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# 30 YEARS

**"Staring at the sticks, I realized they were antler tines rising from the dark water like tree branches."**



**By Shawn Bennett**

**M**ORE THAN 30 YEARS AGO, in 1979, I killed my first whitetail, a doe, with a bow. I had an old secondhand Bear compound bow and a Baker climbing stand. None of my friends or family bowhunted. I learned on my own.

During that first year, arrows flew over some deer, under others. I don't recall how many I missed, but it was more than I cared to talk about back then. Bowhunting for deer was sure more difficult than shooting them with a gun. So when I arrowed that first doe, I was hooked for life.

A lot has changed over 30 years. Bows are faster, clothes are better, and stands are safer. Most notably, deer are more plentiful. Back in the old days, the bag limit in my home state of Maryland was one doe and one buck, and any eight-pointer with antlers wider than his ears was a trophy. Now, the county I hunt in Maryland has no limit on does, and we have some magnum bucks. Things have changed for sure, and I, like many hunters, have grown with the sport.

So last fall, when my friend Bob Linkous invited me to hunt monster Illinois bucks with him, I was ready. We contacted Steve Phelps of Illinois Trophy Bow Hunters (ITB). Steve runs a bowhunting-only operation, and he hunts only in November during the rut. That's what we wanted. We knew our chances to kill a monster were best at that time. We always joke about how the big bucks are like vampires. We get all of our trail camera photos of big bucks at night — except during the rut.

**WE LEFT MARYLAND** for West-Central Illinois on November 4, which seemed a little odd to me with the deer heating up on my hunting property at home. The small bucks had

started chasing, and my trail cameras showed several 140-inch bucks. However, I had killed only a few does and passed on some 2½-year-old bucks. I was excited to hunt the big boys of the Midwest.

When I climbed into my first ITB treestand on the afternoon of November 5, the temperature was a balmy 70 degrees. To make things worse, so much rain had fallen that fall that none of the corn had been cut on the farm we were hunting. Conditions were far from perfect. Still, in the land of giants, you play the cards you are dealt.

Just before dark, a small doe walked by my stand, the only deer I saw that first day. Two days before in Maryland, I had seen 14 deer. What a contrast!

Back at the cabin that night, Bob told me he'd seen a few small bucks but no shooters, and one of the other hunters had missed a buck in the 150-inch Pope and Young class. Hearing these stories raised my confidence, and looking at the big bucks hanging on the walls further fueled my excitement. Trophies like those were the reason we had driven 12 hours to hunt. The big bucks were there. But would I ever see one of them?

My years of experience told me the unusually warm weather and standing corn everywhere were going to make this tough. Still, I had to stay positive. One thing is for sure about big bucks — hot or cold, they are going to breed during the rut. That will always make them move.

**THE MORNING OF DAY TWO**, I showered with scent-free soap and was out the cabin door. As I slowly walked to my stand in the dark, coyotes were barking in the distance, and well before daylight, I was settled into my stand.

In 30 years of bowhunting, I had never seen a deer like this. I shot him in this timber strip between a cornfield and a soybean field.





Illinois Trophy Bow Hunters had got a glimpse of the droptine monster before I arrived.

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Five hours later, I had not seen a deer. I had come prepared to hunt all day, but, feeling a little discouraged, I decided to walk back to the cabin to regroup over lunch. The rut had to kick in soon.

While eating, I noticed that the farmer on the adjoining property was combining his soybeans. With a plan working in my mind, I asked the outfitter about our property line and a strip of timber running between our farm's standing corn and the neighbor's bean field. Perhaps all the noise from that John Deere combine would push some deer through the timber strip. The outfitter agreed and showed me the area I could hunt. Nobody had hunted that spot, the wind was right, and I had a plan.

With a Summit climber on my back and Mathews Reezen in my hand, I crept into the wooded funnel. The sight of several large scrapes and some huge rubs encouraged me further as I climbed 22 feet up a tree just downwind of a heavily used deer trail. The setup looked great.

All afternoon the combine roared in the adjacent bean field, but that was the only action. I did not see one deer. Still, as the sun began to set, I felt good. That's the time of day all deer hunters love.

**BEHIND ME A BRANCH BROKE.** Turning, I saw a buck coming from the standing corn into the woods. This was only the second deer I had seen on my trip, but I had no doubts — he was a shooter. His rack was wide and tall, and a big droptine hung off the left side like a billy club.

As he tore up a sapling 60 yards away, moments seemed like hours. I had never seen a buck like this. My biggest buck on the wall at home was a 154-inch 10-pointer, and this buck made him look small. The moment had arrived. My three decades of practicing and hunting were coming together in seconds.

Look at the shoulder and not that huge rack, I kept thinking. *Focus!*

Fortunately, I had shot so many does back home, this all came naturally to me now. As the huge buck slowly walked down the trail toward me, a light warm breeze was blowing in my face. I drew my bow and with a soft grunt stopped him broadside, 27 yards from my stand.

When the arrow hit behind the front shoulder, the buck stumbled and mule-kicked. Then he ran out of sight toward a nearby creek.

Thirty years of bowhunting these magnificent animals told me the shot was good. I just had to sit down and relax. Then,

after 20 minutes, I climbed down and walked to where the buck had stood. Covered in blood, my arrow lay right there, and a heavy blood trail started just a few feet away.

Immediately I headed to the cabin to share the news with the guys and give the old droptine buck time to die. Only a hunter knows the electric feeling of talking to other hunters when a big buck has been shot, and the cabin was filled with excitement as I kept saying, "He's bigger than anything hanging on the cabin walls!"

The waiting time after a shot is the hardest part of a hunt for me. I was nervous, but, finally, after three hours, armed with flashlights, we headed out to track the buck. Helping me were hunter Doug Partlowe from Front Royal, Virginia, and ITB guide John Jacobs.

The blood trail was obvious, and I had never felt more positive about tracking a buck. Still, my mind was racing as we scanned the dark woods for the droptine monster.

Then the blood trail ran right to the edge of a creek and stopped. No more blood and no buck — not the scenario I wanted! Across the creek was a steep, 15-foot bank. As bad as he was bleeding, we knew he did not go up that high bank.

So into the waste-deep water we went, slowly wading downstream with the current, scanning from side to side with our flashlights for any sign of blood on the shoreline.

Suddenly my light flickered off what looked like sticks coming out of the water. Staring at the sticks, I realized they were antler tines rising from the dark water like tree branches. Everything else was under water.

"There he is!" I shouted, and Doug waded over and pulled the rack up out of the water. It was bigger than I'd thought. Even under water, this one did not shrink. In the dark of night, three grown men stood in cold, waste-deep water, gaping in amazement, laughing and yelling, overtaken with excitement. It was a moment that only those in the hunting brotherhood can understand. I had killed a world class whitetail, and my hands were grasping the massive antlers.

**THIRTY YEARS AGO** I killed my first whitetail with a bow. My gear has changed a lot since my first Bear compound and Baker climbing stand, and I've experienced a lot of early mornings and long days on stand since then. But thinking back on all my great days afield, culminating with this Illinois droptine monster, I know the journey has been worth every moment.

Whether I ever kill a bigger buck remains to be seen. Certainly I don't have another 30 years on my side to do it. But one thing is for sure: God willing, come next November I will be sitting in a tree giving it one heck of a try. I'm still hooked for life. ♪

*When he's not chasing whitetails with his bow, Shawn Bennett makes a living as a commercial fisherman. He lives on the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland.*

**AUTHOR'S NOTES:** My buck's rack had a gross measurement of 239½ inches and an official net P&Y score of 237 inches nontypical.

I used a Mathews Reezen 7.0 at 70 lbs. draw weight, Victory arrow, four-blade Muzzy broadhead, Summit Viper climbing stand, and Hunter's Specialties True Talker call.

To plan your own Illinois hunt, contact: Steve Phelps, Illinois Trophy Bow Hunters (ITB), 520 Juniper Lane, Petersburg, IL 62675; (217) 632-4595; sphelps@gcctv.com; www.illinois-trophybowhuntersinc.com.