

Outing
June, 1886

Ranch Life and Game Shooting in the West

IV. The Deer of the Upland and the Broken Ground

TILL very recently the black-tail deer was the most plentiful of all plains game, and it is still common in many localities; but after the extermination of the buffalo and the elk, it became itself the chief object of the chase with the professional hunters and their ceaseless persecution has in many places totally destroyed it, and elsewhere has terribly thinned its ranks. It differs widely in haunts, habits, and gait from its white-tailed relative, which in form and size it so closely resembles, although rather larger. It is fond of very rough, open ground, and although in many places, as, for example, in the great chains of the Rockies, it is found in dense timber, yet it is also frequently found where there are hardly any trees, or else where they are so sparse and scattered as to afford but the scantiest cover.

It is, with us, the rarest thing in the world to find black-tail on the timbered river bottoms, and it never penetrates into the tangled swamps in which the white-tail delights. The brushy coulees and the heads of the ravines are its favorite resorts, and it also ranges into the most sterile and desolate portions of the bad lands, intruding upon the domains of the mountain sheep. The cover in which it is found is almost always too scanty to, of itself, afford the deer adequate protection; it cannot, therefore, as is the case with its white-tailed relative, often escape by hiding and remaining motionless and unobserved while the hunter passes through the locality where it is found; nor can it, like its more fortunate cousin, skulk around without breaking cover and thus bid defiance to its pursuers. White-tailed deer may abound in a locality, and yet a man may never so much as catch a glimpse of them; but if black-tail exist they are far more commonly seen. The nature of their haunts, too, renders them much more easily approached. Out in the open country the hunter can advance far more noiselessly than in the woods, can take advantage of inequalities of ground for cover much more readily, and can also shoot at a longer distance; then, again, the black-tail, although with fully as keen senses as the white-tail, is put at a disadvantage in the struggle for life by his much greater curiosity. He has a habit, when alarmed, of almost invariably stopping, after having galloped a hundred yards or so, to stand still and look round at an object that has frightened him, and this pause gives the hunter time to make a successful shot. A black-tail is, on the other hand, more difficult to hit while running than is the case with the white-tail. The latter runs more as a horse does, with a succession of long bounds, going at a rolling or almost

even pace, while a black-tail progresses by a series of stiff-legged buck jumps, all four feet seeming as if they left the ground together. This gives him a most irregular and awkward-looking gait, but yet one which carries him along, for a short time, at a great speed, and which enables him to get over broken, craggy country in a manner that can only be surpassed by the astounding feats of the mountain sheep in similar localities.

Most of my plain shooting has been done after black-tail, and, indeed, I have killed nearly as many of them as of all other large game put together; but they are now pretty well thinned out from round the immediate neighborhood of my ranch, and if I wish to get them I generally have to take a wagon and make a general trip of two or three days' duration. There is no locality nearer than ten or twelve miles where they can really be considered at all plenty, and as the best time for hunting them is in the early morning or late evening, one should be able to camp out directly on or by the ground he intends to hunt over, if he wishes to be even moderately certain of success. At times, however, when the black-tail have gathered in bands of eight or ten or more individuals, they will wander away from their usual haunts, and then maybe put up in rather unexpected places. On one occasion, last fall, when I had walked eight or ten miles away from the ranch, preparatory to beginning an afternoon's hunt after white-tail, I unexpectedly came across such a small band. I had struck the trail that we follow with our wagon in going in toward the settlement when the river is too high to permit us to travel along the river bottom, and was walking quietly along it, following the faint scrapes made in the dry ground by the wagon wheels (for the trail is a blind one at best), when, as I came over the crest of a little hill, I saw a deer jump up out of a thicket, about two hundred yards off to one side of the trail, take two or three of the jumps so characteristic of the black-tail, and then turn around to look at me with his great ears thrown forward. In another second a dozen others also rose up and stood in a clump around him. I fired at them as they thus stood clustered together, and more by good luck than by anything else my bullet broke the back of a fine fat young doe.

Only twice last fall did I make a regular trip after black-tail; in each case taking one of my men, himself a very good hunter, with me, and camping out all night right by the ground through which we intended to search. On the first of these occasions I killed a young buck by the side of a shallow pool in a deep gorge, almost as afterwards my companion and I killed a doe and one well-grown fawn, as the result of an immense expenditure of cartridges. The doe and fawn were down in the bottom of a valley; we saw them as we were riding along the ridge above. They were in ground where it would have been almost impossible to have gotten near them, as almost the only piece of brush was that in which the two were standing; and as they both offered fair broadside marks, although at least four hundred yards off, we opened fire on them, I with a Winchester, my companion with a 40-90 Sharp's rifle. The deer, not seeing us, seemed to be perfectly confused by the firing and the echoes, and after each shot merely jumped a few paces and again stood still. I fired much more often than my companion, but without any success, and just as I had emptied my magazine he brought down the doe. The fawn then ran down the valley half a mile or so and entered a deep thicket, in which, after a somewhat careful stalk, I killed it. My companion was a really good shot, and he had

killed the doe fairly at about four hundred yards; but even for him to kill at such a distance as this is an exceptional feat, and almost invariably represents the expenditure of a large number of cartridges.

On our next hunt, however, he made one shot that was even better. We had, as before, camped out all night, and started off early in the morning through as rugged and precipitous a tract of country as could be found anywhere, the sheer cliffs, deep gorges, and towering ragged hills rendering the walking very difficult, and in some places even dangerous. Game was plenty, however, and during the course of the morning we killed five black-tail deer, three bucks and two does. One of these, a very fine buck with unusually large antlers and as fat as a prize sheep, I shot in a rather unusual locality. We had been following up three mountain sheep, which, however, having caught a glimpse of us, went off for good and were seen no more. The course led over and across a succession of knife-like ridges of rock and sandstone, separated by sheer narrow gorges of great depth, and with their sides almost overhanging. On coming to the edge of one of these, and, as usual, peering cautiously over, I was astonished to see a great buck lying out on a narrow ledge along the face of the cliff wall opposite; the gorge must have been at least a couple of hundred feet deep and less than one-half as much across. He was lying below, diagonally across from me, with his legs spread out and his head turned round so as to give me a fair shot for the center of his forehead, and as in the position where I was I could not be sure of killing him instantly with a bullet elsewhere, I fired between his eyes, and, beyond a convulsive motion of one of his hind legs, he did not move an inch out of the place where he was lying. So steep was the cliff, and so narrow the ledge where he had made his bed, that it was a long and really difficult climb before we could get to him, and it was then no mean labor to get him out unharmed to where we could dress him. The time when he was shot was near midday, and he had evidently chosen the cliff for the purpose of getting a regular sun-bath. It is a rare thing even for this bold and rock-loving species, however, to take its noonday siesta in such an exceedingly open place. The locality had probably not before been visited by hunters that season, and the deer had gotten very bold, as the result of being unmolested. Three of the other deer that were killed on this day were shot without any special or unusual incident attending their death; but the fifth represented another piece of good marksmanship on the part of my companion, whose name, by the way, was Will Dow. We were going back to camp, not intending to shoot anything more, but to fetch out the ponies in order to pack back to camp the game we had already gotten. While walking along a line of hills, bounding one side of a broad valley, we saw on the face of the steep bluff-side opposite two deer standing near a patch of cedars; owing to the difficulty of the intervening ground I was unable afterwards to pace off accurately the distance, a thing I usually do in the case of an unusually long shot; but it must certainly have been close upon 500 yards. We sat down and began to fire at them. With his fourth shot Dow apparently touched one, and both went off up the hill; immediately afterwards, however, another rose up from a thicket by which they went and stood looking around. We transferred our attention to this one; again I missed three or four times, and again my companion (thanks doubtless in part to his own superior skill, and in part also to the superior efficacy of his

weapon for long-range shooting), after having wasted two or three bullets, sent one ball home, breaking a hind leg, and, after a rather long and tedious chase, we succeeded in overtaking and killing the animal. As a rule, I may explain, I do not shoot at anything but bucks; but during the past season, when game had become so scarce, and when our entire supply of fresh meal depended upon our prowess with the rifle, it was no longer possible to choose what we would kill, and, after the first of September, when we could keep deer hanging up for a long time, we did not spare either buck or doe if we were able to get one within range of our rifles.