

and through hostile cactus plants, and after battling several swarms of hungry mosquitoes, I was close enough to evaluate the buck with the naked eye. He was approximately 12 inches long, with one busted prong. Adding insult to injury, he possessed one of the ugliest faces I had ever seen on an antelope. With binoculars, I would have avoided the nasty, pointless stalk.

The consequence of breaking this rule was resonant. If I ever forget my binoculars in camp again, I will go back for them, regardless of how far I have to walk. They are that important.

**Rule #4: Beware of Extra Eyes**

Successfully executing a stalk on a buck surrounded by does is impossible, right? This is something I had never been able to do. Bucks with girlfriends had always eluded me. Those extra eyes are difficult to avoid.

So this year, when I glassed up a nice buck with four does bedded in a swale, my first inclination was to pass him up and move on to another location. *Wait a second*, I thought. *You've already broken some of your rules, why not break this one?* The antelope had not seen me yet. They were just lying down in some tall grass, watching a herd of cattle at a nearby windmill. I deduced that the pronghorns were waiting for their turn to get a drink. There was nothing to lose. Again, belly-crawling was in order.

The stalk itself took about 15 minutes. But then I had to wait another 10 minutes when the animals suddenly rose to their feet

and a doe blocked the buck's vitals. My nerves went on edge as the wind picked up and started to change direction. Soon, the antelope would be downwind. When the opportunity presented itself, I drew my bow quickly and let an arrow fly. It hit the buck squarely in his chest, bringing him down in a matter of seconds. I waited several minutes before approaching the downed buck. Once my nerves were settled, I walked over to check him out. A profound thought occurred to me on the way to my trophy. On this hunt, I had broken some of my most steadfast rules. And I knew now that it could be done with success. This was a revelation.

In the distance, two bucks appeared suddenly and gazed in my direction. Now my hand rested lightly on the shoulder of the fallen pronghorn. Those bucks looked bigger than average, yet I never raised my binoculars to confirm that impression. What was the point? The hunt was over now. I wondered out loud if they were 16 inches, but my voice was muffled instantly by the strong prairie wind.

**AUTHOR'S NOTES:** On my 2006 pronghorn hunt, I used my 1974 50-lb. Shakespeare Super Necedah X32 recurve, Easton Axis arrows, Fuse Cybex broadheads, and Vista hip quiver. My Bausch and Lomb 10x42 binoculars were invaluable. I wore Prairie Ghost camouflage.

*The author is a resident of Colorado Springs, Colorado. He has written several stories for Bowhunter.*

# California Blacktails

**BY ZACK WALTON**

**IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA, THE ONLY THING HOTTER THAN THE WEATHER IS THE BLACKTAIL ACTION.**

**Y**OU HAVE TO FORGIVE me — I don't know any better. As a California bowhunter, I've spent my entire life chasing small-bodied blacktail deer in 100-degree heat. Our coastal archery season opens the second weekend in July (the earliest season in the country). The weather can be miserable, and the days extremely long. So, while most of my friends are wearing bathing suits and soaking up sun on the beach, I'm covered in camo and sweat as I hike the hills of northern California.

Growing up, this style of hunting was all I had available to me. I loved it because it was all I knew. Now that I have had a chance to hunt several other states and species, I still choose

early season California blacktails as my favorite bowhunt. It's not an easy hunt, especially when you try to spot-and-stalk in hot, dry terrain. But something about sneaking up on a group of bachelor bucks with velvet antlers glistening in the hot summer sun keeps me coming back every year.

Although you can pattern bucks, blacktails are not as dependable in their daily routines as their whitetail counterparts. Even if you find a food source that bucks frequent, they often use many different trails to get to it. And, despite hot temperatures during the early season, multiple water sources in most blacktail habitats make sitting over waterholes hit-and-

miss, at best. That's why I've found spot-and-stalk techniques to be the most successful approach when hunting blacktails in northern California, as you can cover a lot of ground and look over many more deer than if you are stationary.

Because the heat is so intense during the middle of the day and deer rarely move, the best time to look for blacktails on the move is at first and last light. This approach gives you an opportunity to devise a stalk and execute it before the heat of the day forces deer to bed. During the middle of the day, your best bet is to still-hunt creek bottoms and diligently glass shaded areas where deer can stay cool.

Blacktail habitat varies as much as the techniques used to hunt them. In northern California, it varies from dense, old-growth forests along the northern coast, to grassy hillsides filled with intermittent oak patches, to high alpine basins above pine-covered mountains. Northern California hosts a large population of blacktails, but as a testament to their skittishness, California bowhunters experience a success rate that hovers around five percent.

I have learned more about spot-and-stalk hunting from these little deer than the rest of the western species I have hunted combined. Great eyesight, excellent hearing, and a propensity to spook without any provocation, combined with high populations, make blacktails a worthy adversary for bowhunters of any skill level.

Countless times, I have met up with hunting partners at the end of the day only to say, "I blew another stalk." But that only made the successful stalks more fulfilling. My first successful stalk on a blacktail buck was, at the time, the highlight of my bowhunting career — and I missed that shot. It took many more stalks and several other shots before I started connecting

on blacktail bucks. My most memorable stalk of any blacktail took place on a recent hunt in northern California.

I was hunting the coast range the last week of July. By that time of year, even though most bucks still have fuzzy headgear, they are spending more and more time in thick brush and less and less on open hillsides. And, since antler growth is over by then, the bucks usually become less visible as they begin shedding their velvet. I was hunting with my dad, Jim, and we had seen several bucks early in the week. We had been hunting the spot for several years, so it was no surprise we were finding deer in areas that had produced bucks in the past.

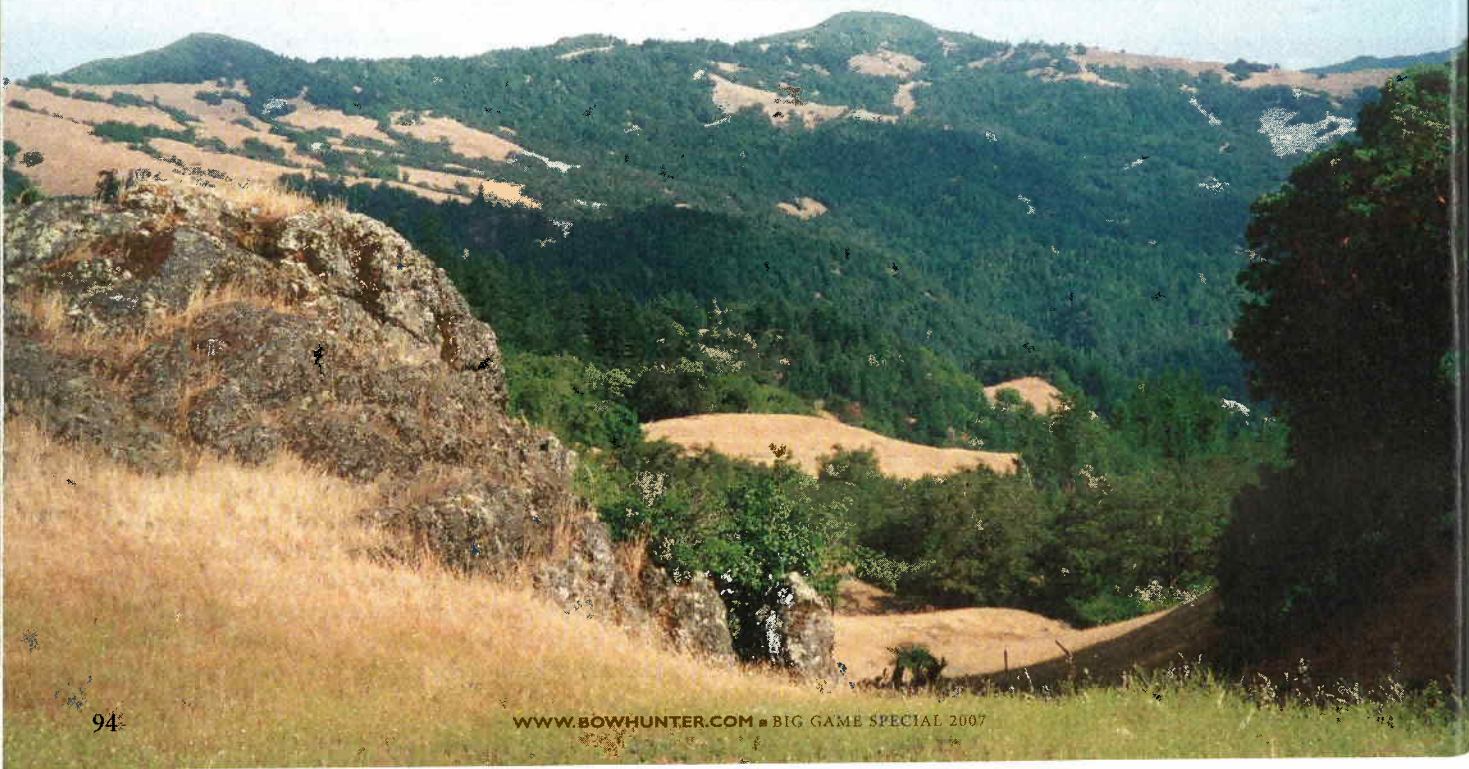
I spent most of the first few days hunting a high-traffic feeding area that rested between two heavily wooded bedding areas. I had seen numerous deer on this large flat, and as the bucks feed off the flat and down the mountain toward cover, they are more stalkable in the broken terrain.

On the fourth morning of the hunt, I was late getting into position and didn't find any deer until I spotted a buck on a bench 300 yards below the flat. After circling to get the wind in my favor, I dropped down the steep hill to the same level as the deer and worked slowly toward the cut where he was feeding. The heavy dew on the long grass and the stiff breeze in my face muffled any noise from my boots as I closed in on the buck's location.

As I peeked over the crest in the ridge, I spotted a buck 80 yards away at the end of the bench — a different buck. It turns out six bucks were feeding in the small depression in front of me. I settled behind a small ridge as the group fed in a small cut just out of bow range. Not able to move any closer without being detected, I sat and waited.

Suddenly, I noticed tall, velvet antlers bobbing just over the

**Instead of hitting the beach with my friends, I trade in my bathing suit for camo and hike the hills of Northern California, stalking blacktails. Even after hunting several other states and species, I still choose this as my favorite bowhunt.**





This nontypical buck was, by far, my biggest blacktail to date.

crest of the ridge, less than 40 yards away. Through the grass, I could tell he was a huge forkhorn, but there was something wrong with his antler on the right side. *Is it broken? No. Is it a droptine? No, it can't be.* When I got a better look, I realized he had an extra main beam. The point was extremely long and jutted out over the buck's face. I knew it wasn't often you see a nontypical blacktail, and this velvet-covered brute was feeding in my direction.

My decision was easy — this was definitely the buck I wanted. Ducking down and coming to full draw in a single motion, I lifted my head to find the buck again. All I could see was his tall, fuzzy forks moving through the grass. He was swinging below me and would come out at about 35 yards. As the buck cleared the ridge and popped into the open, he immediately spotted my form on the grassy hillside. But it was too late — the Easton XX78 was already on its way.

In two steps, the buck was out of sight, but I could hear him crashing downhill through the brush. Before the buck was gone, I could see the fletchings sticking out of him a little farther back than I had hoped. From out of the depression where the buck had come, the hillside erupted with a blur of velvet antlers.

Five other bucks sprang into view and gathered 60 yards downhill from me to figure out what was making all the racket. One 3-point, three forkhorns, and a spike offered quite the sight as I watched them for several minutes before they decided to move out of the area — minus one of their compadres. I marked the spot where the buck had been standing and went back up the hill and found Dad. After discussing the situation, we decided it would be best to wait a couple of hours before tracking.

The shot resulted in a quick kill, as the buck made it only about 200 yards before expiring. I knew he was a great buck, but it wasn't until we got up close that I realized what a unique trophy he was. The buck's antlers were very tall and sported deep forks with a second main beam that stretched more than 10 inches. To top it all off, the buck had another cheater off the back of the main beam and a five-inch base. The buck was, by far, my biggest blacktail and provided one of my most treasured hunts.

California blacktails offer one of the most exciting bowhunting challenges in North America. The cagey, eagle-eyed blacktails along the California coast are often visible, but you rarely can get within bow range of them. On some private ranches, it is not unlikely to see 20 or 30 bucks in a day. California also offers several million acres of public land, with much of it being prime blacktail country.

With a little research, and some hiking boots, you can find spectacular blacktail bowhunting for a great price. By the end of a week's hunt, you can have a dozen stalks under your belt — a good hunt by anyone's standards. And it only takes one — one animal, one stalk, one shot — to make a good hunt great. 🏹

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** My blacktail had a gross green score of 105 inches.

*When the author isn't stalking blacktail bucks, he makes his home in Los Banos, California.*