

# The INVESTMENT and the PAYOFF

BY NICK ZINSMEYER



Nick drew an archery permit for a public land hunt. He invested lots of time and energy scouting and planning to eventually get his trophy buck. Nick even lost a few pounds due to all that hiking and scouting as an added bonus.

AUTHOR PHOTOS

Sportsmen around Central Texas know the Army Corps of Engineers' lakes are a bit of a sportsman's paradise. Along with being great fishing lakes, several of these areas have an almost cult following of serious archery hog hunters who brave the deep woods, creek bottoms, thickets, and open fields to chase some of the toughest hogs the state has to offer. Duck and dove hunters frequent the lakes in the fall. Fishing, bird and hog hunting aside, the true allure of public land hunting in Central Texas is the land's ability to grow and support some of the largest whitetail deer in the state.

If you're one of the few to get drawn for some of the more elite public land hunts, you'll be in areas that offer you a chance at whitetails considered trophies by anyone's measuring stick. However, if you're lucky enough to draw, be prepared to make a significant investment towards taking a trophy animal. Though the necessary commitment is high, the payoff for taking a public hunt trophy is well worth the time investment.

## THE DRAW

Getting drawn to hunt these elite areas is no easy task. Some of the lake areas that don't hold as many trophy-quality deer have much better odds of drawing a permit, but some of the more elite locations have odds of getting drawn right there with finding "Wonka's golden tickets." In 2018, the odds increased slightly when the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department required applicants to pre-purchase both their hunting license and the Annual Public Hunting Permit (AHP) prior to applying to hunt this area. This dropped applicants down to below 1,000 in 2018, which increased draw odds to still just around five percent.

Drawing a permit to hunt at these locations is just the first step of many very challenging steps towards connecting on a big whitetail buck. Some TPWD areas require hunters to successfully take two whitetail does before receiving a permit to hunt a buck. The lakes do not close to the public during the hunting dates as several other TPWD hunts do. It's a normal occurrence to have hikers, fishermen, duck, dove and hog hunters walk right through your setup during prime hunting hours. Along with the challenges from hunting in a public park area, many lake areas are surrounded by private landowners, most who can rifle hunt and many who have feeders and food plots trying to draw deer out of the Corps' land, creating additional pressure and competition for hunters.



Nick's Central Texas buck gross-scored 144 inches and tipped the scales at 151 pounds field dressed.

## MY HUNT

In 2018, I was fortunate enough to draw an archery permit to one of these elite areas after many years of applying. My brother and father-in-law were also on our card, and we received notification we had been selected to start hunting in the middle of October. I immediately made plans to start scouting several areas around the lake I knew held deer in the past. Over the next several weeks we set up spots for multiple treestands, built many ground blinds out of brush in the area, and found areas to place pop-up blinds in thick brush along the creeks and rivers feeding the lake.

We set out a dozen trail cameras and started formulating plans for the season, based off the deer we saw in different areas. This hunt was one that required you to take two does before you could hunt a buck, and we wanted to get our does early. When opening day arrived, I had a plan. I decided to sit at a spot where I saw a few does visit.

At last light on the first night, a big mature doe came through my setup and I shot a Rage Hypodermic broadhead through her at 22 yards. One doe down, one to go. The next morning, I chose a spot on the opposite side of the lake in a tree line. My setup was in a large tree about 25 yards back in the tree line with a small lane that provided visibility into an open field.

This was still in mid-October and all the mourning dove hunters were blasting away and yelling back and forth to each

other out in the open field within a few hundred yards of where I was hunting. I hadn't seen a single deer all morning. When I saw three coyotes run within 35 yards of my blind, I knew my hunt was over. I got about halfway back to my vehicle and saw a group of deer in a small group of trees across an open field.

I decided to sit down next to a small mesquite. I looked up, and coming straight at me from across the field was the group of about 40 deer still about 200 yards away, but closing fast. I stayed behind the mesquite tree, nocked an arrow and drew back in anticipation of the deer coming within range. Sure enough, a big mature doe leading the group ran 15 yards in front of me.

It was too late for her because I was already at full draw. I let one fly and she dropped right where she stood. I had my second doe after only two sits and was qualified to shoot a buck.

Over the next month I spent a lot of time in the field. I decided to focus my efforts on the area where I shot my second doe. This area consisted of about a mile-long tree line following a creek. The deer would stage in the thick woods and move in and out of the fields to feed in the open.

One afternoon during Thanksgiving week, I found a spot that looked promising to hang a new treestand. It was a natural cutout in the tree line near a bend in the creek. It looked like multiple deer trails crossed at this point and I decided to hang an old two-piece, lock-on style treestand about 20 feet up in an oak tree. From where the tree stood, I could see about 35 yards in front of me and had heavy cover to help conceal me.

While hanging the treestand, I realized the top part of the stand where I was supposed to sit was broken beyond repair. I decided to hang the bottom platform and I would just bring a pad to sit on the next morning and would sit on the base with my feet and legs dangling. The next morning, I parked my truck about 30 minutes before shooting light. I had to hike a mile back to the stand and climbed up into the tree right at legal shooting time.

I had only been in the stand 15 minutes and looked up to see a monster buck standing broadside right on one of the trails. He looked directly away from me and had no idea I was there. I knew he was a buck I had pictures of 10 days prior. I'd never seen this buck live before, but saw the very distinguishable three extra kickers on his left beam and the splits on both G2s.

I drew back an arrow and aimed a little high with my single pin sight set at 20 yards. I knew the buck was about 28 yards away, and with him being relaxed and looking away from me, I didn't think he would drop much when he heard my release. I let my arrow fly and heard the unmistakable sound of an arrow striking flesh. He jumped and took off the way he came in. I could see my Full Metal Jacket arrow sticking straight up in the ground with red blood staining the white veins.

### RECOVERY

I gave the buck 30 minutes then climbed down from my stand. I went to my arrow and confirmed good red blood on it. I started looking for blood where he ran off and couldn't find a thing. I searched closer to the creek because I thought a hit deer would run downhill.

Finally, after 45 minutes of searching I started back at square one and found a small drop of blood about 10 yards from where I shot him. Slowly but surely, I found another drop about 15 yards from the first one, then another and another about every 10 to 20 feet.

Instead of traveling downhill into the woods, the old buck had turned and run directly into the open field. After about 30 minutes of slow tracking, I saw dark antlers sticking up from the grass. I walked up to find my buck lying in the open field.

This Central Texas buck tipped the TPWD check station scales at 151 pounds field dressed, and hit a gross score of 144 inches, even with a break on one of the G2 splits. I'm 35 years old and first sat in a deer blind with my dad and my twin brother when I was 4 years old. I started out the season at 6-foot-1 and weighed a lean 177 pounds. By mid-season I had dropped to 165 pounds from all the walking, scouting, and physical activity that comes with hunting a public land area. This was by far the hardest hunting I have ever done, but the payoff was one of the best. 🦌



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