

HUNTING THE BLACK-TAILED DEER

BY THEODORE ROOSEVELT



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THE black-tail's great curiosity is one of the disadvantages under which it labors in the fierce struggle for existence, compared to the white-tail.

The latter, when startled, does not often stop to look round; but the former will generally do so. The first black-tail I ever killed was obtained owing solely to this peculiarity. I had been riding up along the side of a brushy coulee, when a fine buck started out some thirty yards ahead. Although so close, my first shot, a running one, was a miss; when a couple of hundred yards off, on the very crest of the spur up which he had run, he stopped and turned partially round. Firing again from a rest, the bullet broke his hind leg far up and went into his body. Off he went on three legs, and I after him as fast as the horse could gallop. He went over the spur and down into the valley of the creek from which the coulee branched up, in very bad ground.

My pony was neither fast nor sure-footed, but of course in half a mile

was creditable as the more target shot would think. I have seen many a crack marksman at the target do quite as bad missing when out in the field, and that not once, but again and again. I have never made big bags myself, for I rarely hunt except for a fine head or when we need meat, and if it can be avoided do not shoot at fawns or does; so the greatest number I have ever killed in a day was three. This was late one November, on an occasion when our larder was running low. My foreman and I, upon discovering this fact, determined to make a trip next day back in the broken country, away from the river.

We breakfasted hours before sunrise, and then mounted our horses and rode up the river bottom. The bright prairie moon was at the full, and was sunk in the west till it hung like a globe of white fire over the long row of jagged bluffs that rose from across the river, while its beams brought into fantastic relief the peaks and crests of the buttes upon our left. The valley of the river itself was in partial darkness, and the stiff, twisted branches of the sagebrush seemed to take on uncanny shapes as they stood in the hollows. The cold was stinging, and we let our willing horses gallop with loose reins, their hoofs ringing on the frozen ground. After going up a mile or two along the course of the river we turned off to follow the bed of a large dry creek. At its mouth was a great space of ground much cut up by the hoofs of the cattle, which was in summer overflowed and almost a morass; but now the frost-bound earth was like wrinkled iron beneath the horses' feet. Behind us the western moon sank down out of sight; and with no light but that of the stars, we let our horses thread their own way up the creek bottom. When we had gone a couple of miles from the river the sky in front of our faces took on a faint grayish tinge, the forerunner of dawn. All in the valley was yet dark when we reached the place where the creek began to split up and branch out into the various arms and ravines from which it headed. We galloped smartly over the divide into a set of coulees and valleys which ran into a different creek, and selected a grassy place where there was good feed to leave the horses. My companion picketed his; Manitou needed no picketing.

The tops of the hills were growing rosy, but the sun was not yet above the horizon when we started off, with our rifles on our shoulders, walking in cautious silence, for we were in good ground and might at any moment see a deer. Above us was a plateau of some size, breaking off sharply at the rim into a surrounding stretch of very rough and rugged country. It sent off low spurs with notched crests into the valleys round about, and its edges were indented with steep ravines and half circular basins, their sides covered with clusters of gnarled and wind-beaten cedars, often gathered into groves of some size. The ground was so broken as to give excellent cover under which a man could approach game unseen.

At last, just as the sun had risen, we came out by the mouth of a deep ravine or hollow cut in the flank of the plateau, with steep, cedar-clad sides; and on the crest of a jutting spur not more than thirty yards from where I stood, was a black-tail doe, half facing me. I was in the shadow, and for a moment she could not make me out, and stood motionless with her head turned toward me and her great ears thrown forward. Dropping on my knee, I held the rifle a little back of her shoulder—too far back, as it proved, as she stood quartering and not broadside to me. No fairer chance could ever fall to the lot of a hunter; but, to my intense chagrin, she bounded off at the report as if unhurt, disappearing instantly. My companion had now come up, and we ran up a rise of ground, and crouched down beside a great block of sandstone, in a position from which we overlooked the whole ravine or hollow. After some minutes of quiet watchfulness, we heard a twig snap—the air was so still we could hear anything—some rods up the ravine, but below us; and immediately afterward a buck stole out of the cedars. Both of us fired at once, and with a convulsive spring he rolled over backward, one bullet having gone through his neck, and the other—probably mine—having broken a hind leg. Immediately afterward, another buck broke from the upper edge of the cover, near the top of the plateau, and, though I took a hurried shot at him, bounded over the crest, and was lost to sight.

We now determined to go down into the ravine and look for the doe, and as there was a good deal of snow in the bottom and under the trees, we knew we could soon tell if she were wounded. After a little search we found her track, and walking along it a few yards, came upon some drops and then a splash of blood. There being no need to hurry, we first dressed the dead buck—a fine, fat fellow, but with small misshapen horns—and then took

up the trail of the wounded doe. There, however, I again committed an error, and paid too much heed to the trail and too little to the country round about; and while following it with my eyes down on the ground in a place where it was faint, the doe got up some distance ahead and to one side of me, and bounded off round a corner of the ravine. The bed where she had lain was not very bloody, but from the fact of her having stopped so soon, I was sure she was badly wounded. However, after she got out of the snow the ground was as hard as flint, and it was impossible to track her; the valley soon took a turn, and branched into a tangle of coulees and ravines. I deemed it probable that she would not go up hill, but would run down the course of the main valley; but as it was so uncertain, we thought it would pay us best to look for a new deer.

Our luck, however, seemed—very deservedly—to have ended. We tramped on, as swiftly as was compatible with quiet, for hour after hour; beating through the valleys against the wind, and crossing the brushy heads of the ravines, sometimes close together, and sometimes keeping about a hundred yards apart, according to the nature of the ground. When we had searched all through the country round the head of the creek, into which we had come down, we walked over to the next, and went over it with equal care and patience. The morning was now well advanced, and we had to change our method of hunting. It was no longer likely that we should find the deer feeding or in the open, and instead we looked for places where they might be expected to bed, following any trails that led into thick patches of brush or young trees, one of us then hunting through the patch while the other kept watch without. Doubtless we must have passed close to more than one deer, and doubtless others heard us and skulked off through the thick cover; but, although we saw plenty of signs, we saw neither hoof nor hair of living thing.

We lunched at the foot of a great clay butte, where there was a bed of snow.

After lunch we hunted until the shadows began to lengthen out, when we went back to our horses. The buck was packed behind good old Manitou, who can carry any amount of weight at a smart pace, and does not care at all if a strap breaks and he finds his load dangling about his feet, an event that reduces most horses to a state of frantic terror. As soon as loaded we rode down the valley into which the doe had disappeared in the morning, one taking each side and looking into every possible lurking place. The odds were all against our finding any trace of her; but a hunter soon learns that he must take advantage of every chance, however slight. This time we were rewarded for our care; for after riding about a mile our attention was attracted by a white patch in a clump of low briars. On getting off and looking in it proved to be the white rump of the doe, which lay stretched out inside, stark and stiff. The ball had gone in too far aft and had come out on the opposite side near her hip, making a mortal wound, but one which allowed her to run over a mile before dying. It was little more than an accident that we in the end got her; and my so nearly missing at such short

bounds, and I knew he would not go far; nor did he, but stopped short, swayed unsteadily about, and went over on his side, dead, the bullet clean through his body.



FALL WORK OF PLOWING AND PLANTING BEGUN

Fall plowing has commenced in earnest and the farmers of this section are therefore busily engaged and have been ever since the welcome rains of last week which put the ground in good shape to work. For the next month plowing and sowing the seed for next year's grain crop will be the order of things on most of our farms. On quite a few places a great deal of garden truck will be put in this fall though probably most farmers will await the coming of spring for this sort of work.

On many of the newer places the ax, the saw and the stump puller are busy and as fast as the wood is removed the ground made ready to receive fruit trees and grapes. Between now and spring hundreds acres of land which have heretofore been covered with timber and brush will be planted to apples, pears, peaches, cherries, and other fruits to say nothing of grapes and berries of all kinds for which this portion of the Rogue River Valley is famous. The progress which will be made in transforming waste lands to orchards and vineyards during the next six months will undoubtedly equal or exceed all the work heretofore done in this line in the valley.

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The buck was packed behind.

range was due purely to carelessness and bad judgment.

Neither of my shots had so far done me much credit; but at any rate I had learned where the error lay, and this is going a long way toward correcting it. I kept wishing that I could get another chance to see if I had not profited by my lessons; and before we reached home my wish was gratified. We were loping down a grassy valley, dotted with clumps of brush, the wind blowing strong in our faces, and deadening the noise made by the hoofs on the grass. As we passed by a piece of broken ground a yearling black-tail buck jumped into view and cantered away. I was off Manitou's back in an instant. The buck was moving slowly, and was evidently soon going to stop and look round, so I dropped on one knee, with my rifle half raised, and waited. When about sixty yards off he halted and turned sideways to me, offering a beautiful broadside shot. I aimed at the spot just behind the shoulder and felt I had him. At the report he went off, but with short, weak

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overhauled the three legged deer, which turned short off and over the side of the hill flanking the valley. Instead of running right up on it I foolishly dismounted and began firing; after the first shot—a miss—it got behind a boulder hitherto unseen, and thence over the crest. The pony meanwhile had slipped his hind leg into the reins; when, after some time, I got it out and galloped up to the ridge, the most careful scrutiny of which my practised eyes were capable failed to discover a track on the dry ground, hard as granite. A day or two afterward the place where the carcass lay was made known by the vultures, gathered together from all parts to feed upon it.

When fired at from a place of hiding, deer which have not been accustomed to the report of a gun will often appear confused and uncertain what to do. On one occasion, while hunting in the mountains, I saw an old buck with remarkably large horns, of curious and beautiful shape, more symmetrical than in most instances where the normal form is departed from. The deer was feeding in a wide, gently sloping valley, containing no cover from behind which to approach him. We were in no need of meat, but the antlers were so fine that I felt they justified the death of their bearer. After a little patient waiting, the buck walked out of the valley, and over the ridge on the other side, moving up wind; I raced after him, and crept up behind a thick growth of stunted cedars, which had started up from among some boulders. The deer was about a hundred yards off, down in the valley. Out of breath, and overconfident, I fired hastily, overshooting him. The wind blew the smoke back away from the ridge, so that he saw nothing, while the echo prevented his placing the sound. He took a couple of jumps nearer, when he stood still and was again overshoot. Again he took a few jumps, and the third shot went below him; and the fourth just behind him. This was too much, and away he went. In despair I knelt down (I had been firing offhand), took a steady aim well forward on his body, and fired, bringing him down, but with small credit to the shot. For the bullet had gone into his hip, paralyzing his hind-quarters. The antlers are the finest pair I ever got, and form a magnificent ornament for the hall; but the shooting is hardly to be recalled with pleasure. Still, though certainly very bad, it was not quite as