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How Georgia Became the No.1 Trophy Deer State in the South

October 2022

By Jon Kohler, JD Broker / Partner – from “The Kohler Chronicles”

Florida and Georgia have a competitive relationship whether it's the “Georgia / Florida football game” or the “Florida / Georgia football game” or, in my world as a land broker, the competition between which state can claim the best hunting lands. In my observation, that boils down to two points of contention: one state claims world-class trophy bass and the other, the largest trophy Whitetails in the South. Not all that long ago, the deer in both states were about equal. However, the backstory of how Georgia got its trophy deer is a classic case of atonement and redemption.

Floridians can take pride in knowing that the “Florida Strain” largemouth bass is the no.1 trophy bass genetic in the world – not just the Southeast, the world. This strain holds several world records, with one of the record strains harvested in Southwest Georgia in 1932. The strain was even transplanted to Japan, which holds the current world record caught in 2009. Both these fish weighed in over 22 lbs. However, new research has now shown that the “Florida strain” naturally extends up into Southwest Georgia. I guess it's too late to call it the “Florida / Georgia Strain” so perhaps like an undeserved score in college football, it's still on the board for Florida.

However lucky Florida is in getting its name on the best bass genetic in the world, it may be just as unlucky with the Whitetail genetic, of which today's Georgia dominates. Hands down. Headlines like “Florida-strained bass changed the world of bass fishing” have never been said about Florida's deer.

More B&C Whitetails have come from Georgia than any other Southern state and that number grows every year. Georgia currently has 95 all-time B&C entries. I personally have clients who no longer enter the registry over privacy concerns, so the actual number is even higher than the recorded count.

Meanwhile, Florida has only six sporadic B&C entries. However, like bass, a lot of places in Florida and Georgia historically share a similar natural Whitetail genetic. Given the choice of harvesting a 170-inch buck or a 15 lb. bass, I'm going with the buck 100% . . . so what happened to Florida?

For most of its history, Florida had better success in protecting the deer herd, and ironically that's what set it back. It's not as if our Florida genetic is “pure” like say the Coues Deer subspecies in Texas. In most of Florida, like the rest of the South, deer of all types have been brought in from other regions to restock over-harvested populations. Aside



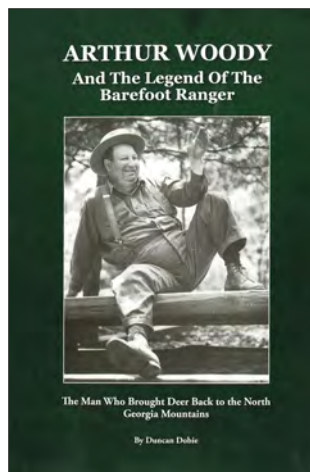
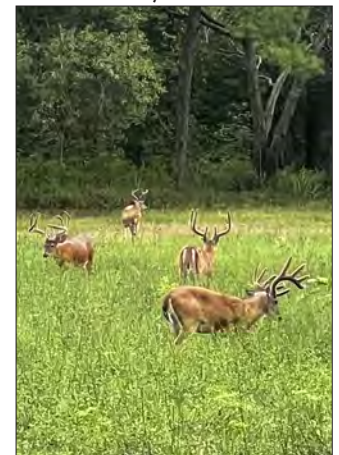
from a few places like Georgia's coastal islands or South Florida, most everywhere else has outside genetics.

A dollar bill first got the nickname a “buck” because a deer hide was worth one dollar. At a buck a piece (and without the wild lands of Florida) it didn't take long for deer to become extinct in most of Georgia. Thus, when improved deer were brought into Georgia, the genetics were not diluted.

Generations of Georgians grew up never seeing a deer and for a while, there was almost no culture of deer hunting. The credit for who started the spark for what is now Southwest Georgia's pride is given to one person. One would think that across Georgia that person's name would be more famous than Ohio's own Johnny Appleseed. Both made a difference. Georgia has its own Ranger Arthur Woody to thank, the year would be 1927 and one couldn't find a more likable person. He was Georgia's second Forest Ranger. He had his hand in early fire, wild turkey restocking, virgin forests, trout stocking, lake building, and he loved the mountain people and God.

Even his dad's name “Abraham Lincoln Woody” sounds like a name in a script from a John Wayne movie. In my business, I know the reason most folks buy recreational land is that, when they were at an impressionable young age, they saw someone they admired working or enjoying the land and a spark was started. I call it developing a reverence. Legend has it that 11-year-old Woody was out on a deer hunt when his dad shot a monster buck. He was told that was the last big buck and he would never see another. At that very moment, that spark started and would burn for the rest of his life, almost unknowingly hypnotizing him. His life's goal was to see to it that this wouldn't be Georgia's last big buck. He started with two circus bucks from Wisconsin and grabbed five doe fawns from North Carolina. Back then, you didn't go to prison for transporting live deer across state lines.

He started releasing his deer in what would later become the first WMA and the released deer quickly grew to an estimated 2,000. With almost zero predators, his timing couldn't have been better. Bears were long gone. Georgia's last Red Wolf (the no. 1 deer predator) was shot near the Okefenokee in 1908, twenty years earlier. It would be another 43 years before the first coyote took advantage of the void. By 1958, the screw worm was eradicated. EHD wouldn't be widespread until the early 1970's



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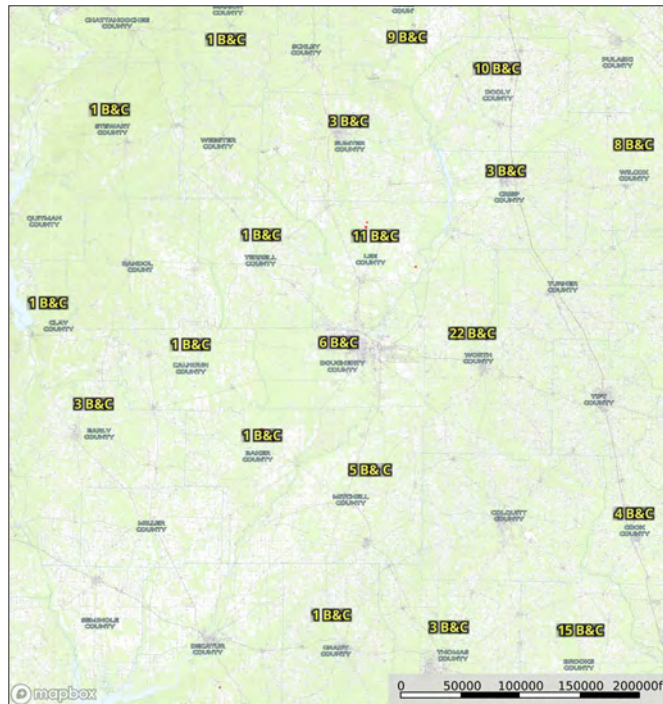
leaving neither major predator nor disease.

The early lack of sophistication, backed by country ingenuity, is precisely why today some Georgia counties have the genetics to consistently produce B&C record book bucks and some don't. Other than Woody's "Blue Ridge herd," deer were extinct throughout Georgia except in the hard-to-reach Coastal islands. Catching deer is not easy. They tried using dogs to chase deer across salt marshes into nets. They tried box traps. The Director of the Wildlife Resources Division, Jack Crockford, personally developed the dart gun! After much effort, it was determined that most of this was too difficult and costly in man-hours. Of the 3,471 deer stocked 1,819 were trapped from Georgia's coastal islands before they called that quits. Later, Crockford determined that it made more sense to simply buy the deer. In 1960, using "Pittman Robertson" money, they paid \$35 a head for readily available Texas or Wisconsin deer. It was a deal. That's when Southwest Georgia really got lucky.

Texas deer were thought to carry screw worms, which couldn't survive the cold of North Georgia, so they were sent north as a precaution. Therefore, SW Georgia got the best genetics, those from Babcock, Wisconsin. In what would amount to the financial "investment of the century" Southwest Georgia landowners joined in too, in the form of the Worth County Wildlife Club. Their 124 "Babcock" deer would later catapult Worth and surrounding counties into a 2022 deer hunting land boom. Can you imagine going back in time and trying to exclaim to them that in the future we would be consistently selling top deer hunting land at values close to or even exceeding irrigated farmland values?

One can quickly look at today's top B&C counties and see pretty much exactly where the Wisconsin deer were initially released 60 years ago. Worth County is in the middle of it all, so are the land values. They had no way to comprehend the massive financial benefits of their conservation efforts.

The superior genetics combined with Georgia's fertile soils and cropland gave the deer the nutrition to reach their full potential. Additionally, the hunting culture started anew, this time respecting age and size over quantity. Thus, unlike in many areas, hunters in SW Georgia grew up knowing the benefits of



letting them go so they can grow. When one harvests a 341 lb. buck in Dooley County or harvests a 170-inch monster, (like several of our clients have), that's something special.

Genetics is the only one of the three central tenants that landowners couldn't control. I credit solving nutrition and age to one of Georgia's most famous visionaries, David Morris. Like Woody, David has not only an unbridled passion for deer, but he also loves Jesus, and with that comes a love for sharing with others. Just as a good disciple, David knows how to spread the word. Hunters across the South took notice.

David spent years managing and studying deer in the famed 12,000-acre Burnt Pine Plantation where he oversaw the harvest of 2,000 deer. Many people are

curious, and many are observers, but finding someone that could be both and develop new conclusions or "rules" is rare. David is that person for mature Whitetails. He literally wrote the original rule book on "Hunting Trophy Whitetails." He published the no. 1 deer magazine, "North American Whitetail," that shared his rules on the secrets to nutrition and age. He went on to pioneer an entirely new way to grow and manage Whitetails through his brand Tecomate. His TV Show "Bucks of Tecomate" is still one of the top hunting shows out there.

With David Morris, along with fellow Georgians Dr. Larry Marchinton and Dr. Karl Miller, preaching that we could consistently grow big bucks if we had 1) nutrition 2) age, and 3) genetics - Southwest Georgia could now have it all. Sportsmen have finely honed the skills of raising mature Whitetails to the maximum of their ability. Today, while the Florida Strain Largemouth bass can be stocked about anywhere, the same simply does not hold true for deer. What's done is done. What was once the worst of wildlife sins - the local extinction of a species - has certainly been atoned for. The redemption of which turned Georgia into a trophy deer hunting paradise in ways it never had been before. This may seem like the end of the debate, except that today's Florida landowner's have their own

"Ace in the hole." You see on Florida's private land's, unlike Georgia, many are able to get permits to breed and develop one's own genetically improved herd, using today's latest science. These deer are bigger than anything that ever came out of Wisconsin, but that's a story for another day . . .

