

BLUFF COUNTRY BUCKS

AS A YOUNG MAN just starting out in archery hunting, one of the first destinations I dreamed of pursuing whitetails outside my home state of Pennsylvania was Wisconsin. Back in the 1990s and early 2000s, it seemed like many of the big bucks you saw or heard about were from the Badger State. One area in particular — Buffalo County — stood out then, and still does now, due to the number of trophy antlered deer it has given up over the decades.

When it comes to deer hunting, Buffalo County has become one of the top destinations in the nation for big whitetail bucks. In fact, according to the Boone & Crockett Club, no single county in the United States has more bucks listed in the B&C records than this county. So last fall, when I was invited by Mystery Ranch to hunt at Bluff Country Outfitters — smack dab in the middle of the county — needless to say I was ecstatic.

Set amid the rolling hills and farmland east of Alma, Wis., Bluff Country Outfitters is a world-class whitetail guiding service that offers deer hunts on nearly 4,000 acres of privately owned and leased lands. In operation since the early 1990s, it's run by Tom Indrebo, a onetime avid bowhunter who has likely forgotten more about deer and deer behavior than I'll ever know. One of the primary reasons for his extensive knowledge of the animal is his decades-long passion for filming and photographing the whitetails in his area, something he started doing long before it was popular to video hunts or run trail cameras.

Bluff Country's Early Days

To understand how enthusiastic Indrebo is about observing and studying whitetails, you need to go back to the late 1970s or early 80s when he started hunting in Buffalo County. Indrebo found the deer hunting so exceptional that he and some friends purchased a farm in the area, and he also started videotaping the big bucks that he saw.

Once Indrebo had gathered enough footage of the deer, he condensed it into a videotape that started to make the rounds among friends and other hunters. Eventually, the Quality Deer Management Association, then in its early stages, heard about Indrebo's work and contacted him to see if they could obtain some of the footage.



By **MARK DEMKO**

**WISCONSIN'S BUFFALO
COUNTY GIVES UP MORE
BOONERS THAN ANY
OTHER COUNTY IN THE U.S.**

BUCK: JOHN PENNOYER



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Approximately 220 trail cameras are strategically placed to monitor deer activity on the numerous properties that Bluff Country Outfitters' owner Tom Indrebo has access to hunt. Indrebo has amassed close to one million photos during his nearly four decades of taking pictures of whitetails.



Above: Small ponds, most of them manmade, are scattered across Bluff Country Outfitters' properties, making them magnets for whitetails. Stands are strategically placed adjacent to these waterholes, giving bowhunters good, close-range shots at deer that come in for a drink. Below: When conditions are right, sometimes heading out for a midday sit can be in order, even if the rut is still a few weeks off.



"They asked me if I could send a copy out to their advisory board, which consisted of 13 biologists from the different universities that had deer study programs at the time," Indrebo said. "After they had the meeting, they called me and said, 'Can we buy some footage from you to use in this (QDMA) tape?'"

Of course, as word spread of the big bucks roaming Buffalo County, farmers started to sell their properties and access to land became harder and harder to come by (Buffalo County is now home to several outfitting and guiding services). Fearing he'd eventually be shut out of the properties he'd hunted and filmed on, Indrebo bought a 200-plus-acre farm for his family in 1993, and soon thereafter he purchased another 150 acres adjacent to that property.

"The first year I was here, the local taxidermist called me and said, 'Hey, can you take a couple hunters out? I got some guys calling me from Florida, and they want to gun hunt,'" Indrebo said. "I answered, 'That will help pay my taxes; have them come over.'"

Out of those early one-off hunts, Bluff Country Outfitters was born, with clients traveling to western Wisconsin from all over the country to pursue Buffalo County's big bucks. Over the years, Indrebo has hosted numerous celebrities and professional athletes, including former Seattle Seahawks wide receiver and U.S. Congressman Steve Largent and musician Hank Williams Jr., to name just two.

A Trendsetter

As Bluff Country Outfitters' reputation grew, Indrebo began to lease more farm lands to accommodate additional

hunters. Several years prior to starting his business, he had already begun monitoring the local deer herd via rudimentary 'trail cameras,' basically print-film cameras that were operated via makeshift triggering devices.

"We used to have a string across a trail and it would pull a timer, so you saw something walk by and it could have been anything (in the image)," he recalled. "You didn't always know what it was."

As the first digital cameras started to appear on the scene, Indrebo would then purchase older, clearance models online in bulk (the first digital cameras were very expensive), transforming them into trail cameras by creating a special protective housing and hooking up some type of activator. Fast forward to 2022, and he now runs 220 cameras — the majority of them modern digital trail-cams — and catalogues 300-plus bucks each year. Incredibly, he has captured deer up to age 12 on camera, a rather advanced age for wild whitetails, and at one time Indrebo had more than 600,000 images archived on his computer.

"If a guy shoots a buck (while hunting with me), I'm usually able to go back and find 2, 3, 4 or even 5 years of that buck — what the deer was like those years — and show him pictures of it," Indrebo said.

More important than the photos, Indrebo has created a whitetail haven on his farm, with a variety of crops, food plots and a network of trails the deer often use to travel. In addition, he has added in 35 ponds on the properties he hunts, providing dedicated water sources that deer frequent regularly. Like many guides, Indrebo protects younger bucks so that they can grow into an older age class



Above: When it comes to whitetail deer, few individuals have observed free-ranging, mature bucks as much as Indrebo, who has been filming them and monitoring them via trail cameras for more than 40 years.



Mounts of some of the monster whitetails taken off Bluff Country Outfitters' properties over the years adorn the dining room of Indrebo's home (above), while replicas of some of the biggest bucks ever taken in North America are on display in the garage and game room (right).



by limiting hunters to harvesting only deer that score 140 inches or better. His goal is that only bucks ages 4.5 and older are harvested each year. Unsurprisingly, as a result of all the habitat work and management efforts, Indrebo's properties have given up antlered deer well over 180 inches, with a couple even topping the magical 200-inch mark.

Hunting Bluff Country

Staying at Bluff Country Outfitters is a first-class experience, with quality, home-cooked meals served in the Indrebo's dining room, where large mounts and replicas of some of the bucks taken on the farm over the years watch over you while you eat. The Indrebo's giant garage also doubles as a lounge, with pool and foosball tables, bar and replicas of some of the biggest bucks ever taken in North America, making it a must-see when you're in camp.

During our visit, there were six of us hunting Oct. 20-23. After a quiet outing the first morning, a steady rain moved in, dampening deer activity for the rest of the day. Indrebo, however, expected the activity to pick up the following day as the front moved out. And although the morning sit on Day 2 was slow due to a continued light rain and fog, true to his words, as things cleared up, deer movement increased dramatically.

Starting in late morning, multiple trail cameras on different farms began snapping pictures of bucks on the move, sending the images back to Indrebo's computer. Although it was still a few weeks away from the rut, the strong activity indicated to us that heading to the stand for a midday-to-dark sit — at least for this day — might be a wise decision.

Intel in Action

For many bowhunters, climbing into a treestand at 12:30 or 1 p.m. at any point prior to the arrival of the rut might seem akin to wasting their time, but we trusted Indrebo's guidance implicitly. As I settled into my stand overlooking a small, manmade pond 30 yards away, I had a good feeling in my gut, especially since most of Indrebo's waterholes are tucked inside the woods, making it more likely deer might visit them throughout the day.

Sure enough, three bucks showed themselves during the first 75 minutes I was on watch. While seeing one buck might not have been surprising, I'll admit that I was pleasantly shocked to see three antlered deer at midday, something I really never had happen to me before.

As fate would have it, the first two bucks — both younger, smaller-racked deer — came to the waterhole from the woods along the sides, making them easy to spot before they reached the water. However, the last deer, a definite shooter, came up the steep hill behind the waterhole, stopping for a drink on the back side of the pond 36-38 yards away. Facing me head-on, there was no chance for a shot while he was drinking; my only hope was to catch him as he left the pond to continue on his way.

If he went to my right, there were several potential opportunities to draw my bow since an old ATV trail ran from the cut cornfield adjacent to the woodlot into the pond. But, if the buck went to my left, I may not have an opening to push an arrow through since the cover was still rather thick due to the mild fall.

Little did I know, but the others in our group were all

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having action as well. Around 2:30 p.m., Sam Soholt of North Dakota spotted a doe trailed by a buck with a split G2 on its left side that made it easy to recognize, both on trail-cam photos and in the field. Although the two deer came to within 45 yards — a distance Soholt was comfortable shooting — thick brush prevented a clear shot and the pair wandered out of sight.

Fortunately, about 40 minutes later the doe returned, once again with the buck in tow. While she traveled on the trail that passed below Soholt's stand, the buck took a slightly different path, presenting him with an 8-yard shot.

"The only thought going through my head when I saw the buck was how big the frame was on his rack, and I was solely focused on figuring out how to get a shot," Soholt recalled. Capitalizing on his opportunity, Soholt knocked down the big mainframe 8-pointer, which was later green scored at 150 inches.

On the last night of the hunt, Jack Gavin of Minnesota also scored on a big Bluff Country buck, taking down a 9-pointer that came in around 5:30 p.m. to check out a scrape 25 yards from his stand. Following the shot, the deer ran a short distance, stopped and then trotted another 20 yards before collapsing.

"He expired right there, making it less than 50 yards



Sam Soholt of North Dakota made good on an 8-yard shot during the second day of his hunt, knocking down this 150-class, mainframe eight.

MYSTERY RANCH TREEHOUSE PACKS

When it comes to deer hunting, I'd rather have too much in my pack than go light and learn the hard way that I left something behind that I really needed. That's why Mystery Ranch's top-loading Treehouse Series Packs are so impressive and appealing.

Designed for whitetail and treestand hunters, these roomy, ultra-quiet packs are purposefully built for hanging on a hook or from your treestand and feature a flip-back top, making them easy to access whether hanging or leaning against the tree.

Available in two models — the new 20 and redesigned 38 — the Treehouse pack is made of durable, water-resistant materials and includes several zippered pockets and sleeves inside the main compartment for storing gear and equipment, as well as two exterior, stretch-fabric side pockets on both sides and a stretch pocket on the front, perfect for holding items like water bottle, binos and other gear. It's worth noting that the zippered pocket on the inside of the pack lid is accessible whether the pack is open or closed, making it great for items like gloves, grunt tube or a rangefinder that you want at your fingertips.

On the Wisconsin hunt, I worked my Treehouse 38 pack hard, filling it with my Ozonics unit, extra base layers, fleece jacket, camera equipment, bowhunting accessories and more. In addition to the flip-back top, the pack also has full-length zippers on both sides, allowing you to open the pack as much as you want to access the contents. Hence, I never had trouble grabbing what I needed when I needed it. I went into the pack numerous times on the hunt and was amazed how easy it was to find things quickly and quietly.

The Treehouse is quiet yet repels water thanks to the fuzzy, cotton-like polyester exterior backed by Nylon 210D laminate fabric. It comes with

compression straps to secure your bow, a small stand/platform or climbing sticks, and it also has a removable tree strap that allows you to affix the pack to your tree or stand.

The Treehouse 20 measures 20.5x10.5x11 inches, offers 1,275 cubic inches of space and weighs 2.82 pounds, while the Treehouse 38 checks in at 23.25x13x12.25 inches, weighs 4.47 pounds and provides 2,370 cubic inches of room. Other features of the 38 include an adjustable yoke — the area where the shoulder straps meet the back — for a custom torso fit, as well as a padded, removable waist belt with small, zippered pockets. Both packs are available in a wood (tan) color or DPM Canopy, a disruptive pattern; MSRP is \$229 for the Treehouse 20 and \$299 for the Treehouse 38.

If you're on the hunt for a feature-rich, highly practical pack that's truly treestand friendly, Mystery Ranch's Treehouse Series is for you. For more information, or to purchase a pack, visit mysteryranch.com.



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from the stand," said Gavin of the deer, which green-scored 158. "With over an hour of light left and the buck down well within view, I remained in the stand enjoying the incredible hunt that I was lucky enough to experience. Eventually, the urge to get a closer look at the deer took over and I climbed down to get my hands on him."

As for my deer, when the buck finished drinking, he turned and went behind some large trees, emerging in the thick brush to my left. Although at one point he passed within 25 yards of the tree that I was in, there just wasn't a good opening to take a clean shot.

Once the buck passed my stand, it trotted across the corner of the cut cornfield behind me, stopped to work a scrape briefly and disappeared into the woods. Over the next two days, I saw several smaller bucks, but nothing that would classify as a 'legal' buck at Bluff Country. However, as we all know, that's how it often goes when you're bowhunting big, mature whitetails — you may only get one chance.

That said, the quality of the experience hunting with Bluff Country Outfitters, coupled with the sheer size of the deer that call that area home, had me dreaming on my flight home of returning one day soon to take another crack at the big bucks of Buffalo County! **B**

Hunting with Bluff Country Outfitters

For information on archery deer hunts with Bluff Country, visit bluffcountryoutfitters.com or contact Tom Indrebo at 608-685-3755.



Jack Gavin of Minnesota kneels next to the big 9-pointer he took on the final night of his hunt with Bluff Country Outfitters. The deer green-scored 158 inches.



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