



The “Big 6” taught these Michigan hunters that sharing information about bucks in the neighborhood, rather than keeping quiet, was much to the mutual advantage of everyone involved.

THE BUCK THAT BROUGHT NEIGHBORS Together

By Jim Brauker

When my neighbor Lucas Kennard saw his first trail-camera photo of the “Big 6,” he spoke out loud his first thought: “Whoa!”

The view of the deer walking through a brassica plot in velvet (right) revealed a tall, narrow, 6-point rack with curling brow tines estimated to be about 8 inches long.

A few days after Luke retrieved this picture, I called him up.

“Do you have pictures of *that* 6-point?” I asked.

No other description was necessary. Luke knew which buck I was talking about, and our conversation that day led



to a meeting with about six of our fellow neighbors who are members of the Bean Creek QDM Cooperative in southern Michigan. This was in September 2013, and with hunting season approaching we gathered to share trail-camera pictures, including a picture of the Big 6 in velvet from the summer of 2012 (lower left) – head down, wide shoulders, displaying the oddly shaped, sweeping brow tines which almost met in the center.

Our Cooperative has been in place since 2009. Fellow QDMA member Jake Ehlinger and I started it in the spring of that year by going around and knocking on

doors of neighbors and holding educational meetings that were attended by as many as 30 landowners. Several years went by, and things were not improving much. This new meeting just before the 2013 archery season was an acknowledgement that in our area we were a Mini-Cooperative amounting to six hunters with contiguous properties making up about 380 acres. The area has superb habitat, which I believe is a major factor allowing us to support several mature bucks on a relatively small area. A buck can travel for 1.6 miles without leaving heavy cover, crossing a road, or leaving three properties that are protecting immature bucks.

At that first session in 2013, Luke and I both saw pictures of deer we'd never seen before. We went from thinking there were only one or two shooters on our properties to knowing there were at least three or four, and they were likely using both of our properties and those of our neighbors.

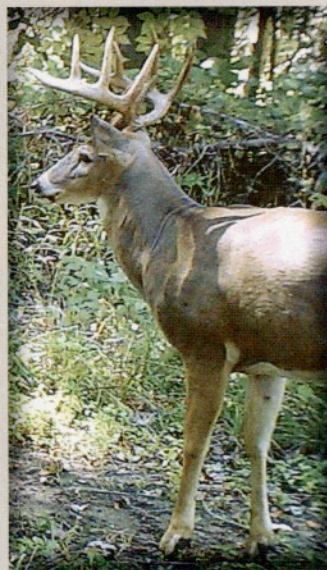
"Deer that I was initially thinking, 'Yeah, I would shoot that,' automatically became a hard 'No' because of the bigger deer the neighbors had on their cameras," Luke said.

As the 2013 season progressed, none of us actually laid eyes on the Big 6, but we had many pictures, including one taken on November 9.

"Seventeen minutes after I pulled that card, the Big 6 walked by that same camera, and while I know it's not possible, I would swear he had a smile on his face as he strolled by my camera," Luke said.

Exactly 4 hours and 10 minutes after the Big 6 passed Luke's camera, and about 300 yards to the south, I had an encounter with a buck that would become known as the "Other 10" (right). If I had been paying more attention to him instead of fussing with my camera, I might have shot him. Instead, fate would lead him to be one of our target bucks during the 2014 season, as he survived and grew into a very robust specimen of a 4½-year-old buck.

On December 1, sitting in my stand with my crossbow, I saw the Big 6 in the flesh for the first time, just before dark.



The "Other 10" in September 2014.

I had been rewarded the night before with a picture of the Big 6 in a text from my trail-camera, in the last 45 minutes of the firearms season, standing only 40 yards from this stand. Thrilled that he had survived and was hanging out on my land in daylight, I hunted that area hard for the next several days but did not see him again until Christmas Eve. For the first time, he showed up in broad daylight about 80 yards west of me. Here I sat, looking at the Big 6, watching him work a licking branch and slowly shuffle his way toward a doe and fawn heading in my direction.

When the doe was about 40 yards out, she was straight downwind. It is rare for a deer to detect me from that distance given my extreme scent-control measures, but she did. She stopped, raised her head, sniffed the air, and stiffened her posture. He wheeled and ran full speed to the south and the safety of the woods. He read her body language, sensed she had smelled something he wouldn't like, and his first instinct was to just escape as fast as he could – while she spent another five minutes sniffing and posturing and working her way closer to investigate. A mere 30 minutes later, he had circled to the north and showed up on Luke's trail-camera.

The 2014 Season

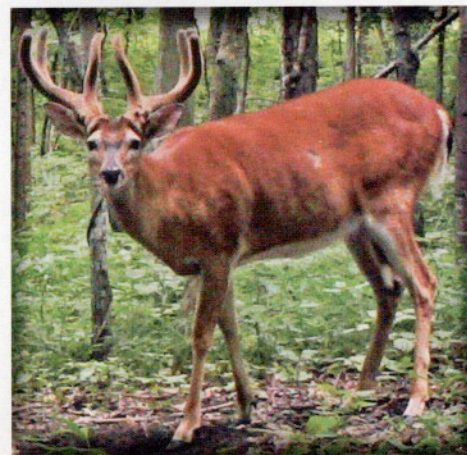
In July, Luke got his first 2014 picture of the Big 6, and man was he big (upper right of page). What was Luke's first instinct? He called me.

"Guess who I got a picture of?"

I simply said, "Send me a picture please." I didn't have to ask who it was.

He was sporting a wider, taller rack, a distended belly from a summer of living large, a thick, muscular chest and front shoulders, a neck that, though not swollen for the rut yet, arced all the way down to his briscket, and Schwarzenegger haunches. He looked like a big cardboard box perched atop toothpick legs. He stared at the camera as if to say, "Come and get me, boys."

On October 22, I called Luke and he did not answer. I would later find out that when his



phone vibrated, Luke was at full draw and waiting for the Big 6, standing 18 yards away from him, to step forward. Luke drew his bow three different times as the Big 6 paced around below him for 10 minutes. Each of the first two times Luke drew the bow, he reached a point where he could no longer physically hold the bow back and had to let up, each time fearing that the movement would send the Big 6 bounding away, and each time relieved to see that the giant buck was unaware of his presence.

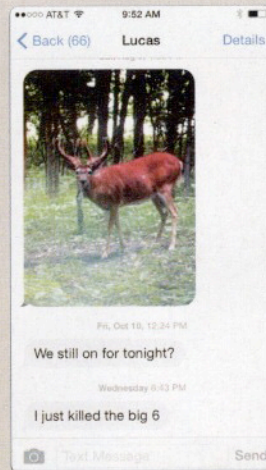
The deer presented several shots, but none were quite good enough. Small twigs were in the way, or the body position was not right.

"That was torture," Luke told me later, "but I knew I couldn't chance a bad shot. This deer deserved better, and I would never forgive myself if I made a bad shot. Plus, I'm pretty sure you would kill me."

The third time drawing the bow was the charm, as the Big 6 stepped into the clear and Luke released. He watched the 263-lb. buck crash away through the brush. After giving the deer some time, Luke found the Big 6 dead only 60 yards from where he was shot.

My phone buzzed with a text message. "I just killed the Big 6."

A chill of excitement ran up my spine. The Big 6 was killed by a guy who had



never laid eyes on him in the wild but who knew him intimately, who had worked for him and dreamed of him. He was not killed by some guy with a shotgun sitting on a bucket behind the barn. He was killed by an archer who worked hard on his craft.

I got to hear the story of the hunt and lay hands on the Big 6 later that night with a jubilant group of guys. The next day, I posted on Facebook that this was the greatest day of my deer-hunting life even though I had not gone hunting. To share in Luke's celebration was affirmation of the hard work by the members of our local Cooperative. Surely someone in our Cooperative had passed this buck when he was a yearling. Members of the core group gathered at my house a few days later, admired the rack, looked at pictures and videos, and discussed who else was left out there. There was the Other 10, of course. Luke told me that now that he had killed the Big 6, he was going to pass the Other 10 and two beautiful 8-point bucks, Curves In and Curves Out, that could only be distinguished by the curve of their brow tines. He vowed to only kill another buck if it was a monster. He told me he wanted me to shoot the Other 10. We were no longer just friendly neighbors but were friends, each rooting for the other to succeed.

Eight days later, I watched the Other



One of Luke's photos of the Other 10 in a three-day, late-October series showing the buck moving during daylight toward Jim's 40 acres. Luke shared the information with Jim, who chose an appropriate stand location for November 2.



The author with The Stranger, a 242-lb. buck that green-scored 153 inches, taken on November 2, 2014 on his 40 acres. That same day, two other friends in nearby counties took mature bucks on their small properties.

10 work a licking branch and scrape right at dusk, but at 60 yards he was out of range. On November 1, I learned that for the previous three days in a row Luke had gotten pictures of him at around 10:30 in the morning, angling toward my property. I made plans to be in my favorite stand, called the Giant Oak, the next morning.

I never got a chance to see the Other 10 that day. Instead, an unfamiliar buck appeared following a doe 13 yards to my left. Five seconds later I had put an arrow through his lungs. I watched him run for 21 seconds and fall in a grassy field. As I turned the video camera to capture my own smile, staring out toward the field where he fell I saw one of the curved 8-points – either Curved In or Curved Out – walking about 40 yards beyond where the buck fell. Indeed, the hunting was improving.

I had never seen "The Stranger" before, and 30 minutes later Luke and I stood in wonderment looking at a magnificent specimen of a whitetail. He would green score 153 inches as an 8-point, due mainly to the huge mass, and weigh in at 242 pounds, just 21 pounds lighter than the Big 6.

As we stood over The Stranger, I thought of the Other 10 and the sacrifice

Luke had been willing to make for the me.

"Is the Other 10 back on the table now?" I asked.

Standing in the glow of our combined success and the overpowering smell of The Stranger's tarsal glands, we agreed that neither one of us would be the ones to kill the Other 10 this year. We also removed the two Curved 8s as targets. We would let these and any other promising candidates pass. If our neighbors shoot them, fine, that would only strengthen the resolve of the Cooperative and the potential that things could improve further.

Five days later, my phone vibrated and there was a fuzzy picture of the Other 10 standing only 12 yards from Luke with the message "Sooooo hard not to drop. Beautiful deer." He stood there in broad daylight in all his glory, wearing

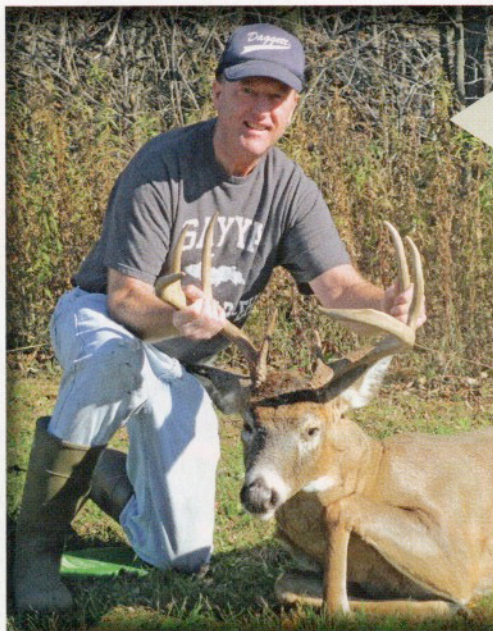


muddy black socks from crossing the creek on our property line.

We had come to realize it would be a good thing for the Cooperative if one of our neighbors shot the Other 10.

Sharing and Trust

Our experience with the Big 6 changed us. Because of him, Luke and I began to take some risks with the information we each possessed. We shared information with each other and with other neighbors because we knew there was something out there worth taking a risk for. Because we were openly discussing



what we did and did not intend to shoot, our veracity and integrity depended on following through, which led to increased trust and increased sharing.

In our neighborhood in southern Michigan, the landscape is peppered with small properties, most of which have sev-

The Importance of Habitat

I don't want to mislead readers into thinking that QDM success on small acreage is all about cooperation. We own parts of the best bedding area in a square mile and put a lot of time into making sure that habitat is in as good a condition as possible. No matter how much neighbors cooperate, if they don't also have quality habitat, their chances of seeing quality bucks are diminished.

As if to prove this point, the stars aligned the day I killed The Stranger. On that day, two of my closest friends and habitat-management mentors also killed mature bucks. I work every year on habitat projects with both of these guys, trading days on their property and mine. All three of us have small properties, we all maintain superb habitat, and we all scored on November 2.

While I was dragging my buck with Luke's help, I received a text from Mike Hartges (left), who killed a big 8-point on his 59-acre Hillsdale County property. In the afternoon, Jake Ehlinger (below) came over and helped me hang and gut my deer, and then he went out in the evening and killed a 225-lb. 10-point on his 67-acre Lenawee County property.

Altogether, it was a red-letter day for my close friends and me. Even though they are not part of a large, contiguous group of neighbors, they make up for it by creating the kind of habitat big bucks love. Taken together, the events surrounding the killing of the Big 6, the Stranger, and Mike and Jake's deer prove that if you combine restraint and great habitat, you can kill mature bucks on small properties.



eral hunters on them. Historically, the existence of older deer has been rare. If you think of each hunter as a player in a game, the outcome of the game depends on the decisions they make. The prevailing strategy in my neighborhood for many decades has been to shoot the first buck you see, because if you don't shoot it, the neighbors will. Thus, your immediate interest is satisfied by shooting first and asking questions later, but the long-term interests of you and everyone else playing the game are diminished. In game theory – the study of strategic decision-making – this is an example of a non-cooperative game.

But what happens when you find out that your neighbor is making different decisions? Suppose you find out your neighbor is passing bucks because he feels it would be in both your interests if those bucks live another year? Suppose the neighbor proved to you that he is passing those bucks by showing you photographs and video of the deer walking past his stand, or other mature deer you may not know existed. Might you act differently once you know his strategy has changed? We did, but we went further than that.

We came to believe that sharing everything we know about the bucks in the neighborhood is in our own long-term best interest. The deer in our neighborhood are not limited by anything except the choices made by hunters. If we can have one or two bucks around like these every year, why not four or five, or more? Keeping the ones we know about secret will not help to change the culture in our neighborhood.

Letting people know what is out there (if they are willing to wait for it) may very well change the game, turning it into a cooperative game that benefits everyone maximally. If every neighbor gets a chance to shoot a buck like Luke and I did this year, we think they will be more likely to show restraint in later years. Only time will tell, but I believe our future is bright.

About the Author: Dr. Jim Brauker of Michigan is a QDMA member and owner of Extreme Deer Habitat, a website devoted to teaching land management techniques for small-property owners. He is a certified Property Inspector for QDMA, a Level II QDMA Deer Steward and author of the book "Extreme Deer Habitat." He has been a featured speaker at multiple QDMA Branch events and National Conventions. Find him at extremedeerhabitat.com.