



GEORGIA:

PEACH STATE GIANT

Cory Croft's 196-inch Georgia buck showcases his hunting club's management goals. ■ by Scott Bestul

PHOTOS BY CORY CROFT



■ After a disappointing archery encounter, Croft made good on a second chance with the buck during the firearms season.

It's not often a Georgia hunter gets a crack at a 190-class whitetail, but Cory Croft actually had two chances at a giant buck in the same season. Croft wounded the buck during an early-season archery hunt but killed the deer while hunting the rut with his rifle. Even better, Croft, who manages a prime tract of whitetail ground, had a three-year relationship with the Peach State monster.

THE CAMPAIGN

Croft was first aware of the buck during the 2019 season.

"He was a 150-class 3-½-year-old that year," he said. "That's a great buck, but on this property, we manage for 5-½-year-old bucks, so he was off-limits that year."

Croft, a certified wildlife biologist and owner of Veritas Wildlife Management Services, was running cameras in November when he got the first pics of the deer.

"He hung around for a couple of weeks but then disappeared," he said. "We're good friends with the neighboring property owners, and when I was talking with them that fall, it turned out that they'd had pics of the buck during the summer, 2-½ miles away. So, he was doing some traveling to hit both properties, but I figured if the buck wanted to summer on them and come to us in the fall, we were getting the better part of that deal."

With high hopes for the 2020 season, Croft scanned camera after camera for the buck, only to be disappointed.

"He just disappeared from our property that fall, and I run a lot of cameras in a grid pattern survey that's pretty intensive," he said. "I can't say I get every buck, but I don't miss many. When I checked with the neighbors, they had the same report: The buck was just a no-show. So, we figured something bad had happened. With that much distance separating our properties, it wasn't hard to imagine."

RENEWED HOPE

But when the 2021 season arrived, Croft was in for a pleasant surprise.

"One day, I got a text from the neighbor that just said, 'He's back,' and I knew exactly which deer he was talking about," Croft said. "And just like before, the buck left them in summer and came to our place in the fall, just in time for the archery opener."

Croft hunted the buck, which had blown

up into a true giant, several times during the first weeks of bow season.

"We have 120 acres of food plots on the property, with lots of Whitetail Institute Clover, Whitetail Forage Oats and other varieties, and he was hitting those pretty hard," he said.

Finally, Croft saw the buck during a hastily assembled bowhunt.

"After being busy for a while, I finally had an afternoon to hunt, but as I got my stuff together, I couldn't find my release anywhere," he said. "I had no choice but to run to the store and buy one. I came home and shot it a few times, but really didn't have time to tune it very well. That came back to bite me when I finally went out for the hunt."

Croft saw the monster buck that afternoon.

"He actually came out and walked to within 20 yards," he said. "I needed him to take two steps so I could get a shot at his vitals. Suddenly, a coyote came from behind him and spooked the buck, and he ran out to about 80 yards. Then the coyote ran all the deer off the plot and trotted over toward me. I decided not to shoot him because there were 90 minutes of shooting light left, and I thought I still might have a chance.

So, I spooked the coyote, and sure enough, 20 minutes went by, and the buck came back out to the plot, but this time at 60 yards. He fed for a while and disappeared, and I figured, 'Well, that's it for tonight.' Then suddenly, just at prime time, he came back out and stood at 22 yards. I drew and was settling in, and that's when not knowing that release hurt; I just barely touched it, and it went off before I was ready. I watched in shock as my arrow hit the buck square in the shoulder. I shoot 70 pounds, but I had almost zero penetration and found very little blood."

THE ROLLERCOASTER

Although obviously upset about wounding the buck, Croft got some good news from the neighbor.

"I called to tell him about the hunt and to keep an eye out for the buck," he said. "He told me that he had the buck on camera at 3 a.m., just hours after I'd hit him. I was relieved to know he was alive but obviously disappointed that I hadn't been able to make a clean kill when I had my chance."

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■ Croft's Georgia buck was a main-frame 10-pointer with matching forked G2s and G3s. With 18 scorable points, it grossed 196 inches.

Croft figured his big opportunity at the buck was gone, and the old whitetail would likely avoid the property where he'd been hurt.

"Then for some reason, the buck came back to us in November," he said. "I was still hunting with the bow, as the rut was starting to build. I saw the buck several times, but he was always out of range. Finally, I decided I'd start taking the rifle.

"On the morning of Nov. 12, it was very foggy, and as it got light, I could see a couple of bucks bowed up over a doe. As I watched them through my binocular, I spotted the big one in the background, bedded. He'd been there the whole time. One of the smaller bucks, a 3-½-year-old, started walking toward me, and I thought, 'This is perfect,' and sure enough, the big one stood up to follow, and while he was standing in some tall grass, I had a good shot to his vitals.

When I pulled the trigger, he bucked and ran, and then quickly disappeared. I felt like the shot was good and, sure enough, he had only run about 10 yards."

Obviously thrilled to get a second chance at a buck of a lifetime, Croft was pleased for another reason.

"The buck was not doing well after the arrow wound," he said. "He'd lost a lot of weight, and it didn't seem like he was participating in the rut. He might have recovered, but you never know, so I was really happy to get another chance."

Croft's Peach State monster was a main-frame 10-pointer with matching forked G2s and G3s. With 18 scorable points, the Georgia giant grossed 196 inches B&C.

"It's a buck of a lifetime most anywhere, I guess," Croft said. "But a truly special whitetail in Georgia."

NEXT-LEVEL MANAGEMENT

A 196-inch buck taken anywhere can be something of a lightning strike, but the management plan Croft oversees seemed destined to produce such a giant.

"I've been managing this property since 2014," he said. "We have a group of eight like-minded hunters who are serious about whitetail management and are fortunate to have some good neighbors who largely think the same."

The Georgia property covers 7,000 contiguous acres, 120 acres of which is devoted to food plots. "One of our biggest hurdles is poor soil," Croft said. "We've got plenty of that red clay, and it's not unusual for our pH to start off at 4.8 to 5.2 on many of our plots. So, it takes a good bit of lime to get that soil built up to acceptable levels. Although it's something we commit to every year, it's

a constant process you can never let up on. While we plant beans as a summer crop in some plots, the cornerstone of our program is Whitetail Institute Clover, Fusion and Whitetail Forage Oats. Those have been some of my favorites since the beginning.”

In addition to supplying ample food, Croft manages habitat on the property.

“This is as critical as food plots when it comes to keeping deer feeling safe and secure, as well as providing natural food sources,” he said. “Timber management, as well as prescribed burns, are an integral and ongoing part of our management plan.”

CAMERA SURVEYS: KEEPING COUNT

One of the most important steps in developing a management plan for a property is assessing the deer herd. Croft accomplishes that via annual trail camera surveys designed to identify buck-to-doe ratios and fawn recruitment, as well as nailing down the number of bucks — and their ages — on the lease.

“We conduct our first camera survey in the summer, typically in August,” he said. “This is accomplished by placing one camera per 100 acres, each situated over a site baited with whole-kernel corn. Each camera is placed on a five-minute delay and is left on the baited site for three weeks. We typically get over 1,000 pictures per camera during this survey.”

After the survey is complete, Croft goes through every picture and identifies bucks and estimates their ages.

“Once we have all the bucks identified and aged, we create a hardcover book that contains at least one photo of every buck on the property and his age,” he said. “Lease members can then study the book and become familiar with bucks that are eligible for harvest as they go into the hunting season. Aging bucks on the hoof, especially during a hunting situation, can be very difficult, even for a veteran hunter. The book takes a lot of the guess-work out of the process and allows our hunters to spot a buck from a stand or blind and know exactly the deer they’re looking at.”

HUNTER INFO: SEASON-LONG DATA

Not surprisingly, the group’s approach



■ Croft’s buck seemingly disappeared during 2020 but showed up again in 2021, just in time for the archery opener.

to hunting the property is anything but haphazard.

“We actually have the entire property divided into 10-acre grid sections,” Croft said. “We color-code each grid on a map and record the number of hours each grid is hunted and, of course, the deer seen on each hunt. I’m always reminding the guys to be mindful of their approach to and exit from each stand or blind, in terms of the noise they create as they travel, but also the wind direction. Deer literally live and die by their noses, and they pattern us more quickly than we pattern them. We do our very best to not hunt a spot unless the wind is perfect for that area.”

When deer are harvested, the data-mining continues, according to Croft.

“We record body weight on every deer, and we pull a jaw bone for tooth-wear aging, and that goes for does as well as bucks,” he said. “It’s just as important to monitor the health of your does as the antlered deer, as they’re obviously half of the management equation.”

Croft described the annual buck harvest on the tract as “relatively light,” with an emphasis on killing antlerless deer.

“We adjust our harvest goals according to what our trail cam surveys reveal about population and age structure,” he said. “In an average fall, we’ll take 75 does and only 15 to 18 bucks, and we’ve kept that basic ratio for many years. That’s resulted in a buck-to-doe ratio that’s close to 1-1. Although you hear a lot of guys or clubs claiming they want as many does as possible on their property so bucks will hang around, they’re really hurting themselves with a highly skewed

buck-to-doe ratio.

“With an unbalanced buck-to-doe ratio, the rut you experience is far less dramatic and exciting, as bucks simply don’t have to work very hard to find a doe. When you hear guys talking about a trickle rut — one that doesn’t exhibit a lot of buck activity — that’s usually what’s happening. Conversely, we have a pretty amazing rut hunt here. You’ll see chasing and fighting, and hear grunting and snort-wheezing. It’s the kind of rut hunting lots of guys travel to Iowa or Kansas or Texas to experience, and we have it right here at home.”

HARD WORK MEANS POSITIVE RESULTS

Obviously, producing a 196-inch 5-½-year-old buck is not going to happen every year, even on the best-managed tracts. But Croft insists his incredible 2021 buck is proof that the process is worth it.

“We just have so much fun doing the hard work, and the bucks we harvest are the benefit,” he said. “The property has produced multiple bucks in the 170s and 180s, and my personal best before this buck was a 177-inch bow kill. We have a great group of guys who’ve bought into the management plan and enjoy working hard to do everything we can to provide everything a whitetail could need on the place. It’s a long-term effort that brings us all a lot of fun and satisfaction.”