



Although not a yucca, this stump of a dead fir tree in Colorado shows how an inanimate object can look very much like a buck.

# RATTLESNAKES AND YUCCA BUCKS

Article by STEVE NELLE

**I**t was mid-December of 2013. I had Gus, my ten year old lab with me while working on some family land near Manor. In the middle of the small tract is the old Rose Hill Cemetery where my great-great-grandfather George Heinrich Nelle and his wife are buried along with other early German immigrants. The land surrounding the cemetery once had the Rose Hill schoolhouse and German Evangelical Lutheran Church. The nearby land had been farmed by my family for many years and the small Rose Hill Community prospered. During the early 1900s most families moved away and the buildings were dismantled. Over time the cemetery and surrounding land was neglected and become overgrown.

## GUS

December had already been an unusually cold month, and I figured that the snakes would be denned up for the winter. While I was working, Gus was exploring. About mid-afternoon, she came up to me limping and holding her right front leg off the ground. I could find no thorn and saw nothing abnormal, so I told her to go lay down where I could keep an eye on her. Because I thought that snakes would not be active in cold weather, I dismissed the possibility of a snake bite.

A short while later after closer examination, it became obvious that she had probably been bitten. Her upper chest was swollen

and oozing blood. A fast trip to the nearest vet confirmed my worst fears. There was nothing to do; the bite was too severe and too close to the heart. I watched Gus die as I held her in my lap, about two hours after being bitten. It was nearly dark by then. I dug a hole in the hard black clay and buried my dog and cried like a child. It was lonely that night and the next as I slept on the ground without my companion of ten years.

For the next few days as I worked to thin out the dense brush, I was more wary than ever of rattlesnakes and hated them more than ever. But it was December and I saw no snakes.

## MESQUITE

The following April I was back at Rose Hill again, continuing the campaign to reduce the excess mesquite. The pain of losing Gus had worn off but I still walked by her grave and spoke to her. My brother and I had been working to thin out the overgrown mesquite for the past year. After cutting the mesquite we would immediately spray the fresh cut stump with a mixture of diesel and Remedy to kill the root system. As a result, there were thousands of small and midsize mesquite limbs lying on the ground. As the grass grew up, the limbs were becoming partially hidden. Most limbs were about the same diameter as a good size rattler and the color and texture of the bark were similar enough to fool you at first glance. Your mind

can play tricks on you.

As we walked back and forth working, it seems that every other step had a limb. Some of them even seemed to move. The grass and weeds were still dry and walking on it made a sound that could be mistaken for a rattlesnake. I had my hearing aids turned up all the way hoping to hear any real snakes before stepping on them.

Then I saw the slight movement and heard the faint buzz, both in the same instant, a large snake less than two feet away partially hidden in the grass. You know the feeling. Even if you halfway expect it, the shock of the too-close encounter is surprising and revolting. I jumped away and muttered a few unrepeatable words. I had nothing to kill it with; but I did spray it with a good dose of diesel hoping to make it sick. The snake retreated out of sight into the thick underbrush. Was it the same snake that killed Gus?

Afterward, every mesquite limb seemed to resemble a snake. It makes it hard to concentrate on your work when you see snakes every few steps. My mind was playing tricks on me. Because I anticipated seeing snakes and because of recent memories, my mind saw snakes.

That's why people still see Elvis. Because they want to see Elvis, they see him. It's not just the kooks. We all tend to see things that we want to see or that our minds have been trained to see. Conversely, sometimes we refuse to see things that are evident – because we don't want to see them.

Likewise, in ranching, wildlife management and hunting, our minds can also play tricks on us. Making us believe

things that are not real. That is what ground shrink is all about. The massive 12 point, 20 inch buck becomes an ordinary 9 point, 16 inch buck after the bullet hits.

#### YUCCA BUCKS

Most Texas deer hunters have observed the mysterious yucca buck. Although this type of buck is commonly seen, few if any clear photos exist to prove its existence. It is most often spotted in the early light of dawn, near sunset or on foggy mornings. Yucca bucks usually blend in well with the surrounding brush, but sometimes they stand out in the open. These bucks almost always remain motionless for long periods. Sometimes the hunter swears that they move. The bucks are carefully observed through binoculars or scope, trying to judge whether the antlers are really as large as they appear. Only very seldom is one actually killed. They are elusive.

Even seasoned deer hunters are fooled by the yucca buck. Because the hunter expectantly anticipates or dreams of seeing a huge-antlered buck, his or her mind is programmed to see one. Anything that even faintly resembles the shape of a deer or the silhouette of antlers gets our immediate attention. Once we finally figure out that it's just a crooked old Spanish dagger, we feel foolish.

#### OTHER EXAMPLES

Many hunters still kill yearling spikes under the belief that it will improve genetics. They have been told and want to believe that they can improve the antlers in future generations by culling out young spikes, even under free range conditions. After several years of culling, the hunters are convinced they notice an improvement

in buck quality – because they think it should improve. Even though the harvest records do not reveal any change, yet they continue to kill spikes.

For decades range managers and ranchers have declared that mesquite and cedar are depleting aquifers and drying up springs and creeks. That belief prompted the assumption that widespread brush control would restore the state's dwindling water supplies. Government agencies spent millions in support of that assumption. It was easy to believe and there were anecdotal accounts that seemed to support the assumption. But sadly we often hold on to threads of evidence, no matter how weak, that supports our opinion, and ignore stronger evidence and hard data that refutes it. It is human nature to want to be right; but wishful thinking and strong opinion does not make spikes flow again.

Fire is another example. Those who over-promote prescribed burning only see the positive effects of fire. Their eagerness to advance the use of burning does not allow them to see the negative effects. Even if bare ground, erosion and other problems are clearly evident, they do not see it because they do not want to acknowledge something different from their dogma. The same can be true of those who over-promote various mechanical practices, herbicide treatments, grazing systems or the latest improved grass. Every tool or technique we use as land managers can have both positive benefits and negative side effects. The astute land manager forces himself to see both sides, looking past the hype and evaluating everything with strict



Photos by Steve Nalle

At first glance, a mesquite limb can look enough like a rattlesnake, to startle even the most experienced. Even when outdoorsmen are on vigilant lookout for snakes, one can still be surprised by a too close encounter. Afterward, *everything* looks like a snake.



and ruthless judgment.

It requires a brutally disciplined mind to be able to see things as they are rather than the way we wish. This involves the practice of critical thinking and forces us to lay aside bias, tradition and emotional attachment to the issue. It is difficult to do.

**CONFIRMATION BIAS**

This inclination to see what we want to see is called confirmation bias. It is the tendency to search for and interpret observations and information in a way that confirms what we already believe. The effect is stronger for emotionally charged issues and for deeply held beliefs and traditions. Confirmation bias creates overconfidence in personal beliefs and can even strengthen beliefs despite evidence to the contrary.

Scientists are also guilty, although like the rest of us, they are reluctant to admit it. There is often a preferred and anticipated outcome to research and it is uncanny how frequently the outcome matches the expectation. Several years ago, this desire for data to match expectations

apparently drove climate change scientists to fraudulently fabricate or alter data. They made the data match what they wanted to be true. However, in most cases, it is not blatant dishonesty, but unconscious biases that direct the mind to see what is expected.

Confirmation bias is not a new discovery. In 1620, English scientist and philosopher Francis Bacon noted, "The human understanding, when it has once adopted an opinion . . . draws all things else to support and agree with it. And though there be a greater number and weight of evidence to be found on the other side, yet these it neglects, despises, or rejects."

In 1899, Leo Tolstoy observed that "the simplest thing cannot be made clear to the most intelligent man if he is firmly persuaded that he knows already, without a shadow of doubt, what is laid before him."

The practical application of these truths is easy to see but difficult to implement. First, we can all admit that we are guilty of this bias to some extent. This admission can motivate us to be hard on our own

opinions. By scrutinizing our own beliefs and being open to differing and opposing perspectives, we can come closer to discovering real answers. Secondly, we can acknowledge that in the complex world of land and wildlife management, nearly everyone else also has biases that dictate and drive nearly everything. We should be cautiously suspicious of nearly everything and if it seems too good, we should be even more suspicious. If something goes against your training, your logic, your experience or your instincts, question it severely; but then also question your own position.

TWA is an organization with great diversity of opinion on nearly everything. It is part of what makes us a strong, effective and dynamic association. Although the absolute final truth on just about any subject is elusive, and even though the "right answers" may change over time, the search for the best possible solution is vital. It doesn't necessarily mean a compromise; it does mean working hard to find tough answers to difficult issues. 🍷



How could a common yucca be mistaken for a buck? Just ask any deer hunter. Most longtime deer hunters have been fooled by a gnarly old Spanish dagger under faint light, thinking it may be the buck of their dreams.

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