a couple other bruisers pretty heavily and had been seeing them almost every day just before dark feeding within bow range of the little persimmon thicket where our blind was sitting.

Passing hours saw more and more deer pile into the plot. There were two or three nice bucks and several does and fawns feeding in the far end of the green field behind our location. About 6 p.m. I looked to the south of our location through one of the side windows in our ground blind.

"There's a nice buck in the edge of the timber," I whispered.

The guide peeked through the window

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▲ This is another massive buck harvested while the author was in camp.

There are multiple variables that come into play. When the camera can see the buck, the shooter can't and vice versa... and then there's that lighting problem you oftentimes see in outdoor TV shows when it becomes too dark to film.

As the buck continued feeding toward our location, we began determining how far the buck would need to come before the camera would have an unobstructed view of him, and I could take the shot. The deer was moving from my right to left, and Bum was set up on the left side of the blind, meaning the deer would have to feed almost past the blind before I could shoot. Luckily, we had a gentle breeze from the southeast so we wouldn't have to worry about the buck winding us.

All seemed to be going as planned when, suddenly, the buck jerked his head up and looked behind him. I glanced back down toward the timber and saw a young eight-point step out of the woods and begin feeding.

As the bucks continued feeding in our direction, I could see their body language relax in the open surroundings. The nine-point finally made it past the window in front of me, and Bum whispered that

and said, "That's one of the bucks we are after."

The buck was casually feeding on acorns beneath the large oak trees that surrounded the plot, and he was in no hurry to venture out in the open. The woodline was only about 80 yards down the hill from us, but I was about to give up

hope before the buck finally began feeding on the oats and heading our direction.

My buddy Curtis "Bum" Bumgarner, from Outdoors Our Way Productions, was in the blind videoing the hunt. This wasn't my first time hunting in front of a camera, and I was well aware of the perils of aiming to get a bow kill on video.



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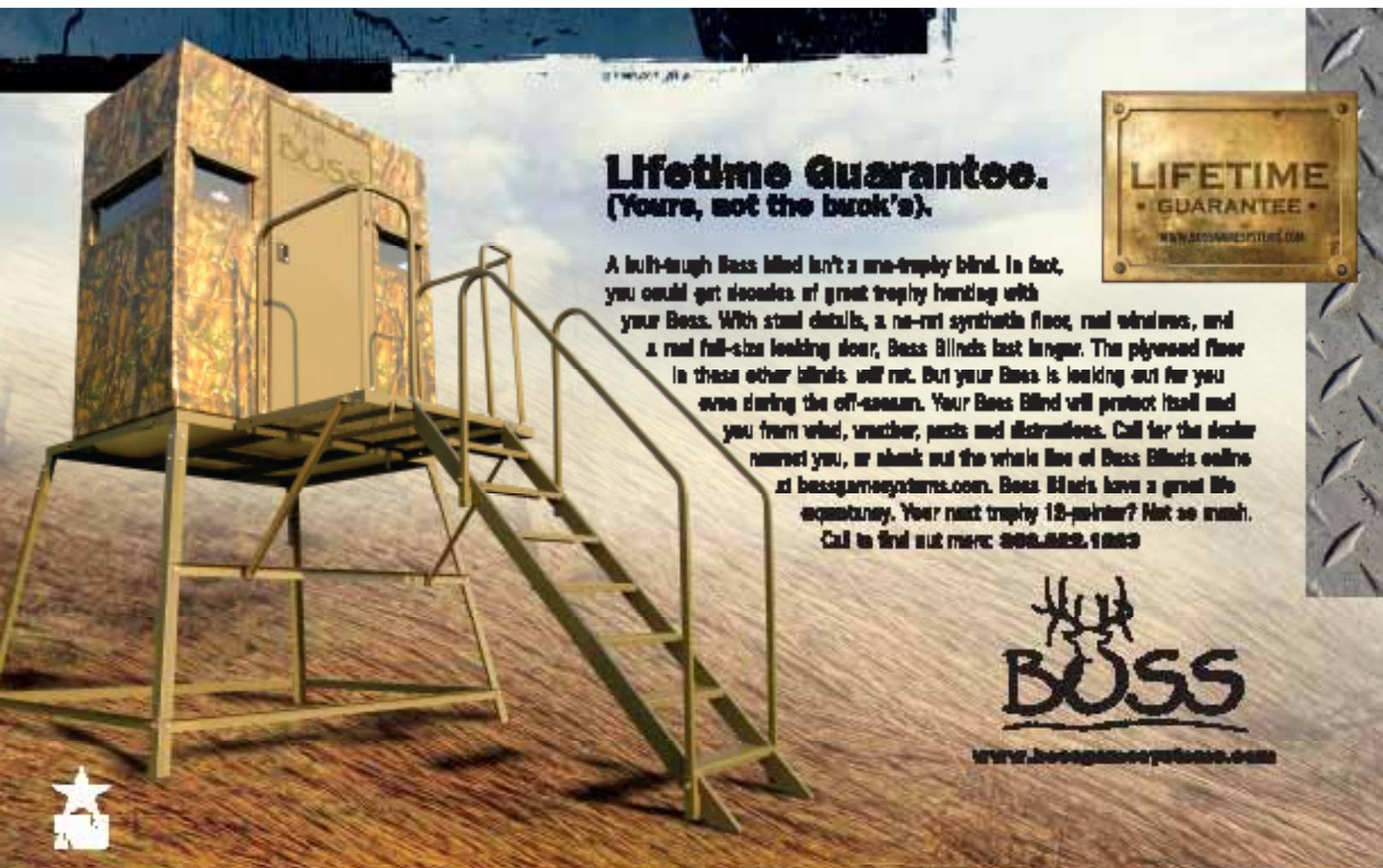
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he was on him with the camera, but I couldn't shoot until he traveled another 10 yards or so. Once he was visible in the middle window, I had a perfect shot, but a couple of persimmon tree trunks blocked the camera's viewpoint. Bum said he needed about five more steps to be clear.

The sun had been down several minutes and light was fading fast. I was beginning to think it was going to be too dark to take a shot when Bum finally said, "Okay, I'm on him." The guide ranged the buck and said he stood 39 yards as I came to full draw. Settling my 35-yard pin on the middle of the buck's shoulder, I touched the release and heard the arrow smash through his chest. The buck stumbled and bolted over the top of the hill and out of sight. A second later, we heard him pile up, and then all was quiet, except for our heavy breathing and excited congratulations.

Sure of the hit, we only managed to wait about 10 minutes before leaving the blind to recover the buck. We slipped up to the crest of the hill and looked in the direction we had last seen the buck traveling. He made it less than 50 yards from the spot he was hit and expired right in the middle of the two-track road that circled the food plot. He proved a great buck, scoring 166 2/8 gross B&C inches with a massive, clean nine-point typical frame. As I admired the massive white antlers in the fading evening light, I realized I was finally experiencing a Midwest reality that I had dreamt and read about for decades.

I experienced a great hunt at Oak Creek Ranch. The guides are highly knowledgeable and spend countless hours scouting the ranch and getting to know the habits of the bucks that reside there. The accommodations are wonderfully welcoming and the country is beautiful. Our mid-October hunt allowed us to catch the end of the colorful fall foliage, and the late-arriving mild weather finally offered a great change of pace from the South Texas heat I had left behind. ☼

For more information on hunting packages available at Oak Creek:

573-943-6644

www.OakCreekWhitetailRanch.com

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The author's hunt was filmed by Outdoors Our Way Productions.

They film everything from ducks in the flooded timber of Arkansas, elk in New Mexico to deer and turkey all over the Midwest and South. The Outdoors Our Way crew will also be featuring some small game adventures including frog giggering and squirrel hunting with some of the best treeing dogs around. Several DVDs are currently available on the website.

www.OutdoorsOurWay.com

Oak Creek Whitetail Ranch Is Putting More Monster Whitetail's High Into The SCI Record Book Than Any Other Outfitter

Proof Positive: Oak Creek hunters have accounted for 7 of the top 10 SCI Typical and 5 of the top 10 Non-Typical of all time.

More records have already fallen during the first two weeks of the 2010 season. It appears Irvin Barnhart has shattered the SCI Handgun record, taking a 324-2/8". Mr. Barnhart then took, what promises to be the new #1 SCI Muzzleloader deer...a showy 310". Woody Fox may have the new SCI Non-Typical of all time with his 355-5/8" Oak Creek bruiser. Max Rickerson returned and took a double drop time 321-2/8" and an impressive 346-7/8". Well done all! (Green scores, pending drying time and certification of SCI Midwestern Whitetails).

Hunters Come To Oak Creek For Massive, Showy Northern Whitetails Like These!



Irvin Barnhart's 324-2/8" Handgun buck



Irvin Barnhart's 310" Muzzleloader buck



Woody Fox and his 318-3/8" with Donald Hill



Woody's potential new #1 Non-Typical: 355-5/8"



Max Rickerson was back! 321-2/8"



Max's 346-7/8"

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