

FEATURE

What A Trip!

Jack Downing



OUTFITTER JASON GOWER is shown holding mounts of three bucks that he took off of the farms he leases for his hunters. Jack Downing photo

A buck crossed the creek about sixty yards in front of my elevated stand and would disappear from view for a short time.

Even though I couldn't see him, I knew he was coming because the mid November Missouri forest was dry and it sounded as if he was walking on potato chips.

I'd parked my truck camper about a quarter mile away from this stand and spent the night there prior to Missouri's opening day of rifle season. I'd elected to use my Knight muzzleloader as Jason Gower, the outfitter, had assured me that the stand was located in a good crossing area and shots would be close.

An hour before legal shooting time I arose, had a yucky bowl of instant oatmeal, donned my backpack and headed for the stand.

I was dragging a rag on which I'd applied a liberal coating of "Code Blue" estrus scent. Jason had said this concoction seemed to work for him here in the "Show-me" state so I was giving it a try.

When I got to the stand I hung the rag on a branch nearby and then hung another cotton ball soaked in the stuff on the ladder rung.

A barely perceptible breeze drifted from behind the stand down across a creek and then out into an open field a hundred yards away. A perfect set up.

The leaves were nearly gone off the surrounding mature hardwoods and visibility for a shot would be good. I took an apple from my pack and waited for God to turn on the lights.

I'd met Jason on the internet and stopped by to meet him in real life last fall while traveling from a Montana deer hunt to my winter home in Florida. I liked the kind of honest hunting operation this fellow seemed to run so I booked an opening day hunt for 2005.

I was excited about the possibilities as Missouri sits right between the states that are getting all the big deer hype -- Illinois, Iowa and Kansas. I'd seen pictures of the whitetails Jason had taken in the past and when I stopped in the next town to eat at a local restaurant/bar I was sold on this slightly undiscovered area for giant deer.

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The walls were lined with mounts of hummingbird bucks. Many of these were taken by one local man who always seems to take a buck between 165 and 185 B&C. My mouth hung open and I could hardly chew my dinner as my eyes danced from one mount to another.

As the intensity of light increased from the eastern horizon and filtered through the stand of cathedral-like hardwoods I became aware of a nearby turkey and then a squirrel skittering through the crackly leaves. I shivered a little at this coldest time of the day and poured a cup of hot coffee from my thermos.

Life is good on a morning like this if you are in a tree stand with a weapon in your hand and it can only be appreciated by those of us who have done it.

Then it happened! There was a buck. A small buck, but a buck. He was moving across the pasture on the other side of the creek about 150 yards away.

He had his nose to the ground and had that determined pace of a buck after a hot doe.

This was good news as now I knew he was either catching a smell of the estrus scent I had put out or he was truly after a hot doe and the rut had begun.

He was only in view for less than a minute but it was enough to bring me to full alert. Would I see it again?

The answer was no, but 15 minutes later a six point buck appeared from where the other guy had gone into the woods, and this one moved across the field in the opposite direction. It too had its nose to the ground and its mind was on lovmaking.

I shared this farm that Jason had leased with one other hunter and the few shots that I heard were way off in the distance. Therefore, I was not pressured to harvest a deer just to fill my tag because some other nearby hunter would kill it if I didn't.

However, when that gorgeous eight point came up out of the creek bed at 25 yards I was in awe. I wanted it! The cross hairs on my Leupold scope eased onto its shoulder and my 52 cal. Knight Disc Extreme just did what it was supposed to do. The Barnes 375 grain "Red Hot" bullet imparted all of its energy into the animal and I never even heard the leaves rustle after it hit the ground.

It was an hour and a half into the season and I was done. Did I shoot too soon? Maybe. A few days later another hunter on the other side of the farm took a buck that scored 208 B&C. Will I return? You bet! I'm already booked with Jason for 2006.

The good news is that you may purchase your Missouri license and deer tag over the counter for \$145. No need to apply and hope you draw. If you think you'd like to hunt these monster bucks, contact Jason Gower in Knox City, Missouri by phone at 660-434-3105 or email at backwood@markheat.net.