

Situation Ethics
Big Buck, Bad Shot
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A second shot could end the chase. But there was a tenth of a percent chance it'd be the wrong move.

It was a perfect fall morning, one of those magical times you just know something is going to happen. A foot of snow had fallen the night before, creating ideal conditions for still-hunting a poplar forest at the foot of the Rockies.

I'd covered maybe a quarter of a mile, when my attention was drawn to a horizontal shape about 100 yards away. Through my binoculars, I saw that it was a downed poplar tree. But my heart quickened when I realized what was behind it: a bedded white-tailed buck. And not just any old run-of-the-mill buck, either. Each side of his rack sported five heavy and high tines, and the beams extended well past his ears. It was the largest buck I'd ever had a chance to shoot.

The deer peered intently in my direction, seemingly unsure what I was. Decked out head to toe in snow-pattern camouflage, I blended perfectly with the terrain. I leaned against a tree and watched the deer watching me. The dead poplar lay diagonally across the buck's chest, leaving only the white throat patch exposed. I slowly put the crosshairs on that patch, cranked the scope to eight power and considered taking the shot.

I wasn't sure I could kill the deer cleanly in its bed. I'd heard horror stories about deer running around with their jaws shot off, the result of poorly placed neck or head shots, eventually succumbing to predators or to a slow death from starvation. I was determined this great deer would be killed quickly and cleanly, or not at all. So for several long minutes I willed the deer to stand and present a broadside shot.

My heart raced. My hands started trembling. It was a waiting game, I knew, but I was becoming impatient. I edged slightly to my right. At the movement, the buck instantly stood, presenting a quartering away view. His coat was distinctively rust-colored in the sunshine. The 30-06 roared. The buck jumped straight up, turned and vanished in the trees. I leaned against a tree and took a deep breath. The shot had seemed good. I was sure the buck was piled up nearby. I covered the 100 yards quickly. As I searched the fresh snow, however, I couldn't find any blood or hair. My heart sank.

Finally, I glimpsed a clump of thick hair hanging from a willow several feet away. It was a patch of guard hair from along the buck's back. I silently cursed myself for shooting too high, for somehow managing to shave off the hair while completely missing the spine. Seeing no blood anywhere, I began to follow the trail. At first, the buck appeared to be bounding along. Then it slowed to a walk. When the tracks reached a frozen creek, the deer jumped it, without showing any sign of being wounded. After going several hundred yards without seeing any blood, I started backtracking. I'd gone about 100 yards when I froze. A drop of blood, no larger than a pencil eraser, dotted the snow beside the track. I couldn't believe I'd missed seeing it the first time past. Several feet later, I saw another blood drop, then another in the deer's track. I eventually saw six tiny drops of blood. At that point, my attitude changed drastically. The deer wasn't hit solidly, to be sure, but it was definitely hit. Returning to the creek, I decided to give the buck a chance to bed down and, I hoped, die.

Sitting on a log, I forced myself to wait 30 minutes, beating myself up repeatedly over my shoddy marksmanship. However, I once again started thinking that just maybe I'd be putting my tag on this dream buck. I resumed tracking, encouraged by single fresh blood spots every 50 to 100 yards.

The buck led me to a thick patch of willows, which it circled three times. Twice, I found the deer's deep hoof prints where it had stepped in my own boot tracks. Finally, the buck left the willows and started heading toward a low ridge. I moved slowly and silently. After several hundred yards, I saw the ridge through the trees. I stopped to scan the thin edge of forest separating me from the foot of the ridge.

A rusty patch slowly materialized in the trees just 50 yards away. A deer. But was it the buck? Willows and poplars shielded the animal's head. All I could see was its body and distinctive wide, rust-colored tail. It was on the same trail as the track I was following. It was a large-bodied deer, but I wasn't sure it was a buck. Although it had the same reddish coat of the buck I'd shot at, I couldn't swear it was the same animal. I could tell by the deer's posture that it was looking backwards at me.

I struggled with my options. I had a clear shot at its heart and lungs. If, indeed, it was the buck, I could kill it cleanly right now and take satisfaction that I'd hunted well—at least after the initial rushed shot. I recalled the buck's wide, thick rack when I'd first seen it. I pictured that head on my office wall and its flesh in the freezer, providing a lifetime's supply of memories and stories I could embellish with each telling.

Without moving my body, I strained to see the spot where I judged the deer's head to be. I was desperate for even a glimpse of antler tine. Without that crucial confirmation, however, shooting this deer wasn't even an option. Although I was 99.9 percent certain this was the buck I was after, what if it was a big doe? Doe season wasn't open. What if I shot and then discovered I'd made a mistake?

What would I do then? Walk away and pretend it hadn't happened? Turn myself in? So many questions. But for me there was only one answer: *Don't shoot, you idiot*. I believe in and preach the gospel of hunting responsibly, ethically, and within the law. My vehicles bear Report-A-Poacher licence plates. Shooting without being absolutely sure of my target was out of the question.

The deer didn't move a hair. The standoff couldn't have lasted five minutes, but it seemed like hours. Once again, I decided to try to make something happen. If I could move just a few inches, I reasoned, I might see at least a portion of the rack. Presented with even a hint of antler, I would shoot. The deer reacted as if poked with an electric cattle prod. As it bolted from the trees, the first thing I noticed was the huge set of antlers. The second thing was that it didn't appear to be hurt in any way. Quartering away and shielded by trees and brush, the buck ascended the ridge. I had no clear shot, but the buck was heading for an opening in the trees. I raised my rifle and waited, ready to take the 75-yard shot. The buck was closing fast. Fifty yards, 40 yards, 20, 10. I slipped off the safety, took a deep breath, then watched, incredulous and helpless, as he veered right just inches before reaching the clearing.

In a heartbeat, the deer was out of sight. Slumping against a tree, I felt emotionally and physically drained. I was wracked by disappointment and self-doubt. I knew that by now the buck likely would have cleared the four-strand barbed wire fence bordering the neighboring property at the top of the ridge. I briefly considered approaching the rancher, appealing for permission to track the wounded buck. But a few days earlier, the landowner had rather curtly denied me access. He'd actually laughed when his blue heeler nipped the seat of my pants as I returned to my vehicle. And how could I tell him, with any real conviction, that the buck was mortally, or even seriously, wounded? It had easily jumped a six-foot creek. It had effortlessly ascended a steep ridge. It never bedded down after that first shot. The blood spots were tiny and infrequent. If I couldn't convince myself this deer was seriously wounded, no way would I convince this landowner to allow me on his property to try and track it. I gave up, convinced that my bullet had merely nicked the hide and flesh on the buck's back, making a wound that would heal in a day or two.

Since that hunt many years ago, I've relived it over and over in my head. As I rewind it, fast-forward it and play it through, I can't think of anything I could have done better or differently—except for *being more careful* with that first shot. Every buck I see reminds me of that big-racked foothills' ghost. I've never had a shot at another buck like that one. Perhaps I never will. That experience taught me a thing or two about hunting, but especially this: make your first shot count.

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