

It Only Takes a Second

Change of Fortune

By Ben Wright
Appalachian Whitetails Field Team



It had been only a few hours since I had the biggest buck I had ever seen in PA in my bow sight. Even though he had been not more than 10 yards away from my tree stand, but obscured by brush, the buck was running a doe and just would not give me a shot. It was a monster, but I lost him. How frustrating. It was not easy to get over, especially since I had hunted this area for so long.

Now I was climbing into a truck along with my hunting companions, heading for Illinois. I couldn't help wonder what I had been thinking six months ago when we booked the trip. Would it be worth the time and expense? My attitude was solemn as we pulled out of the drive and started our 12-hour trek to prime deer hunting grounds, often referred to as, "the land of the giants," located near the Illinois River. I was trying to maintain a positive outlook, but it was already proving difficult, as I thought about the big one that got away. Would my luck change?

Off to a Slow Start

After arriving at our camp in late afternoon, I had just enough light to run into the woods to scout a spot for the following morning's hunt. Sprinting up a hollow and to the top of a ridge, I was trying to take in as much of the topography and deer sign as I could before the day faded. I crested a ridge and spotted a mature doe with her fawn feeding on some acorns. Continuing along, I spotted two small bucks in the same vicinity. With nightfall fast approaching, I decided that this area would have to do for the first day and returned to camp. Over supper, the three of us agreed that our best chance would be to find a decent spot, adjust, and sit it out in hopes that the rut would hit. I slept restlessly in anticipation of morning light.

We awoke to a full moon. Dressed and out the door, I retraced my walk of the night before, passing landmarks, trees, and bushes. On the way in I could hear deer spooking all around me. This was not what I had hoped for. As the day progressed, the wind strengthened and hunting conditions deteriorated. Towards evening, I climbed what had once seemed a favorable location, but then spooked more deer. My mind raced and I concluded that to get to this spot I must walk through a bedding area. I decided to change location, pull my stand, and move into a hollow to avoid the wind and the bedding area. I have to admit my attitude was souring, again, thinking about that big one back in PA. Sure enough, the day ended with no luck, no shot, and no "wall hanger."

Back in camp my hunting partners encouraged me to keep a positive outlook because, as we all know, tomorrow was going to be a new day, and it only takes a second to change everything.



The three-county area of Calhoun, Pike, and Adams is often referred to as the golden triangle of trophy whitetail buck hunting.



Hank Balles downed this 256 pound 9 point on the first evening of the hunt. The buck fell victim to Dead Red.

The next day seemed as unproductive as the previous. Although I had seen a small buck and a doe in the morning, I had to make yet another adjustment to my location. Finally satisfied with the new perch, I prepped for the afternoon hunt but then had to sit through 2½ hours of rain with nothing to show for it. Discouraged and considering just returning home, I returned to camp for the third evening. Two deer in two days, soaking wet with visions of my monster at home being shot by someone else prompted me to hope that the other guys had had better luck. I admit thinking that, if they had gotten deer, we would just pack it in and return home.

Normally, I did not let these things bother me. Since I was a kid I had logged so many hours sitting in trees and always been successful hunting deer. For some reason, I was unable to shake my negativity this trip. Again, my partners encouraged patience and reminded me of why we do this—it's not always just to bag a deer, but to enjoy the camaraderie and the great outdoors. I managed to settle myself during dinner and decided to try my new site again the next morning. If I had no luck, I would spend the afternoon scouting an adjacent ridge for a more suitable location. I was able to close my eyes with a better attitude.

New Spot = Fresh Start

The next morning was still and cool with some cloud cover but no rain. Finally, the weather was going to cooperate! I was excited because the morning felt good. I felt confident and I made an extra effort to get into my stand early so as not to spook any deer. As I sat in the damp darkness and eerie silence, daylight began to break and I could make out a deer moving on the hillside 20 yards in front of me. It was a perfect 8 point. It was not the type of buck we were here to shoot, so I watched it feed at 20 yards for over half an hour, until it slowly ranged out of sight.

I had seen three doe and four bucks, all within range, by 7:30 a.m. Although none were shooters, this was much more hopeful than what I had been experiencing. The activity slowed until about 9:00 a.m. when a small doe came running down the hill towards me. She seemed to keep looking behind her. I couldn't help but feel disappointed as she turned and walked back toward the direction she had come. I figured if a buck was there, he was now long gone. As the doe drifted out of sight, I checked my watch and decided I would sit for another 20 minutes and then head down to do a little additional scouting.

I looked back towards where the doe had been and saw what appeared to be a larger deer walking along the hillside away from me. Not being able to see its head, I decided to try the grunt tube in hopes that the noise in combination with the smell of Dead Red in the area might make the animal respond. I hit the grunt hard, watched as the deer turned and moved towards me at a run. It started through the brush at 70 yards, heading directly at me. I could see it was a shooter and I had to move quickly because the deer was closing fast. I picked the clearing, drew the bow and within seconds had the animal at 23 yards. I bleated in an effort to stop him for a shot. It hesitated and then began to move immediately as I released the arrow. It appeared to hit the animal a little further back than I wanted, but it happened so fast I wasn't sure. The animal ran 10 yards and then stopped again. I was starting to question whether I even hit it. My eyes had played tricks on me before! I knocked another arrow, estimated the deer for 35 yards, put the pin on him and let it fly. I was disappointed as the arrow flew directly under the animal. He jumped, ran another five yards, stopped, looked around,

and laid down. Was he hit? Was he hurt? Ten minutes later, he arose from his bed and walked to the valley bottom where he laid down again. This seemed off to me and I had never planned for a situation like this. I decided to wait for another 30 minutes, exit the tree, and find my first arrow. If it was blood-covered, I would exit the woods away from the deer and wait until the following morning to pursue him. If there was no blood, I would look for the second arrow and get back in the stand in hopes he would return to the area. With minimal effort I had found the first arrow bloodied, so I quickly but quietly exited the woods according to my original plan.

The next 20 hours were perhaps the longest of my life. I replayed the shot over and over in my mind and no matter how much I thought about it, it didn't change the fact that the shot was not perfect and I didn't know if we would find him or not. My nerves were frazzled. I was tired and I couldn't stop my mind from racing. I knew it would be a long night, and had to convince myself over and over that waiting was the right thing to do.

I arose at 6:00 a.m., ready to start tracking. Describing what had happened to my companions, we decided that the deer was most likely in the stream bottom where I had seen him last. Our strategy was to walk the stream looking for him. If he wasn't there, we would retrace what I knew and begin to track, again. My heart sunk as we walked the entire stream bottom and found nothing. I took Hank, one of my hunting buddies, to my stand and began to replay the scene. We found blood in the first



Nick Pinizzotto

The author with his dandy Illinois 9 point. The deer weighed an estimated 250 pounds.



Ben Wright

A couple days after finding his buck, the author helped Appalachian Whitetails owner Nick Pinizzotto find his 10 point, making it a three for three trip.

bed. Small drops in his hoof prints led us down the hill to his second bed. I explained to Hank that he had gotten up from there and I had not been able to follow his movement. We searched and searched until Hank found another bloody bed in the stream bottom. We found nine more beds over the next 20 minutes before the trail became sparse again. There was some guarded, but concerned, optimism as we checked the hollows looking for any sign of the buck. And it wasn't long or far from the last spot of blood where I stumbled onto him laying in a ball, expired. I let out a yell in an effort to release all of the pent-up tension built up over the last couple days. Here lay the largest buck I had taken with a bow. Nine beautiful points with an 18.5" spread, not to mention the live weight of the deer was over 250 pounds!

Upon further inspection, my first arrow had hit the diaphragm, liver, spleen, and some of the stomach because of the angle.

Although not a perfect shot, it was lethal. My second arrow had brushed the chest and cut the

front leg. It was this blood that allowed us to track the deer to its first and second bedding.

My experience has taught me many things. The first is the importance of patience. This is not a new revelation in bow hunting, but rather a confirmation of what we need to practice as archers. We need to show patience not only with the pursuit of a shot at whitetails, but patience pursuing the animal when you may not be sure of your shot. Had I chosen to track immediately, I would have undoubtedly pushed the deer out of the area and most likely not recovered it. Most importantly, this experience has reminded me how lucky we are to be able to have these experiences and to appreciate them when they happen. I can't sit here and tell you that the experience would have been the same had I not had the opportunity to take this deer, but I can tell you that even without the opportunity I would have looked back on the trip fondly. I would have dwelled on stories told and other aspects of the trip and undoubtedly would be in the same situation, starting to plan for next year's great adventure.