



KANSAS

Comeuppance

Traditional bison range is now covered with big whitetail bucks.

By Lee J. Hoots

The Medicine Lodge River wells up from the sun-dried prairie in south-central Kansas. Flowing southeastwardly, three-quarters of its 100-mile length cuts Berber County in nearly equal, triangular halves (northeast/southwest) before spilling into Oklahoma's Salt Fork. Almost equidistant along its length, the storied town of Medicine Lodge sits near its bank. The river gets its name from the region's Native peoples, who often gathered along the river to "make medicine," perhaps to sooth a burning realization that the open prairies and vast herds of bison that lived there were soon to become overrun and run off by white settlers and the muscle of a pioneering government eager to expand its new nation.



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In February 1873, 400 acres had been selected and prepped for a town along the river's banks. Almost overnight, a hotel, office building and general store had sprung up. Medicine Lodge became a bustling township, incorporated in 1879. In 1880, more than 1,200 residents called it home. The lines that would define Barber County, nearly 1,200 square miles, in which Medicine Lodge is centrally located, were surveyed and solidified in 1873 as well.

It is interesting to consider that more than 100 years after many bloody battles between white settlers and Native Americans were won and lost, and considering the many hardships endured by early settlers and the remnants of the Native tribes, life in Barber County hasn't changed much. The total county-wide population today, approximately 4,500 people (1,800 in Medicine Lodge), remains low, and those who live outside larger towns run cattle or farm, or do both – just as the settlers did in the late-1800s.

One thing that has changed, and quite drastically during the past 30 years, is the abundance of white-tail deer in Kansas and the quality of hunting in Barber County. We need only go back one generation to find folks in southern Kansas and northern Oklahoma (most of the central states, in fact) who remember a childhood without whitetails.

"A friend of mine told me a good story about his grandmother," says Jerick Henley. "They live south of Kansas in northern Oklahoma, and his grandmother is about 95 years old, and blind. He took her out to their ranch one time and a deer ran across the road, and she said she was sad that she couldn't see it. In all the time growing up on that ranch, she never saw a deer. White-tail deer in that country was almost nonexistent then."

That's hardly the case anymore, says state big game



This old farmhouse, nearly 100 years old, serves as a shooting bench and bunkhouse for muzzleloader hunters.

program coordinator, Lloyd Fox. Kansas alone harbors perhaps as many as 650,000 whitetails, and the population continues to grow.

"The main reason has been the farm program, and the maturing of the Kansas landscape that has occurred," the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks biologist says, giving great credit to the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) as well. "The CRP program has provided millions of acres of outstanding fawn production areas, and in most years, very good escape cover."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's multiarmed and controversial "farm program" subsidizes, among other things, landowner/farmer income during times of both crop deficiency and abundance. Agricultural overproduction brings prices and income down, and some farmers are actually paid not to farm. Critics say taxpayers are giving farmers a free ride. For certain, land that is unfarmed reverts to its natural state over time, and Kansas whitetails are making full use of it as the federal deficit deepens.

"Kansas is not the same today as it was in 1840, when people were using wagons to cross it," Fox says. "Today there is much more revegetation, the land is divided up a great deal, and we have a lot more production with agricultural crops. We have a limited amount of burning as compared to historical levels, when the

While equipment used to farm in south-central Kansas has changed, Medicine Lodge residents still make a living off the land, as they have since the city was incorporated in 1879.

land was all grassland, and there is a woody invasion taking place in pasture lands and along stream courses.

"Plus, in central Kansas, we have mile after mile of shelterbelts built in the 1930s, the dustbowl days, to control wind erosion," Fox says. "These shelterbelts are now 60 to 70 years old – mature, linear, woody habitat which provides travel corridors for deer."

The balance of open space and overgrowth, including profitable agricultural production, is a tricky one, but the current conditions are prime for whitetails to thrive, particularly in central Kansas.

"Many of our pastures and rangeland areas have been overgrazed, and in some cases have reverted to woody invasion. A little of this is absolutely great for deer," Fox says. "If it gets extensive, say with red cedars in areas that used to be prairie, stream flow is dramatically reduced and production of forbs and woody shrubs diminishes."

Central Kansas, and specifically south-central Kansas, is in its deer habitat prime.

"We probably are in that excellent mix right now," Fox says.

When it comes to herd health, antler growth potential and hunter success, Barber County in hunt Unit 16 is a recent benefactor of that "excellent mix." Other, somewhat localized conditions also help whitetail deer thrive, and hunters succeed here.



Left, the use of core feeders is a legal means of attracting deer in Kansas, but Lee preferred to hunt over natural fields and travel corridors, which is easily accommodated. Below, Barber County in south-central Kansas features miles of grasslands, traditionally home to vast herds of bison. Whitetails thrive in this country.



Rifles used during the hunt included T/C's Omega Dream Season (top) and Encore Pro Hunter XT with Speed Breech.

"First, that's the area of the Red Hills, so you have topography that provides great escape cover for the deer," Fox says, "and there is a great deal of cedar invasion, some good and some bad. There are also some fairly productive areas soil-wise [for farming]. There's also the land ownership pattern; there are large blocks of land under a single owner, and as such, those individuals can control access and tend to be a little on the conservative side and limit the number of people they allow to hunt their land."

It appears that Kansas has always had great whitetail genetics, and large blocks of family-owned private land with limited hunting activity allow bucks to reach older age and show characteristics of maturity. Read: big antlers!

Oscar Chain, in 1893, traded \$50 and a shotgun for 160 acres of ranchland in Dewey County, northern Oklahoma (nearly due south of Medicine Lodge). In time the Chain Land and Cattle Company grew to encompass 70,000 acres of prime ranch and farmland, about evenly split between northern Oklahoma and south-central Kansas. That Kansas property is located in Barber County.

"We are a working cattle ranch that manages our deer hunting for trophy-class animals," says Jerick Hen-



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ley, Chain Ranch Outfitters lead guide. “We have no pressure to sell numerous hunts to pay for leases; we simply manage to harvest a limited number of mature bucks.”

Henley’s hunters take no more than 20 to 25 bucks off three large properties, and most years that goal is met. His clients tend to be regulars, consisting annually of four muzzleloading hunters, eight bow hunters and eight rifle hunters.

“We are not about five-star lodging and fancy meals,” he says. “Our focus is on amazing hunting opportunities supported by comfortable accommodations and a commitment



Jerick Henley started hunting deer at a young age and has been operating hunts for Chain Ranch Outfitters for 12 years.

from our guides to work as hard as possible to give hunters the opportunity to harvest a good buck.”

Henley may be a little modest when he says “good buck.” Last autumn I sat with him high up in a portable scissor-jack blind one evening, overlooking a fallow field left in native grasses as a staging buffer between heavy cedar woodlands to our front and an alfalfa field behind us. During the final 15 minutes of shooting light, deer poured from the cedars into the tall grass. Each buck seemed to be larger than the next, and when a good opportunity arose for a shot at a 150-class 10-pointer, I couldn’t resist (this, in spite of Henley’s cautioning me to hold off a few more minutes).

I felt confident (perhaps too confident) that I could make the 90-something-yard shot, leveled my T/C Omega Dream Season muzzleloader and broke the trigger. When the smoke cleared, the buck was standing only slightly farther away, confused. Reloading in the blind proved difficult and gave the buck enough time to walk off another 100 yards before lying down. Unsure of where the bullet hit, and even if it did hit, Henley and I climbed out of the blind and, in the remaining light, began our sneak on the bedded deer.

When we got to within about 50 yards, the buck burst from cover, sprinting for the cedar woods. A second bullet flew harmlessly high as the buck made good its getaway, clearing a barbed-wire fence and

disappearing in the cedars. “I don’t think you hit that buck at all,” Henley decided. When a more thorough search of the area revealed no indicators of a wounded deer, it became evident that I’d simply shot a nice, clean hole in the Kansas soil.

“We have a variety of terrain on the three Kansas ranches,” Henley says, “that includes mixed prairie and river bottom with hardwoods, with thousands of acres of agriculture scattered throughout. We raise wheat and alfalfa on the majority of that ground, which provides both summer and winter nutrition for the deer. We also have the benefit of having really good water on our ranches.”

While touring some of the property during midday chores, Henley showed me many of the hunting setups, some specifically for rifle hunters and others for bow hunters and yet others set specifically for muzzleloading. Most hunting is done from ladder stands or ground blinds. Tower blinds, some portable like the scissor blind I hunted from, are used in areas where riflemen can reach out to distant deer in the more open pasture land.

“In our country, elevated blinds provide a distinct advantage. We have incredible grass on our ranches, some of which can be 5 to 6 feet high, and deer can disappear in that type of habitat,” Henley says.

Kansas’ muzzleloader season takes place in late September, when the mornings are usually cool, but midday and evening hours can be quite

warm. The deer’s feeding pattern will determine where hunters are stationed each morning and evening, a very typical situation white-tail hunters adapt to all over the country.

For our last afternoon hunt, we moved the scissor-jack blind several hundred yards south before climbing in it for our last set, the missed shot from the evening before still weighing heavy on my mind (probably Henley’s too). Most likely I pulled that shot off the deer, but I checked the rifle earlier that afternoon nonetheless. Shot from a prone position off the porch of a classic old farmhouse, which was likely built in the 1920s or ’30s and served as our bunkhouse for four days, two T/C 200-grain Shock Wave bullets with Speed Sabots landed neatly 2 inches above point of aim at 100 yards. The powder charge consisted of two 100-grain Hodgdon Triple 7 pellets and Winchester W209 muzzleloading primers. The rifle was a newer .50-caliber Omega topped off with a Burris scope.



managers have really embraced the hunting program, because they see the value it brings to the entire operation. Just a few short years ago, they didn’t concern themselves with grazing rotations that helped the fall deer hunting. Today, we may rotate grazing in a particular pasture so that during hunting season all the cattle are removed from the area. The deer have a tendency to congregate in these low-impact areas, which not only allows us to hunt them there, but also creates some

from the hunting pressure at properties.”
out quality deer management (DM):
arm wheat and alfalfa
and we use this agriculture
er herd,” he says. “We do
ler food plots that we’ve
attract and hold deer.
usually fall plots and con-
eat, rye or winter peas. If
immer plot, it would consist of clover, cow peas or milo.”

The term “quality deer management” has been kicked around extensively during the past 20 years, and its proponents have, in some cases, led property owners to believe that one food plot on four acres will improve hunting on that land. Backyard food plots can now be found throughout the country as a result. There is no doubt that situations exist in which a man can improve deer habitat on his land, but at what scale?

“Quality deer management

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means so many different things to so many different people,” says Kansas wildlife manager Lloyd Fox. “Artificially concentrating deer has serious repercussions. We have people that do a good job of land management, but it has to be done with a big, broad paintbrush. And you’d go a long way in Kansas before you could beat a regular, old alfalfa field.”

Such is the case with the hunting program run by Chain Ranch Outfitters. Behind our blind on the final afternoon was an alfalfa field, the same one that was attracting the deer the prior evening.

“There’s some does coming out on the alfalfa down there to the right,” Henley whispered. “But those are Oklahoma deer.”

“Oklahoma deer?” I asked.

“Yes, that fence is essentially on the state line,” he said.

I was shocked, not having realized just how “south-central” in Kansas we were. Four whitetail bucks stood in the short grass out in front of the blind minutes later. The sun was sinking quickly, and a decision was made to shoot the largest of the four, which stood at a laser-ranged 204 yards. In the fading light, the first T/C bullet took the buck squarely behind the shoulder, after which the buck stumbled and fell into a shallow swale and out of sight. As I reloaded, the second largest buck in the group began to push around the mortally hit buck, which then stood to its feet about the time I primed the Omega. A second shot hit home again, and the deer fell back into the swale. Almost immediately the smaller buck again commenced its attack, this time getting the big buck to its feet and chasing it across the open field, over a



barbed-white fence to the north and into grass more than 5 feet tall.

Henley and I were speechless. Hit solidly twice, there was no way the larger buck could survive for long, but adrenaline instills great strength and endurance in otherwise dead deer. We sat, amazed, in the darkness for a few minutes.

We quickly found where the deer had jumped the fence, and further into the grass was more sign. Blood was sprayed everywhere, head-high grass was flattened in great circles perhaps 15 feet across, and the damp earth was torn up by the hooves of big deer. It was an impressive sight.

“Hey, Lee, look at this,” Henley said calmly as he shined his light toward me. Just beyond his feet was the blood soaked buck, with antlers much larger and heavier than either of us realized – a sure sign that Kansas is in that “perfect mix.”

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