

Dr. Deer's PRESCRIPTION



IT AIN'T AS EASY AS IT LOOKS!

By Dr. James C. Kroll, Ph.D.

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Ben Koerth and I presented seminars at all the 2007 TTHA Hunters Extravanzas. They're always like homecoming for us, since we have developed many friends among those who faithfully attend the shows. These are great times to catch up on how everyone did last season and answer questions about the latest concerns from the thousands of hunters, landowners, and deer enthusiasts who attend. David Blanton also presented talks on his years with *Realtree Outdoors* television. In my book, David is one of the nicest Christian gentlemen I ever have had the pleasure of knowing. I respect him and his opinions very much.

I had the luxury of having enough time to sit in on one of David's talks. To my surprise, it was not really about hunting techniques, but about the ins and outs of filming hunting shows. Since hearing David's presentation, I've been back in the woods taping shows for *North American Whitetail Television*, hunting in Saskatchewan, Kansas, Florida, Texas, and Mexico, so far. I've also done shows for TTHA and certainly plan to do more. So in this column I thought it might be interesting to expand on some of David's thoughts to

give you, *The Journal* readers, insight into what *really* goes into making a whitetail hunting show.

15 Minutes Of Fame

"It must be nice to be you!"

That's the statement I hear a lot as I travel around the country. I certainly am flattered by the statement, but in the early days, I tried to explain that "being me" is not always so great. Believe me, I do *not* take myself very seriously—my work yes, but not myself! Each time I've ever been faced with that statement, though, I carefully explain how different producing a hunting show is from watching one—or even hunting in general! I would tell about the long hours, the countless road trips, being away from my best friend and wife, Susie, and on and on. But one day I realized this was *not* at all what people wanted to hear. TV viewers of hunting shows wanted to think someone has the perfect job, hunting and fishing for a living! I've given up, and now I simply say, "Yes, it really is!"

I truly have been blessed by God to have grown up in the woods and to make a living working with deer. I spend more than 360 days a year working with, studying, and hunting

whitetails. I never tire of them, and never grow weary of answering questions posed by folks I run across. It is what I wanted to do when I was only seven years old, and it is what I will be doing the day I leave for Heaven.

That is not to say my job does not have its moments. There are countless frustrations, mostly with people either opposed to deer hunting or deer management. Ignorance is not what drives me crazy, it is the *conviction* in that ignorance that does! I also tire of dealing with bureaucrats and the political nature of wildlife management. But these frustrations dim when I am sitting in a tree, watching a buck try to win over the cute little doe in front of me.

It Really Is A Job

As it obviously is with David, one of the hardest things I do involves taping hunting shows. The misconception is that we arrive at a hunting camp, get treated like royalty, and go out to kill the buck they have "tied up" for us. This past season, in Saskatchewan, a guy (embarrassingly, from Texas) even had the nerve to say that to my face! The reality, of course, is quite different. Yes, I usually am treated well by the



outfitter, but most of them treat the other hunters just as well. I always try to explain in advance I do *not* want any special favors, I just want to hunt. I do, however, appreciate the honest appraisal of the outfitter as to what the chances are of shooting a nice buck on camera. Just because the guy has great deer and has killed monster bucks doesn't automatically guarantee I will have a chance of getting the filming job done. One outfitter I hunted with in Canada, for instance, kills some great bucks each year, but his success rate is around 20%. Although he has the best bucks, at several thousand dollars in production costs per show, it's not a good idea to risk filming on such a low probability of a kill.

When we do choose a place to film, there *are* some concessions the outfitter has to make in order for us to make a good show. And that means more trouble and work than some are willing to devote. First, there always are two people, me and my cameraman. So that increases the need for accommodations and meals, not to mention accommodating two people in the field. Sometimes we just stay in a nearby motel and eat out wherever it's convenient. We've had some interesting adventures over the years, staying in some "fine" establishments. I particularly remember one motel in a Texas Panhandle town that had only six rooms. When we drove up, I facetiously told my cameraman, "Wow, I bet we'll get a free fly swatter with our room." To our surprise, we did—and we really needed it! Other times we



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stay in the outfitter's lodge and eat with the other hunters. I enjoy meeting hunters and, again, never tire of talking deer hunting and management with them.

We do a lot of homework just finding places to do a show. When it is costing the producer thousands, and time is even more important, you have to have confidence in your choice. In an earlier issue of *The Journal*, I wrote a column ("Fred") discussing what I have learned about picking and qualifying an outfitter (Bob Robb has written an excellent feature on the subject that you'll find on page 52 of this issue). If possible, I try to go to the place during the summer to check out the habitat and general setting of the area we'll be hunting. At times we even set up stands in advance to make it easier once we arrive.

Notice I said stands, as in plural. It's difficult enough to take a trophy deer by yourself, but try to do it with two people and it gets even harder. Although a lot of outfitters now put up blinds and stands large enough to accommodate two people, most do not. Too, it helps that most of the cameramen I have worked with are great hunters in their own right and in great physical condition. That wasn't always the case prior to working with TTHA and NAWT—ever try to get into a single tree with a 300-pound man who has a really bad cold? No matter how qualified the cameraman is, the difficulty in killing a great buck is quadrupled just by having one along.

The cameraman has to be in close proximity to the hunter, usually to one side or just above. That way he can portray the proper perspective and communicate with the hunter. Remember, if the camera doesn't record the kill, there rarely is a show, so I often admit I'm the least important person on the team. All I have to do is pull the trigger or let the arrow fly. The cameraman has the sobering responsibility of getting everything on tape. Now, let's make it even more difficult.

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cameras now are more the standard than the exception they were two years ago. That means a minimum investment of \$70,000 or more for equipment—just for one hunter. That equipment has two limitations: weight/size and light-gathering capability.

to be around them, because they must be pretty weird.

The lighting factor is the other real problem with taping shows. Ask yourself what time the average buck is killed. Because we cannot get enough light to tape a high-quality show under

simply cannot get on the deer. In the Big Bend country of Mexico, a few years back, I had to let an easy new world record Carmen Mountain buck walk because he was behind the camera. So you see, none of this made-for-TV stuff is as easy as it looks.

It helps that most cameramen I've worked with are great hunters in their own right and in great physical condition. That wasn't always the case prior to working with TTHA and NAWT—ever try to get into a single tree with a 300-pound man who has a really bad cold?

Getting a heavy camera into the tree and mounting it on something sturdy enough to shoot is a real chore, but it's something you have to do, because you simply cannot hold cameras like these by hand like you do one used on the family vacation. Again, I am in awe of cameramen who get this job done.

Also, there is not a man or woman alive who can hold a camera steady when a gun goes off! If they can, I don't want

the low light conditions of early morning and late evening, we have to suspend hunting about 20 to 30 minutes before dark and cannot start filming until about the same amount of time after first daylight. I have on many occasions let great bucks walk right by the stand because the camera did not have enough light to film.

There are other times, too, when the cameraman, no matter how competent,

Look, I am the first to admit I love my job. For some reason, God has given me the privilege to work with and champion the most amazing animals on the planet! Yet whether it be me, Jerry Johnston, David Blanton, or any other personality on TV, doing what we do to bring you the best of programming is not easy! And, okay, I do have a great time doing it. 🦌

