

Outing
May, 1886

Ranch Life and Game Shooting in the West

III. Shooting Near the Ranch-House--The White-Tail Deer

But a few years ago any ranchman in the wilder portions of the great western plains country was able to get a large variety of game without having to travel very far from the immediate neighborhood of his own ranch house. When my cattle first came to the Little Missouri almost every kind of plains game was to be found along the river; but circumstances have widely changed now. Antelope, mountain sheep, and two species of deer are still to be found in greater or less numbers scattered through the country over which my cattle ranch, and occasionally not so very far from the house; thus, last winter one of my foremen shot a mountain ram on a ragged bluff-crest but half a mile away; and I have myself killed antelope on the bottom directly across the river, while, but a year or two ago, the black-tail deer were more plentiful in my immediate neighborhood than were all the other kinds of game put together, and even last fall I more than once shot them but a mile or so from the house. These are now, however, but exceptional instances, and if we have time to go off for but two or three hours with the rifle we cannot reckon with any certainty upon the chance of a shot at any game, excepting the white-tailed deer. Of some forty odd deer killed last season (for meat, not sport, and not while on any regular wagon trip) at least nine out of ten belonged to this species. The white-tail, partly from its superior cunning, from a kind of shrewd, common sense with which it is gifted to a preeminent degree, and partly from the nature of its haunts, survives in a locality long after all other of the larger game animals have been driven out by the hunters. It is preeminently the deer of the river bottoms, dwelling among the dense, swampy thickets, that form in the bends of the streams and in the larger patches of woodlands. It is mainly nocturnal in its habits, spending the day in impenetrable depths and tangled recesses, where it is practically entirely secure from the approach of the hunter. Its chase is thus very tedious, as in the localities where it is found it is almost impossible for a man to walk at all, and even with the most painstaking caution, he will hardly be able to avoid making a noise. The white-tail relies alike on ears, nose, and eyes to warn it of danger; and, indeed, it is almost impossible to successfully still-hunt it while lying or feeding in an extensive belt of woodland, and usually the only way to get an animal living in such a locality is to catch it on the outskirts in the very early morning or late evening. Such a meeting is more or less accidental.

At times, however, the deer will be found in the smaller, though still moderately extensive, patches of brushwood and dwarf trees that stud the winding bottoms of the larger creeks for miles up their courses, away from the river. In these localities a man runs a much better chance of getting his game, both because he can frequently "jump" it, getting a close, running shot; and also because if out still-hunting at eventide or in early morning he is almost certain of having a chance to see the deer feeding along the edges of the brush. I have hardly ever

been successful in single-handed still-hunting and killing the white-tail among the timber of the river bottoms, and though I have tried often enough, most of my shots have been taken when it was so dark that it was impossible to fire with any accuracy. When there is snow on the ground, however, we can often kill them along the river bottom, by dividing forces and sending one or two men to beat down through a good locality, while the others watch the probable places for the deer to pass.

As is the case with some other kinds of game, a man is not unapt to run across a deer by accident while riding about among the cattle, or while on one of the 100 errands that keep a ranchman perpetually on horseback. Accordingly, it is very rare for me to go off for any distance from the ranch-house without carrying the little saddle-gun with me. Once, early last September, when we had been out of meat for nearly a week, owing to the stress of work having been so severe as not to give any of us time from our duties in which to go hunting, this custom of mine procured us a welcome addition to our exceedingly monotonous and scanty bill of fare. A small band of horses had strayed away from the rest, and I had ridden out with one of the cowboys to look for them. A ranchman's horses are, as might be expected, perpetually astray, and one of the most necessary, and at the same time one of the most irksome, parts of his business is to look them up. They may wander one or more hundred miles if not found, and as to have plenty of good horses is the condition precedent for the successful carrying on of the cattle industry, it may be readily imagined that a plainsman takes peculiar care of his saddle band. Often all the horses will keep well together, but frequently they will show a tendency to split into little groups, whose individuals are never found far from each other; and at times there will be some one horse that shows a marked inclination to wander off by himself. If one of these individuals or little groups is absent when the bunch is rounded up and driven into the corral, which happens every day or two, some man has to immediately start out and look it up.

This seems at first a good deal like looking for a needle in a hay stack; and indeed, at times it does possess a most painful similarity to such a feat; but if a man knows the country as well as the habits of the horse he is looking for, his work is greatly simplified. Time and again horses have been absent from my ranch for an amount of time varying from a week to six months, but with only two exceptions I have always hitherto recovered them in the end. As already said, it is particularly dreary and tiresome work to look after them, as one has to ride along at a slow jog, continually straining one's eyes in every direction and minutely examining every patch of broken ground or timber that could contain the missing animals. After a rain it is much easier, as then their tracks can be followed pretty readily, while on hard dry ground they leave no trace; an immense amount of land has to be covered each day, and the probability is, that several days' fruitless search will have to be gone through before the animals are really found. One gets gradually to have a certain hopeless and irritated feeling that makes this kind of duty rank as one of the least attractive of a ranchman's life.

On the particular day in question, which was the second one of our search, I and my companion were riding along about noon in the somewhat sullen silence that comes to be one's natural mood after a long course of monotonous exercise in a land whose general aspect is as same as it is barren. We traveled mostly along the higher ridges, whence we could survey the landscape far and near, but finally we came to a place where a creek headed up, and where the ravines twisted to and fro, their beds being filled with underbrush and young trees, and where, in consequence, horses might easily remain hidden in the thickets or in the clefts in the side of the hill without our observing them from the distance. Accordingly we descended to hunt them through more carefully; coming down into a smooth open valley, through whose bottom

extended a dry watercourse, filled up with a dense growth of wild plums, ash and chunk cherries, with a few trees of larger growth. We started to ride down along the side of, and some little distance from, this thicket, which was several hundred yards in length and only thirty or forty in breadth; as the thicket lay in the bottom of the valley, while we were on considerably higher ground, we could look down into it. While the horses were jogging along with their heads down, I was suddenly aroused from my condition of listless apathy by the sudden mashing of dead branches among the underbrush but a rod or two from where I was passing. My blood tingled with that thrill of excitement known only to the man who has a genuine and intense fondness for the nobler kinds of field sports. I was off my horse in a second, running down with the rifle to where the valley sloped abruptly downwards to its brush-covered bottom. After the first plunge a deer will often run almost noiselessly through places where it seems marvelous that animals should go at all and I could not tell for a minute which way the game had gone; hearing, however, a twig snap farther down, I raced along to where the valley turned round a shoulder of the bluff and then again peered over into the dry water course. For a second I then experienced a keen disappointment, for a long distance off I saw a yearling white-tail break out of the brush and canter off out of sight round a bend of the valley. I concluded that I had run down the wrong way from that in which the game had been going, but staying still for a second, I again heard a twig break beneath me, and in another minute a white-tail stole out and stood in a little opening in the brush; it was evidently, from its size, a this year's fawn, just out of the spotted coat, and I gathered at once that there must be a third deer somewhere near, it being not at all an uncommon thing for a doe, a yearling fawn, and a this year's fawn to be together. As we were in need of fresh meat, I leveled on the fawn, which stood facing me, offering a beautiful mark; at the report it plunged wildly forward a few feet and turned a somersault over a small bank. Immediately afterwards the doe, which I had not previously seen, broke out within twenty yards of me. I fired three shots at her with the repeater, and with the last one hit her very far back, injuring her hips and causing her to turn round and run back into the brush. It seems a curious thing, doubtless, to those who have not tried, that a man should, at twenty yards, need three shots to disable, and even then not to kill, a deer; but unless one is a real expert with the rifle, he soon finds that he makes an unusually large percentage of misses on running shots, even when close up, and it is peculiarly difficult to remember to hold far enough ahead. The doe was evidently badly hurt; and by running on rapidly down the creek and taking up my station at a point where the water course was narrow, I headed her off; then the cowboy rode down through the bottom, and, when frightened by his approach, she tried to break by me, I killed her. Each of us took one of the deer behind his saddle and, abandoning for that day our search for the strayed horses, we rode back to the ranch house.

Although these deer were killed while on horseback, yet as a rule we hunt white-tail on foot and this is especially the case if we go out merely for an afternoon or morning's work near the ranch. As a sample of such work, may be mentioned a hunt I made a week or so after the above mentioned incident.

About three o'clock in the afternoon I shouldered my rifle and walked away from the ranch, intending to strike back over the hills to a part of the divide some eight miles distant and from thence to hunt slowly back against the wind through a stretch of broken country, where toward evening one would be not unlikely to find deer. When I had reached the divide and started homewards the shadows had already begun to lengthen out, the heat of the day was well over, and the fall air was already cool enough to make walking pleasant. The country consisted of little else than a series of chains of steep, rounded hills, separated from each other by narrow

valleys that split up and wound around in every direction. For the purpose of commanding as extensive a view as possible, I kept near the summits of the hills, avoiding, however, walking on the very crest, as that would throw my body out so sharply in relief against the sky as to almost of necessity attract the attention of any animal within the ken of whose vision I might be. The walking was very rough, the grassy hill tops and hill sides being exceedingly steep and slippery, nor did I at first see anything. But at last, when the sun was so near setting that the bottoms of the valleys had already almost begun to be in shadow, I crept out on the face of a great cliff shoulder that jutted over the broad bed of a long ravine, and my eye was at once caught by five or six objects below me in the valley, and probably nearly half a mile off. A second glance convinced me they were deer, and I drew back to make a rapid calculation as to the best means of getting near them, for I had to be quick about it if I wished to get a shot before the light failed. Running back at speed nearly half a mile, I crossed the ridge on which I was and slid down into a little washout that opened into a small ravine, whose mouth I had seen, joined the larger valley not very far from where the deer were. This ravine was entirely bare of underbrush, and I had to clamber along one of its sides in spite of the steepness of the ground, as I did not dare to run the risk of an outlying deer catching a glimpse of me if I came openly down the bottom. Nor was my caution thrown away. I found that the animals I was after, having grazed slowly down the main valley, had come directly opposite the mouth of the cleft in which I was. Wriggling along, however, flat on my face, and taking advantage of every boulder or patch of sage brush, I managed to get down near the very mouth. The wind was perfectly favorable, and after a few minutes' patient and motionless watching I saw four or five deer slowly moving along past the other side of a thicket but a couple of hundred yards away, and leaving between me and them a kind of natural embankment, just on the other side of which they halted. I was now able to walk rapidly and quietly up without danger of detection; throwing off my cap, I peered over the edge of the bank to see them feeding in perfect unsuspection, forty or fifty yards away. They were all does or yearling bucks; one of the latter, a fine fat young fellow, stood broadside to me. There was still plenty of light to shoot, and I was able to put the bullet within a hair's breadth of the right place behind the shoulder. Taking off the saddle, hams, and forequarters, and cutting thongs out of his hide to tie them with, I slung them over my back and started off at a rapid rate for home, which I did not reach until long after the moon was well up above the horizon; for even if one knows the country fairly well, he soon finds that he makes but slow progress at night time over broken, difficult ground.