



▲ THE AUTHOR and his trident brow-tined Missouri buck.

story and photos by  
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# Tri-per-fecta

**THREE DAYS INTO THE HUNT** and this buck, along with the cold, has gotten under my skin. A fresh layer of wet snow from the night before crunches with each step I take, no matter how measured, and serves only to buffer the crackling of dead twigs and leaves beneath my boots.

A doe bedded down 50 or so yards to my right glances up the hillside and I freeze. There are so many trees and snags between me and the deer that I can only make out patches of auburn fur, but it's obvious her attention is focused elsewhere. Shooting lanes in these bottoms? More like aiming through a picket fence. With my eye on the doe, I cautiously shoulder the Ruger carbine and select an opening in the trees out front. In my periphery, I catch movement from the left and settle in behind the scope. Minutes pass and there's nothing.

Like some Vegas magic act, out of nowhere the buck appears not 40 yards ahead, beyond my "shooting lane" and angling away. He never flinches; just keeps walking down the draw and disappears. The entire morning spent glassing through fogged binoculars, walking on eggshells, creeping through a spider web of tangled understory, waiting, and he never so much as raises his tail.

I will never complain about cold weather. Growing up in Texas heat has taught me to embrace the cold, treasure its bitterness and lament its departure. I can say this having not lived above the frost line for any extended length of time, although I did spend two years in New England where I hunted greater Canada geese in upstate New York. Wind chill was 35 below, the corn field we set up in was frozen over solid and when we felled them, several of the



▲ AN AWE-INSPIRING SUNRISE paints a classic Missouri winter landscape.

TRI-PER-FECTA

huge birds damn near breasted themselves from the impact.

Cold is a relative term. Hunting big geese in the cold seems appropriate. Deer hunting, not so much so, unless you're sitting in a heated deer stand overlooking a feeder.

The problem with hunting deer in Missouri, in the cold, is these deer do not appear to be predisposed to congregate around a feeder strategically positioned down range from a heated deer stand. Add snow, thick timber, steep draws and an adversary accustomed to these environs and it becomes a bit more challenging.



It was not an unbearable cold, despite the readout on the digital thermometer hanging on the lodge wall at Oak Creek Ranch. It read two degrees and did not stray more than a few clicks in either direction throughout my three-day visit last December. Adrenaline must be a natural heat source because I began getting pumped up about the time I passed the Indian smoke shop statue in Big Cabin, Oklahoma. My rush to get to Oak Creek in central Missouri was not shared by my truck, whose tires do not heat up on icy roads no matter how quickly they rotate. Inching at a snail's pace along the winding and hilly two-lane blacktop from Bland, Missouri to the ranch, the last thing I wanted was to call ranch owner Donald Hill to come pull me out of a bar ditch. Texans don't do icy roads.

By the time I arrived, the rest of the hunters for the week had already settled into the main room of the lodge, admiring the trophies adorning the high walls



An advertisement for Polar Vault coolers. At the top, a polar bear wearing a red Santa hat stands behind two camouflage-patterned coolers. The cooler on the left is labeled 'POLAR VAULT 240' with a capacity of '240-120Z. CANS, 150 QUARTS'. The cooler on the right is labeled 'POLAR VAULT 120' with a capacity of '120-120Z. CANS, 90 QUARTS'. Both coolers feature the 'GAME GUARD' logo. A banner at the top left says 'MADE IN THE U.S.A.' with stars. Below the coolers, the text reads: 'THE GIFT FOR THE MAN WHO HAS EVERYTHING.... BUT HE DOESN'T HAVE A POLAR VAULT!'. Below this, it says 'FEATURING GAMEGUARD® CAMOUFLAGE, THE OFFICIAL CAMO OF THE LONE STAR STATE®'. At the bottom, there are three logos: a polar bear, 'POLAR VAULT', and 'GAME GUARD'. The bottom of the ad contains contact information: 'For additional product information and pricing, we invite you to contact: 817-472-8990 chris.elliott@thermell.com www.thermell.com'.

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**TRI-PER-FECTA**

and recollecting hunts past. Oil guys from Louisiana who'd been to Oak Creek several times and brought with them a passion for trophy deer. Oilmen have a unique glow about them whenever they hit a big producer, and you could tell these boys were on one here. They also don't mess around, and by noon on the second day were loading racks and heading back south with fresh venison and tales to share.

Conversely, I seem to be tapping a dry hole, but not for lack of effort. My guide knows these woods and the deer well. Brian, like most of the guides Hill uses, is from these parts and hires on during the slow season for construction. He urges patience from the onset of our hunt, telling me these deer have been hunted for a couple of months and won't be easy. Piquing my interest, Brian says he hopes to put me on one deer in particular that he's seen recently – a heavy mainframe 10-pointer with triple brow tines – but most anything up to 180 inches is fair game.

Oak Creek is in the big leagues when it comes to trophy deer management, and Hill has gone to great lengths over



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the years to maintain some pretty high standards. He raises big deer by managing habitat that encourages growth and antler development, mandates strict selective harvest and breeds for superb genetics. Finding a buck that scores within my range proved challenging; seeing bucks that exceeded it was not.

Field-judging antlers isn't hard if you know what to look for, and after many years of following Texas whitetails I consider myself to be fairly accurate in assessing raw scores on the hoof. Missouri bucks, I would quickly learn, are deceptively different.

Oak Creek is high fenced and covers about a thousand acres of rugged Ozark mountain country. Once inside the gate, the fence vanishes behind rolling, timber covered hills. As we hunker down along the edge of a huge food plot during the first morning's hunt, a nice non-typical 300 yards out quickly gets my attention. Even taking into consideration the thick mass along its palmated main beams, I guess it to be about 160 since the rack doesn't clear the ears. Brian takes a quick peek and casually corrects my scoring, "He'll go 230."



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No way! Yes way. My first miscalculation is not taking into account body size. It's almost an optical illusion. My Texas baked brain is accustomed to gauging 150-pound bucks whose headgear dwarfs body size. These Midwestern bucks are all upwards of 200 pounds and sport much thicker coats, which mask the size of their racks in proportion to body size.

I get plenty of opportunities to hone my field-judging ability on these monster Missouri bucks during the hunt, inspecting and comparing mounts on the wall with those we observe in the field. It's like window shopping for European sports cars; you never get tired of looking even though you might not ever have a chance to buy.

Watching several 200-plus giants go about their winter routines across picturesque landscapes that could hold Robert Wood's attention, I'm starting to believe these will be my take home memories and that's okay by me. So much emphasis is on dropping the hammer on a buck of a lifetime that we sometimes lose sight of the hunting experience. I've hunted hard and I did get a glimpse of that triple brow-tined buck after a long stalk on the final



THE AUTHOR and his trident brow-tined Missouri buck.



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morning of the hunt. What a story that deer would make, but having had the opportunity to hunt him, I am satisfied.

It's tough to convey that level of "customer satisfaction" to a guide whose abilities are often measured on Boone & Crockett score sheets, and Brian remains determined to find me a buck, THE buck. So we ride and we walk and we glass every odd shape hidden in the shadows. I sense the clock is winding down in Brian's head. It's game on. Each movement he makes is calculated, but quick, like a quarterback running a two-minute drill. There's no time for photographing off limits bucks or snow-covered scenery, we need to cover ground in a hurry.

His truck rarely comes to a complete stop before we break the huddle, bail out and scramble into the woods hoping to get in front of a buck he spotted heading across the other side of the ridge. He's pretty sure this deer meets the criteria even though we never got a good look at him. It's third and long and Brian hopes a screen pass will catch the defense off guard. It's a gamble.

There's a protein feeder just over that ridge and Brian is confident this buck is headed there with a pair of does in tow. He's right. The deer are already there by the time we clear the ridge and we drop on our bellies to catch a breath and get a closer look. The buck looks big enough to me, but as Brian lets out a deep sigh I gather it's not going to happen. Too young.

Brian looks nearly as beat as his worn out pickup. Like him, it's a seasoned workhorse. Brian delays the ride back to camp as much as possible, hesitant to take the truck out of first gear as we amble along the rutted and rock-strewn ranch road. He pauses at the top of each hill looking for a Hail Mary opportunity. Nobody's open. Clock's winding down. Fat lady is doing a mic check. As we make a bend in the road, Brian hits the brakes, disbelief on his face. There, less than 100 yards away standing broadside on the edge of the woods is the buck. It doesn't budge even as the truck door creaks open and I step out.

Michael Irvin has cleared the safeties and the ball is in the air. You know what happens next. Ⓢ



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