

CALLING TACTICS *that* REALLY WORK!

Recognizing deer's vocalizations will help you understand what whitetails are "saying" — plus when and how you can mimic deer calls to improve your hunting success.

BY ■ DR. JAMES C. KROLL

It somewhat staggers me to admit that I'm starting my 36th year of doing research on white-tailed deer. An additional 12 years of hunting these fantastic creatures brings my total life with deer to 48 years!

Looking back on my career, many milestones, wondrous discoveries and experiences have passed. But none had more impact than killing the "Boggy Slough Monster," still one of the biggest bucks ever taken from the Piney Woods of East Texas.

The rack on this whitetail monarch sports four drop tines and 9-inch bases on the main beams. The buck created quite a stir among deer hunters in the region at a time when East Texas was not known for holding monster bucks.

Taking the Boggy Slough Monster was certainly a memorable accomplishment, but something about killing this buck was relatively new to whitetail hunting: I used a grunt call.

Back in 1987, grunt calls were mostly unknown. A year earlier, my friend Eli Haydel had designed the first grunt-tube call. It probably wasn't the first such call, but it must have been one of the first grunt tubes



A buck of the quality of the "Boggy Slough Monster" is a trophy for any hunter. But there was a relatively new twist to the author's killing of this buck in 1987: He used a grunt call to lure this whitetail in! Photo courtesy of Dr. James C. Kroll.

to appear on the retail market.

As a young man in the 1950s, I remember seeing a grunt call for sale in the old Herter's catalog. Being pretty poor, I could only dream about buying the exciting items in each issue of the catalog.

Later in my 1991 book, *A Practical Guide to Producing and Harvesting White-tailed Deer*, I included some advice on calling, noting that an early (circa 1500s) explorer in East Texas had made this comment: "The Caddo Indians are very proficient at killing deer. They call them in by making grunting sounds with their voice."

So nothing was really new that day on December 16, 1987, when on the second grunt from my call, the Monster charged headlong into my life.

Since that time, countless deer calls have come on the market, mimicking a host of sounds deer make — or at least, the sounds someone *thinks* deer make. Recognizing these vocalizations gives you a better understanding of what whitetails are "saying," how and when they "say" what they do — and how you can use deer calls to improve your hunting success.

PRIMER ON DEER VOCALIZATIONS

The white-tailed deer's world is filled with sounds. For most of the daylight hours, birds and other mammals keep the woods pretty noisy.

Even the night contains mysterious sounds. Whitetails, as remarkably vocal creatures, contribute to all this racket. To date, at least eight basic whitetail vocalizations have been defined. In addition, there are variations on each of these sounds.

Some may be different interpretations of the same sounds, since each whitetail (as with each human) has a different voice pattern.

The white-tailed deer's basic calls include:

- Alarm
- Bawl (including fawn bleat)
- Grunts (including those that communicate dominance, contact, and maternal tending)
- Click
- Mew
- Whine
- Flehmen
- Foot stomp



While rattling isn't a vocal "call," the sound definitely can lure bucks into shooting range at the right stage of the rut. Mixing in some grunts with the clashing of antlers helps sell the ruse. Photo by Ron Sinfelt.

The Alarm Call

Few of a whitetail's sounds can generate more frustration in a hunter than its alarm call, which the deer makes by rapidly expelling air from the nostrils, presumably at the same time atomizing secretions from the nasal passages. Hearing an alarm call is disconcerting at the time, but one of the biggest mistakes hunters can make is presuming their hunting hopes are dashed and it's time to find a new spot.

Deer in the woods use alarm calls all the time, and not just in response to your presence. Whitetails will "blow" at each other, at predators — including humans — and at mere shadows. Once emitted, they alert other deer that there may be something bad in the woods, but an alarm call will not cause deer to vacate the entire area! Whitetails are used to hearing alarm calls all the time.

Often, in fact, another deer will approach the source of an alarm call, either to see what is going on or to help drive away some intruder.

I consider an alarm call just a momentary frustration. If you "bust" a deer and it blows an alarm call, the best thing is to sit very still and let everything settle down. After all, deer that haven't even heard the alarm will

come along later and have no idea that anything has created concern. In a pinch, I've actually used an alarm call to get a deer to come to me.

The Bawl

Hunters and other white-tailed deer experts disagree over just what the function is of the whitetail's bawl. Working closely with these deer, I have heard the bawl under a variety of conditions.

As part of our research, we regularly work our penned deer through a custom-made cradle. We bring the deer into the cradle and drop the flock beneath them. Suspended in this way, the animals are easily handled without risk of injury.

A deer in the cradle often emits a very loud bawl. Newcomers to our work immediately assume the sound is a reaction to either pain or fear.

Neither interpretation is correct. Actually, the deer is quite angry!

We tag newborn fawns in our pens. More times than I care to remember, a doe will emit a bawl and come rushing in on me, sometimes to attack. When I'm sitting cross-legged with a fawn in my lap, I'm at a decided disadvantage.

Recently, calls have been developed that actually produce a variation of the bawl. Touted as "new" calls, they mimic a buck giving a bawl out of frustration. In hot pursuit of a doe nearly in estrus, sometimes a buck will just start bawling. This may bring in other bucks, while at other times it does not. It really depends on the local buck-to-doe ratio and the age structure of the herd.

The Grunt

Arguably, the grunt is the one deer call with the most variation. Grunting ranges from a challenge to another deer (buck or doe) to locating another deer, tending a doe, or mother-fawn contact. Thus grunts come in all tones and inflections.

Perhaps the grunt whitetails use most commonly is the **locating call**. If two deer become separated, one will produce a low grunt. Outdoor writers and scientists have described the sound in various ways, from "errr" to "grick." I prefer the latter, but we each hear the sound a little differently.

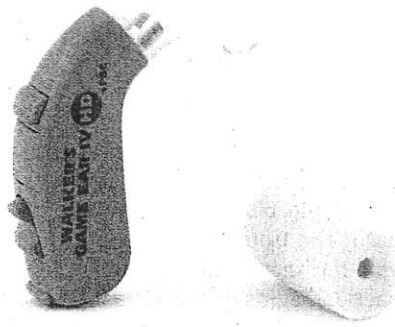
To my knowledge, this locating-call is

the one call that has not been duplicated artificially. Many years ago, I discussed manufacturing such a call with Eli Haydel, but he hasn't made one yet. It's one call I think would be deadly! You could use it in two ways: to calm a suspicious deer or to call one to you.

The next common grunt sound is the **tending call**, that of a buck looking after a doe. Associated with the folks at DeerChannel.com, I'm working on an interesting research project in which we've outfitted bucks with transmitting video cameras — which also have microphones, so we can hear sounds while we watch.

One of the most surprising discoveries from this research has been that as bucks walk around the woods, they tend to make what seem to be random grunts! There needn't even be a doe in sight for a buck to grunt. Animal behaviorists refer to such actions as "vacuum activity."

Another interesting observation is the same buck will exhibit a high variation in pitches and frequencies of grunting. This is especially amusing when you consider the many instructional videos and tapes on how to



Some whitetail vocalizations are faint. But a hearing device such as Walker's Game Ear IV HD PBC, which boosts sounds up to nearly 11 times their normal volume, can help you identify and pinpoint more of them while you're hunting.

grunt. But in fact, there's probably no way to do it *incorrectly*. Also, the tending grunt is probably the one call that has no ill effects if done at the wrong time in the rut sequence.

The Boggy Slough Monster was killed using Eli Haydel's grunt tube. Because of excessive hunting pressure during the first week of the season — which coincides with the first rutting period in East Texas — I waited 25 days until Dec. 17, when the second (minor) rut developed.

The buck's bedding area was a dense 20-acre stand of 8-year-old loblolly pines. Slipping into a drainage adjacent to his sanctuary, I set up with the wind in my face and gave three short tending grunts.

He was on me in an instant. I shot this magnificent creature at less than 10 yards!

When it comes to calling bucks, timing is everything. You have to do what I call "matching the hatch" — that is, match the call to whatever's going on in your herd at that moment.

Because the **maternal grunt** is used most often during the summer nursing period, it has few applications for hunting. I have noticed that after a doe weans her fawns, at about 60 days after their birth, she'll stop responding to maternal grunts.

The Click

The white-tailed deer's click call is nothing more than a subtle tending grunt and probably differs only in volume.

Threat Calls

The true threat calls are the **grunt-snort** and **grunt-short-whoeeze**. A

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buck usually emits these sounds in rapid staccato fashion. On rare occasions, I have heard does make the same sound. They are produced when the deer inhales two or three times, then exhales rapidly.

When a rutting buck hears either version of the sound, he immediately goes on alert. A non-rutting buck often reacts negatively to the sound, sometimes running off.

Commercial calls that imitate these sounds are available, but for years, I have used my own voice.

When combined with the tending grunt, antler rubbing or rattling, threat calls can be quite effective — and deadly as well.

During the pre-rut, I like to find an

IN GRUNTING, THERE'S NO WAY YOU CAN MAKE A MISTAKE. IT HAS TO BE THE MOST FORGIVING CALL IN YOUR ARSENAL.

area with a large number of rubs (especially signpost rubs). I make a grunt-snort-wheeze, and then bang a single antler against a tree. This I follow with rapid rubbing.

A buck will respond to these sounds by sneaking onto the scene. To use these calls effectively, you have to be very still and alert at all times.

Using the grunt-snort-wheeze with rattling works remarkably well, but only for about a week prior to the actually breeding period. Bucks' willingness to respond diminishes after the first estrus peak — which is when you'll first see large numbers of scrapes appear on your area.

The minute you see scrapes appear is the time to rattle and call.

The Mew & The Whine

Mews and whines are calls made mostly during the fawn-rearing season in summer. The fawn uses a mew to beg from its mother, when it wants to nurse or by comforted (by licking, nuzzling or other contact).

The whine is the equivalent of a cat's purr — a sound that means, "I'm comfortable." The fawn will whine when it's being groomed or while it's nursing. Both of these calls are certainly interesting, but not of much use during the hunting season.

The Bleat

The bleat is a much different story, however. It's actually a type of bawl, but I didn't discuss it earlier because it is more appropriate at this point.

With the bleat, the fawn indicates that it's in trouble, or thinks it is. As with the mew and whine, the doe's reaction begins to decline as the fawn approaches weaning. However, a bleat call can be quite effective, especially during the early bow season. Even into the rut, I have made good use of this call.

Years ago — when hunting for white-tailed deer in Alberta, Canada, was first opening up to American sportsmen — I traveled to northern Alberta to hunt with Mike Zelman. It

was a wonderful, stalking-type hunt in the far-north woods. This is wild country, with none of what's referred to as "fringe habitat" where agriculture farming meets the boreal forest.

I was stalking along a cutline surrounding a 5,000-acre block of spruce woods when I heard a commotion coming my way. In the distance, I heard the unmistakable sound of a buck using a tending grunt.

A doe ran past me, with a huge buck right on her tail. I'm not the type to take running shots, so I had to do something to get the buck to halt, at least for moment.

I grabbed my bleat call and blew it loudly. The doe stopped dead in her tracks. So did the buck — another great memory! He fell in his tracks.

Match the hatch!

The Flehmen

Flehmen is a German word, translated as "curling the upper lip." This is the slight sucking sound that a buck makes when he inhales the urine of a doe. The whitetail's whole aim is to suck the aroma into the opening of the Jacobson's organ in its front top palate. This is a typical behavior of many large mammals that has several functions, including priming that portion of the brain that's associated

with breeding.

I see no real application of the sound to hunting, since it can seldom be heard from more than a few feet away.

The Foot Stomp

Finally, whitetails also make noise by stamping their hooves, which sound is seldom discussed because it's technically not a vocalization.

However, the deer uses the foot stomp to demand attention from other deer. The intention is to focus the entire social group's attention.

The stomp, when associated with side-to-side head movement, may help indicate something that is suspect. In desperate moments, I have been known to respond with the same sound — as long as the deer cannot actually see me. This noise will cause the deer to approach you, giving you a momentary chance at a shot.

USING CALLING TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

Now that I've included some tips on using various calls to your hunting advantage, let's put together some calling strategies that you can use this deer-hunting season.

My advice about "matching the hatch" is very important. Calls can be quite effective, provided they match what's going on in a given deer herd at that moment. Many commercial calls are available, and if you bought them all, you could have quite a weight around your neck.

I generally restrict my calls to a grunt tube and a bleat. You can make the grunt-snort-wheeze using the grunt tube and your own voice, though there are combination calls on the market.

As bucks come into the pre-rut, the only call that may attract them is the grunt-snort-wheeze and a single antler, used as described above. Antler rubbing is very effective, as long as you are patient.

Bucks approach the combination of calling and rubbing mostly out of curiosity and do so very cautiously. Sometimes a buck may take an hour to check out what's going on.

Remember, rattling is most effective as scraping activity accelerates. This is the time when bucks' testosterone peaks and they're at their most

aggressive.

This is also when bucks are staking out their initial breeding territories. A mature, dominant buck will not tolerate any other buck nearby.

In this case, the sounds you want to “match” are those of an aggressive buck working a signpost rub and threatening another buck in his sight.

Just like an old pasture bull, bucks will paw the ground, thrash small trees, grunt-snort-wheeze and ultimately, if the intruder does not back down, fight. When scrapes appear where you hunt, you want to mimic the sequence that a buck goes through in making such challenges.

Start by finding a site where there are large numbers of scrapes. Position yourself where you can see downwind, because that’s where the buck will ultimately appear. To hide your shape, keep something solid — such as a large tree or dense brush — at your back.

Begin with a loud grunt-snort-wheeze, then rake the ground and surrounding brush (as when a buck encounters another buck and threatens him). Wait a few seconds and then

repeat the grunt-snort-wheeze. (The opponent is not impressed). Finally, clash the antlers together as hard as you can. I like to engage vegetation between the two antlers, stomping the ground and blowing the grunt call as a bawl or “effort” grunt.

The whole sequence should last about two minutes. When a buck responds, drop the antlers and be ready. Do not ever rattle with a buck in view. That’s a serious mistake!

Once the bucks’ combat period is pretty much over with, you need to focus on the grunt call. Again, the whole idea is match what is going on at that time. Bucks are chasing does, and doing less fighting except when two bucks are pursuing the same doe.

In grunting, there’s no way you can make a mistake. It has to be the most forgiving call in your arsenal. As I noted above, studies clearly show that bucks grunt continuously as they walk along, using every tone and pitch. So have fun!

However, your grunting will get the greatest response when the estrus is at its peak. Remember, there are about three such peaks, each one of lesser intensity.

The first one comes when mature does reach estrus.

The second involves older does that did not breed on first estrus, along with yearling does.

Finally, about 25 to 27 days after the second peak, some doe fawns become receptive to bucks.

Speak to your local wildlife biologist or investigate published information about the deer in your area. Each race of whitetails has a different peak primary estrus. Northern whitetails tend to breed around the middle of November, while whitetails in South Texas often breed a month later.

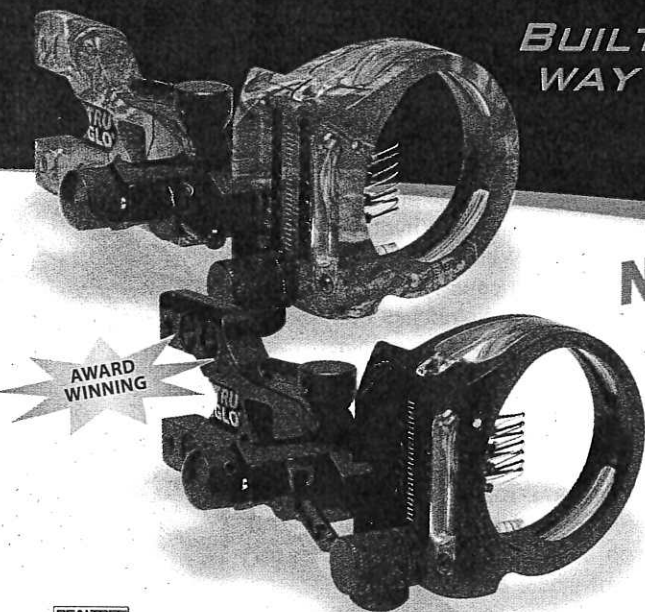
One last bit of advice. Don’t be afraid to “play” with the deer you’re hunting. Try using different calls and note your deer’s reaction.

Also, keep records on when bucks respond to calls. One day, a buck may wander away without acknowledging your call, and then come charging in two days later. If your herd holds good age-structure, study how deer of different ages respond to your efforts.

The whole idea is to keep learning and become a better hunter in the process. ■

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