

The Lumpy-Throat Buck — Part 1

By Cory Gulvas

I REMEMBER wanting to hold onto those moments, because I knew right then I would never forget. As I grabbed the heavy antlers, a rush of emotions consumed me. What was happening during those moments was something I thought was impossible, and up until now, only transpired in a dream. I had just arrowed an old buck that I had known well the previous four years in the remote mountains of Pennsylvania. A buck aged through cementum analysis to have been 9½ years old, and one I had named the Lumpy-Throat Buck. Let me tell you about him.

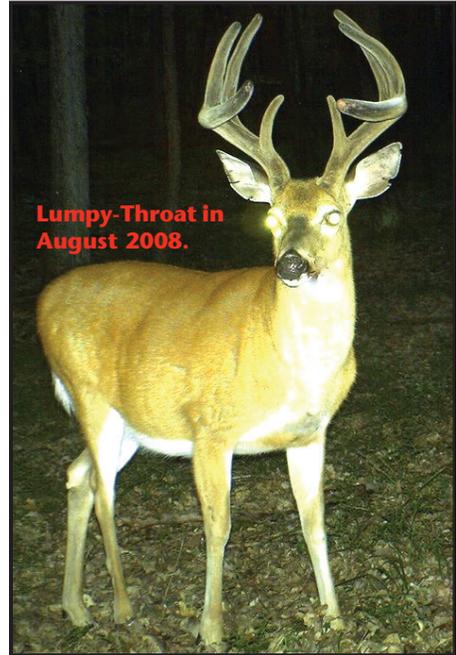
The morning was unusual in that the thermometer stood at a warm 56 degrees, and the calendar showed the first week of January. The year was 2007, and as I crested the high mountaintop in the northcentral mountains, I remember thinking how easily my senses could be fooled into believing that the calendar should read April instead of January. I was enjoying the weather, though, while covering some territory in search of shed antlers.

A week earlier I had come across a fresh antler, which told me that the bucks were indeed shedding earlier than usual that year. The area I was in was extremely vast, containing thousands of acres of thick, nearly impenetrable mountain laurel on steep sidehills. Access to the area is limited, and because of the remoteness and

rough terrain, I knew the area could hold some old bucks.

I had been searching for several hours with no luck when I discovered a feeding area on a south-facing slope where deer had been browsing on tree seedlings, indicative by all the digging and droppings on the ground. Not long after, I noticed something smooth and shiny lying roughly 20 yards ahead of me. A look through my binoculars confirmed it was a shed antler and a good one. Fuel for next season, I thought, as I picked up the heavy antler.

The chestnut-colored antler had good mass and good tine length. I



Lumpy-Throat in August 2008.

scoured the area for the next hour looking for its mate, but came up empty-handed. At the end of the day, I stopped to rest on a fallen log on top of the high mountain that offered a fantastic view of the surrounding mountains and valleys. The air was crisp, completely still and had now cooled off. I remember giving thanks for the discovery I had made that afternoon.

The remainder of 2007 was unproductive as far as any sightings of the buck that had dropped the chestnut-colored antler. I spent many early summer mornings in search of the buck, but the chance of ever seeing one particular buck within the thousands of acres of thick habitat, especially during the summer, was slim. I was somewhat new to trail cameras, but began hanging a few in the area where I had found the antler that warm January day. I never saw the buck during that entire 2007 season. This didn't surprise me, though, with the extreme remoteness and my lack of knowledge of the area, I knew it was going to take some serious effort on my part to even get a look at the buck.

In the spring of 2008 I was anxious to get back to where I had found the big shed the year before. I hoped the buck was still alive, and after many days of shed hunting on the vast mountain I came away empty-handed. My hopes of the buck still being alive were fading. I again hung a few trail cameras in the same area where I had found the shed, only this year my approach was a little different. I left the cameras out without checking them for a month to minimize the disturbance. I've learned that some big woods bucks will not tolerate any human odor. In some of the more remote and rugged regions, the whitetails may go a year without

coming in contact with human odor until hunting season, and then they know they are being pursued.

The cameras hung for an entire month and it was killing me what might be on them. One morning I left the truck at the crack of dawn to try to beat the August heat and hiked my way in to the two cameras I had set where two deer trails intersected. I quickly and quietly changed memory cards in both cameras and headed home.

As I was scrolling through the pictures on my computer, my excitement hit an all-time high. There, standing in front of the camera was a tremendous buck. The 8-point frame was heavy with tines exceeding 10 inches. I quickly located the shed I had found a year-and-a-half before and held it up to the photo—it was him! I had gotten two photos of him. The first showed the true height of his rack, while the second photo showed extremely long tines from the side. Since I had discovered him that warm January day he had grown at least another 15 to 20 inches of antler. He had a tremendous body and possessed all the characteristics of a mature buck.

With the history I had of him and what I knew of big woods whitetails, I figured him to be 5½ to 7½ years old. As I examined the second photo, something stood out. He had a very distinguishable lump the size of a baseball just under his throat and chin area. I had never seen this characteristic on any other deer. This lump made him look a little funny, especially when looked at from the side. I wasn't sure what the lump was, and I was concerned it might affect his health; it certainly wasn't affecting his headgear. Was he born with the lump or was it

from an injury? From that point on, I referred to the old buck as the “Lumpy-Throat Buck.”

The old buck would be my main priority for the 2008 season, but I was in a bind. It would be nearly impossible to learn more about the terrain where he lived during August and September, coupled with the thousands of acres that the vast mountaintop contained. Learning this type of terrain must be done in the spring, when the woods are more open and easier to read. Even though I spent a tremendous amount of time in the area looking for his sheds, it wasn't enough time, nor did I cover enough ground.

I hunted the buck during the first two weeks of November, but my lack of knowledge of the area made me uneasy. I didn't see the old buck until Veteran's Day, with only a few more days of the bow season remaining. I ended up killing a big 9-point. Even though he wasn't the buck I was focused on, on public land, a hunter can't pass on a good shot opportunity at a mature buck. Bow season ended and I hoped

Lumpy would make it through the firearms season.

The winter of 2009 arrived like an angry lion. The winds howled, snow fell and ice accumulated. January was extremely cold with heavy ice on top of significant accumulations of snow. The big woods were barren of any mast crop the previous fall, which would make survival even more difficult. Then that spring on a shed hunt, I discovered what I feared the most—an old buck had succumbed to the brutal winter weather in the Lumpy-Throat Buck's home turf. I could see on the fallen buck's skull where two large antlers were once attached. I scoured the area but never found the shed antlers.

The spring of 2009 passed way too quickly and the heat of summer was on. I began hanging a few trail cameras around late July, and then one August night the Lumpy-Throat Buck showed up on one of my cameras! I was overjoyed. The lump on his throat was clearly evident. As I studied that one photograph it was evident just how hard that previous winter had been on

him. The old buck's rack was smaller. The 8-point frame still carried the mass, but tine length and beam length were shorter than the previous season. I speculated that his decrease in antler development was attributed to the severity of the winter, but I also wondered if his age was catching up with him.

The 2009 fall sea-



ONE of the few photos of the Lumpy-Throat Buck during the summer of 2009. Notice, of course, the throat lump, but also the shorter tine and beam length, attributed to the difficulty of the previous winter.

son brought a bumper acorn crop. Red oak acorns were so plentiful that it actually made walking through the woods difficult. I focused on the Lumpy-Throat Buck, hunting him only during the first two weeks in November, a time when I felt he would be most vulnerable. I hunted him hard, but as in the previous two seasons, I never saw him. My respect for the old buck was increasing with each passing season. And I also knew that with each passing season he would continue to sharpen his senses and would be that much more difficult to harvest, or even see for that matter.

The winter of 2010 was extremely mild and, coupled with that heavy acorn crop, was rather easy on wildlife. And I was about to learn just how a heavy acorn crop and a mild winter affects antler development.

During the spring of 2010, I had collected several sets of sheds from other bucks, but none from the Lumpy-Throat Buck. I covered a lot of territory, but it seemed that I just couldn't luck into those sheds. If he had made it through hunting season, then I felt that he would have easily made it through the mild winter, especially with the abundant supply of acorns.

I began hanging trail cameras in late July in hopes of catching a photo of him to prove my suspicion that he was still alive. Once again, under the cover of darkness, he showed up on one of my cameras. And boy was he impressive! He had his biggest set of antlers since I began pursuing him. I thought his rack to be in the neighborhood of 140 Boone & Crockett Club points. Also surprising was that he had grown an extra point on his left side and was now a 9-point. And there below his throat

was the big lump. I now had three years worth of trail camera photos of the old buck, and every one of those photos had been taken under the cover of darkness.

The 2010 season would be my fourth year hunting the old buck. When you hunt a particular deer for this many seasons and have so many memories of him, the level of respect you feel for that particular animal is immense. I knew that his nocturnal tendencies would make him extremely difficult to see, let alone get an arrow in him.

I had several stands set up and one was near where I had found his shed in 2007. The area consisted of extremely dense mountain laurel that skirted around a small stream drainage that funneled deer movement from one side of the drainage to the other. The funnel spanned several hundred yards in width, though, because of the size of the area. This funnel gave me somewhat of a starting point for at least seeing any deer that might pass through the area. Getting them within 20 yards would be another challenge. In big woods areas, funnels can be rare and difficult to locate, but I felt that I had one here. A west wind was needed at this location, though.

Another stand was located about a mile away at the location where I had gotten the majority of the trail camera photos of the buck during the past three seasons. Even though I felt this was the buck's core home range, it was a difficult area to hunt, because of the unstable wind conditions that persisted throughout the area because of the topography. I accessed the stand from a small drainage that ran in a westerly direction that led me to the top of the mountain. I needed a northwest wind

to blow my scent back down from where I accessed the stand, back down the drainage.

On some days conditions were right, but most of the time the wind would come right up the drainage from where I had walked and blow my scent right across the mountaintop, contaminating the whole area. Because of the drainage, the wind seemed to switch directions doing 180-degree shifts nearly every hour. This may have been why the old buck spent so much time within this particular area; his nose could inform him of any danger from at least two different directions without ever moving. I never set any trail cameras for the old buck during hunting seasons. Maybe it was a mistake, but I did

not want to take any chances of spooking him out of what I was confident was his home area. Hanging cameras only increases one's human scent in the area. During the archery season, I only entered the buck's core area with bow in hand during days when I felt he would be most vulnerable to move during daylight.

So the stage was set for the 2010 season, and I felt confident in these two stand sites.



You'll have to read part two next month for the rest of the story about the Lumpy-Throat Buck.

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