

Bowhunting WORLD

★ WE TEST: ELITE ETHOS

BIG WOODS WHITETAILS

HUNT WHERE THE ONLY COMPETITION MIGHT BE WOLVES

GAME ON! THE RUT ISSUE

- SMALL PROPERTY PAYDAY
- WHAT RUBS AND SCRAPES MEAN
- LEARN HOW TO SHOOT FAST

PRIMETIME REALITY CHECK

CONSIDER SEVERAL FACTORS AS THE RUT APPROACHES

3 KEYS TO DECOYING DEER

LATE-SEASON DEER

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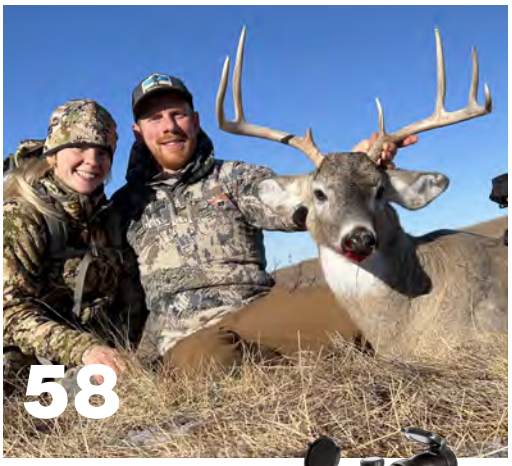
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Take the First Good Shot?

Many successful, experienced bowhunters believe in the maxim, "Take the first good shot." Not me — here's why.

BY DAVE MAAS

As the leaves change color and then drop this deer season, it'll mark my 45th autumn in pursuit of whitetails with archery gear. Through the decades, I've used everything from the most basic recurves (no sights) to high-tech compounds and crossbows, the latter topped with scopes possessing lit reticles and other hunt-friendly features.

Regardless of the hunting tool I'm carrying in the whitetail woods — I use and enjoy all types — ultimately I must decide if and when to shoot, and no two situations are identical. As I teased at the top of this page, many successful, experienced bowhunters believe in the maxim, "Take the first good shot." In fact, I'd say almost all of the very best bowhunters — I mean guys with Super Slams — live by this rule. But not me.





↑ The author sent a fixed-blade broadhead through the heart of this South Dakota 5x5 as the buck slowly walked by his ladder stand at a distance of only 12 yards.

The reason? It's not because I think they're wrong. It's solid advice. Period.

I don't live by that rule because I typically bowhunt only two states each fall, the archery whitetail seasons are long, and the bag limit in each state is one buck. When I kill a buck, my archery season is over there. Okay, that's not exactly correct: In one of the states, I can attempt to fill two antlerless deer tags, but it's not the same as pursuing a buck.

Instead, my moment-of-truth maxim is "Take only a perfect shot."

So how do I define a perfect shot? For me, it's a buck that is stopped or walking very slowly, at a distance of 7 to 17 yards, broadside or slightly quartering away, AND he has no clue I'm in his world. This is critical: He must be totally relaxed. In other words, I've fooled him in every possible way. Checkmate!

At times I'm able to experience this perfect-shot scenario in September, October or December, but the vast majority of the time in my career it has taken place during November, and specifically when the whitetail rut is rolling in the Upper Midwest. During the rut, I'll often use a decoy — buck or doe — to lure cruising bucks into point-blank range. Their attention is focused on the fake, and I can draw my bow undetected. It's almost unfair.

If you haven't tried this technique, I recommend reading Bob Robb's feature, "3 Keys to Decoying Deer" on page 52 of this issue. It's tremendously fun to watch bucks of all ages interact with a decoy, and you'll have a front row seat to all the action. Good luck this deer season! BW

Bowhunting World

EDITORIAL

EDITOR / DAVE MAAS

MANAGING EDITOR / HILARY DYER

PRODUCT EDITOR / GORDY KRAHN

EDITOR-AT-LARGE / BOB ROBB

FIELD EDITORS

CHUCK ADAMS **/** MARK KAYSER **/**
BECCA MCDOUGAL **/** DARRON MCDOUGAL

ADVERTISING

PRESIDENT/PUBLISHER / DERRICK NAWROCKI
(205) 807-5025 / DERRICK.NAWROCKI@GRANDVIEWOUTDOORS.COM

REGIONAL SALES MANAGER / PATRICK BOYLE
PATRICK.BOYLE@GRANDVIEWOUTDOORS.COM

REGIONAL SALES MANAGER / MIKE KIZZIRE
MIKE.KIZZIRE@GRANDVIEWOUTDOORS.COM

REGIONAL SALES MANAGER / DON HARRIS
DON.HARRIS@GRANDVIEWOUTDOORS.COM

CREATIVE

MANAGING ART DIRECTOR / MARK KINGSBURY

BUSINESS

CIRCULATION / HOLLY GENSLER
HOLLY.GENSLER@COLEPUBLISHING.COM

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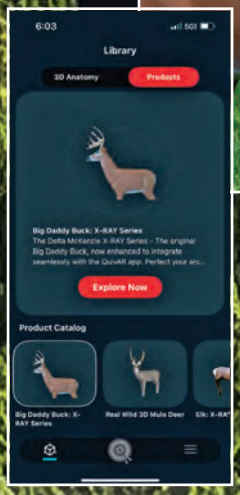
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Small-Property Payday Tactics

Small properties can appear to be small in opportunity. Push that opinion aside and embrace the good aspects of these lands for a great whitetail ending.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY
MARK KAYSER



Do you have access to only a postage-stamp-sized hunting property? No worries. Whitetails spend much of their life living in a similar fishbowl world. Wildlife biologists have long established that most whitetails live in an approximate 1-square-mile home range. Inside that home range lies their core home range. They spend 50 percent of their time there and that sliver of domicile bliss could be less than 100 acres.

Sure, the rut and even regional variances change that home territory, but unlike elk that abandon homes permanently without a second thought, whitetails return to eventually sleep in their own bed.

The home-body nature of a whitetail gives you hope that small property hunting could work in your favor. I've experienced it and know several bowhunters consistently anchoring big bucks on fewer than 100 acres. One bowhunter I know hunts a 10-acre property with success on bucks from 180 to 190 points. If you have access to only a small property, quit whining and analyze it to take advantage of every benefit it might offer.

THE RIGHT STUFF

Every small property doesn't have the right stuff for you to launch an arrow. Properties with no cover or even too much cover curtail hunting opportunities. Those anomalies aside, scrutinize the property for details that deer appreciate. Keep it simple; focus on food, travel corridors, shelter and maybe water in arid zones.

First, consider food as it lures deer and keeps them nearby. An acre of food on 50 acres has big attraction, and the more the better. If you can plant a food plot, use seed mixtures or partition your plot, but plant several varieties to appease palates before and after the frost season. Early season deer are drawn to browse options high in protein. As winter's grip increases, deer transition to carbohydrate-heavy and high-fat crops.

Even without a food plot, a handful of oak trees might scatter mast enough for several months of deer desirability. And regardless of what you feel about baiting, if legal, it alone could be the magnet for deer to bypass onto a small property.

Travel corridors also have an impact on small properties. Your tiny piece of heaven could be the link between a cedar-choked ridge, bedding cover and a soybean field. Study all surrounding properties and put that hunting app to work looking for possible travel routes, funnels and pinchpoints. It amazes me how often I see an obvious (but originally missed) passageway on a property while looking down on it with my HuntStand app.

It seems as if food plots and feeders exist on every 120 acres, but off-limit areas do not. Consider making most of your small property a refuge and, whenever possible, make noticeable improvements to that sanctuary setting. Start by establishing off-limit zones where you and your friends do not venture. These should be in the most secluded, densest and roughest country on the property. Think coulees, wetlands and overgrown forest areas. For properties lacking in any refuge criteria, add it.

Planting crops such as sorghum, Egyptian wheat, corn or even landscape reed grass can create a sense of security for deer. It also proves worthy in veiling your arrival and exit after the hunt (more on that in the next section). When Mother Nature fails and farming is a no-no, get handy with a chainsaw. Felling dead timber, gathering downed trees and pushing them into piles creates windbreaks, and blocks for wildlife including whitetails. It also provides another wall of cover for you to use as a cloak while hiking to your hunting



↑ Standing corn or other products planted as a screen can hide your movements and steer whitetails to your advantage.

ambush location.

The scent of other deer also boosts the confidence for more whitetail visitors. Establishing mock scrapes with drippers, misting scent in your shooting lanes and dispensing scent via wicks all add an atmosphere that a property is the happening place. Switching scents systematically from a dominant buck scent to Golden Estrus and other scents keeps deer curiosity levels piqued at the faux visitation.

ARRIVAL AND DEPARTURE SCHEDULE

Do not follow the crowd. Avoid the path-of-least-resistance if it leaves you exposed on your way in and out of the small property. Instead, unearth hidden routes and plan more than one. This allows you to vary your entrance so as not be patternable.

Kick off your route selection by studying predominant winds and then search for every possible topographical advantage to duck out of sight. Ridges, steep hillsides, dry creek beds and a host of other geographical anomalies provide 6 feet of height or more to hide your upright form. Long ago I began using steep river and creek edges, and even walking on ice, to stay below banks while navigating to ambush locations.

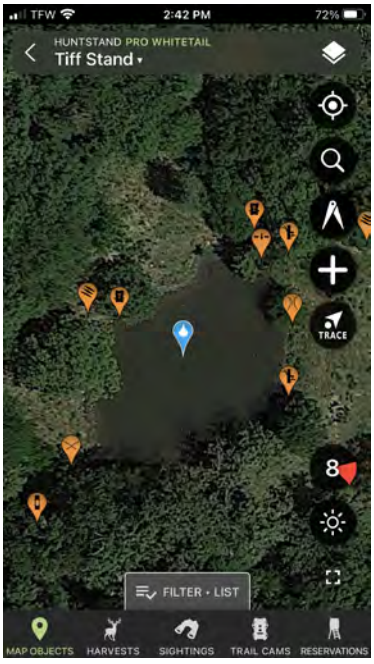
If the topography doesn't favor an invisible route, supplemental vegetation and tree piles could be the answer. For example, plant a row of dense, tall grass to disappear behind as you make your move.

HUNT SMARTER

With all your planning in place to optimize a small parcel, hunt with patience. Skipping that attribute could ruin a small property promptly regardless of your overall plan. Small properties give you only small margins of error before you fail. So, utilize patience to determine the best time period of the day to hunt, when to skip a day of hunting, and how much pressure a particular property can take before it gets burned out.

You already know that deer often behave on a dawn-and-dusk schedule. You will want to hunt these periods whenever possible, but it might not fit the character of the hunting property. Deer hanging on your property all night could lead to you bumping into them as you enter in the darkness before dawn. Vice versa, deer locking onto a food source at dusk could trap you in a stand, forcing you to consider alarming deer during your exit. Plan carefully to avoid bumping deer.

A wind change could be all wrong for hunting a small property and cause you to push your patience up another level. And you may even be sharing a property with other hunters, possibly weekend warriors. Instead of battling their miscalculations, you may have to be patient and hunt the property only during midweek when deer return to a normal pattern after the weekend blowout.



↑ The margin for error is small on a small property; hunt smart and limit pressure.

Finally, hunt smart along property boundaries. Even a picture-perfect, double-lung arrow does not anchor a deer, and it could easily flee 100 yards to jump a fence, and die on the neighboring land. That may not be an issue if you have a relationship with that deed holder, or it could create bad feelings for years ahead. Review every hunting scenario with solutions to keep the hunting on your side of the fence. BW



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Rubs, Scrapes, and What They Mean for Bowhunting

Killing a mature buck isn't always as easy as hunting over these clues.

BY DARRON MCDOUGAL

The sand was almost through the hourglass of my late-September 2011 South Dakota hunt. I was hunting along a shelterbelt bordering a standing cornfield, and the shelterbelt was littered with deer sign. There were trails, rubs and droppings galore. There was even a scrape 30 yards away.

With daylight fading fast and my trip coming to an end, I pulled out my grunt call. With cornstalks rattling in the breeze, I blew the grunt call pretty aggressively a few times so it could carry a great distance. I tucked it away and stood alert with merely minutes of legal shooting light remaining.

Suddenly, my ears detected some suspicious noises in the cornfield. I trained my bino in that direction to identify the source of the noise. Antlers! I grabbed my bow from its hook and prepared for a potential shot opportunity. Soon, the buck stood perfectly broadside over the scrape. My 30-yard pin hovered on his ribs as the shot broke. He piled up 60 yards away.

I wish I could say that all of my hunts over scrapes and rubs have ended like this, but they certainly haven't. Although it's exciting to find an area all ripped up with these two whitetail clues, from experience, I suggest it's important to temper your expectations.



↑ Research shows that 84 percent of scrape use occurs in the dark, which means the odds of a daylight visit are merely 16 percent.

Photos: Gary Reissmann

With that, let's dive into some of the ins and outs of rubs and scrapes with input from Kip Adams, chief conservation officer with the National Deer Association and a certified wildlife biologist.

RUBS

What do you think of when you see a buck rub? Do you associate it merely with a buck rubbing off his velvet and perhaps "marking his territory" during the rut? Let me assure you, there's way more to it than that.

"A rub is one of the primary ways deer communicate," Adams said. "Sure, bucks rub off their velvet, but rubs are much more important as communication tools. Bucks break through the

tree's cambium layer, which releases aromatics and attracts other deer. Bucks also rub their forehead gland on the tree. This is one of a deer's most important glands. Researchers from the University of Georgia have identified nearly 50 unique pieces of information from that gland alone. As humans, we aren't sure what all of that information means, but deer certainly know. Researchers surmise that the information includes identity, nutritional status, maturity, dominance, etc. I'd compare it to leaving my business card at the post office."

Again, deer certainly rub during the beginning of fall to help shed their velvet and also during the pre-rut and rut, but those aren't the only times bucks rub trees.

"Since rubs are an important communication tool," Adams said, "bucks will rub trees the entire time they are hard-horned. They'll rub small trees. They'll rub large trees. The largest rubs tend to be used year after year, and we often refer to those as 'signpost rubs.' It's important to understand that rubs aren't always used by only one buck. Other bucks often visit rubs to see which other deer have been there, and to leave their own information. Does will also check out rubs. There is even video evidence of a doe rubbing her genitals on a buck rub.

"Bucks don't put in a rub line to defend a territory. Bucks are never territorial. The only deer that are ever territorial are does during the fawning season."



↑ Although rubs frequently appear in lines, bucks aren't using them to defend their territories. They're stringing them out to leave and collect information.

"As hunters, we often talk about 'rub lines.' Research shows it doesn't quite work that way. Deer will use multiple rubs, however, even when several rubs are located close together, research shows that all bucks don't always use every single rub. Bucks don't put in a rub line to defend a territory. Bucks are never territorial. The only deer that are ever territorial are does during the fawning season. A buck creates multiple rubs to leave his 'business card' for other deer."

Adams further explained that bucks use rubs anywhere trees grow, as well as places without trees. He noted that bucks will rub fenceposts and power-line poles, which I've witnessed myself while hunting the more open western states.

SCRAPES

A scrape is another primary way that deer communicate. Adams said bucks scrape all throughout the year, but they tend to use them a lot more during the breeding season. I've personally found scrapes that were freshly worked in May and August, but like Adams, I find the most scrapes in October.



↑It's exciting to find fresh scrapes, but it isn't always the most productive to hunt directly over them. The best ones to hunt over are generally located near bedding areas where a buck is more liable to appear in the daylight.

"As cool as rubs are, I find scrapes even more interesting," Adams said. "Mature bucks, immature bucks, does, and fawns all visit them. There is usually an overhanging branch above the scrape, which is one of the most important aspects. It's what we call the 'licking branch.' Bucks will mouth it and rub their preorbital gland on it. They often rub the forehead gland on it, too. The goal is to leave their identifying features on it. After they work the branch, they paw at the dirt, and then they may or may not rub-urinate in the scrape.

"The other cool part is the visual component of the exposed dirt. Anytime you expose dirt in the timber or along a field edge, deer almost cannot ignore it. They have to go visit it; it's that ingrained into them as a communication tool. So, there is a visual component and certainly an olfactory component with scrapes."

Adams reminded that deer don't always have to be directly over the scrape to check it. He says video evidence supports that deer often swing downwind to collect information about other deer that have visited the scrape. In some of these cases, they don't hit the scrape to leave their own information.

IMPLICATIONS FOR BOWHUNTING

I spent a lot of my younger years hunting over fresh rubs and scrapes along food sources. I'm talking about areas littered with rubs and scrapes. However, I encountered more hunters than shooter bucks in these areas. While the concentrated sign is alluring, the only reason it is so prevalent around food sources is because deer congregate there daily. But, when does mature-buck activity peak on open food sources? In the dark.

"Research shows about 84 percent of scrape use occurs at night," Adams said. "Most of the activity is just before dawn and just after dusk. If I say hunting right over scrapes isn't always the most productive, someone might argue, 'I killed the biggest buck

of my life over a scrape!' I'm not arguing with success. If it works for you, keep doing it, because 16 percent of scrape visits are during the day.

"In most cases, though, it's often a better strategy to find the scrapes and then determine where there is good cover in the vicinity. If you position yourself somewhere in between the two, you have a greater chance of encountering the buck during legal shooting hours. We can use scrapes to our advantage, but sitting right over them isn't always the most productive.

"Rubs and scrapes are generally great spots to hang trail cameras to learn what deer are using them. As far as timing, I've found rubs and scrapes most useful for hunting and scouting during the pre-rut just before peak breeding. Research supports that this is when scrape usage peaks because deer are moving all over and advertising themselves. When peak breeding occurs, bucks aren't using scrapes as regularly because they are with does. In fact, you can learn when peak breeding occurs where you hunt simply by monitoring trail cameras (where legal). You'll see the activity ramp up more and more, and then it will diminish. That usually means that peak breeding is underway."



← Most scrapes are beneath a licking branch, which deer rub with their foreheads and preorbital glands.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Hopefully, this input has shed some light on the purposes of rubs and scrapes. If you're one of the many hunters who has sat over these clues countless times with minimal results, you might want to consider the 84/16 (night/day) percentage we discussed above and reframe your hunting strategy. But, if you've had tremendous success over scrapes and rubs, by all means, keep doing what works. BW



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NASP Latest News

NASP selects experienced conservation leader as vice president; NASP unveils first-ever Annual Review; student archer shoots perfect 300 score in national tournament; and NASP coordinators, sponsors and supporters gather in Fort Worth, Texas.

BY STEPHANIE EVANS, NASP PROGRAM MANAGER

NASP SELECTS EXPERIENCED CONSERVATION LEADER AS VICE PRESIDENT

NASP recently announced that Jeff Rawlinson, a respected and experienced administrator from Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, will become its second-ever vice president. He has served as an assistant division administrator with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission, where he worked for the last 25 years. His team had oversight of recruitment, retention and reactivation of hunters and recreational shooters, hunter/bowhunter education, hunter outreach, NASP and shooting range development for the commission.

Rawlinson is a devout hunter, angler, shooter, wildlife viewer, naturalist, father and husband. He holds a bachelor of science and master of science degrees from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. He has been a hunter and bowhunter education instructor for more than 25 years, NASP archery instructor specialist for the last 20 years, NRA firearms instructor and range officer, and member of the NASP and National Bowhunter Education board of directors.

He is the vice chair of the Midwest Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies R3 and relevancy committee, and sits on the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies hunter recruitment and retention as well as education committees. Rawlinson loves to pursue turkeys in the spring, deer and squirrels in the fall, eat gourmet meals from the duck blind, and pontificate about the outdoors. He loves to spend outdoor time with family and friends and instill the excitement of the outdoors in everyone he meets.



Jeff Rawlinson

Rawlinson's NASP duties will include the growing positive relationship between NASP and the nation's state fish and wildlife agencies, conservation organizations and various shooting sports organizations. He will also be involved in the coordination of all internal and external NASP activities, as well as day-to-day operations.

NASP President Tommy Floyd said, "Jeff has developed tremendous positive relationships with state fish and wildlife agencies, conservation organizations, and the entire R3 community through his work with Nebraska. His personal passion for the outdoors, and his deep commitment to connecting young people to the outdoors, makes him a great candidate to help lead our growing organization. If you spend much time with him, you will also hear Jeff speak of his deep passionate belief in what NASP is and has done for the millions of young people who participate. I am extremely excited about the days ahead with Jeff coming on as vice president of NASP!"

NASP UNVEILS FIRST-EVER ANNUAL REVIEW

The strong partnerships with state agencies, conservation organizations and thousands of schools continue to spread in-school archery. To showcase this growth, NASP has released its first-ever Annual Review. It is intended to provide an in-depth and graphically based look into the current success of the 22-year-old organization.

This Annual Review will be a one-stop reference for partners, current and future participants, as well as anyone who wants to know more about NASP.

NASP President Tommy Floyd said, "Many top shooting sports organizations share information regarding their success. One such organization is the USA Clay Target League. It was conversations with President John Nelson that led NASP to share similar information. From those conversations, and with reference to what other organizations put out, the idea for the NASP Annual Review was born. We believe this is a great way to tell our story, encompassing the full year, and showing the value NASP brings to the education system, and to the shooting sports.

"We know that school leaders are looking for ways to engage students and improve school cultures. We think our Annual Review shows just how NASP continues to change lives. For the educator, the parent, or someone getting involved as a volunteer; we wanted this report to provide a snapshot of the power of partnerships in our success."

STUDENT ARCHER SHOOTS PERFECT 300 SCORE IN NATIONAL TOURNAMENT

For the first time in the Eastern National Tournament of the NASP, a student archer shot a perfect score of 300 to take top honors in their division. That feat was accomplished by Gunnar Couch, a seventh grader from Grand Bay Middle School in Mobile County, during the event held in Louisville, Kentucky.

For his first place finish in the overall high school division, Gunnar received a $1,000 scholarship and the opportunity to compete for a $5,000 scholarship at the NASP Championship in Daytona, Florida. In addition to shooting a perfect individual score in the bullseye portion of the tournament, Gunnar placed third overall in the IBO/3D Challenge (animal shaped targets) with a score of 295 out of a possible 300 points.

Grand Bay Middle School Athletic Director and archery coach Matthew Perry said the hard work Gunnar put into archery this season paid off for him.

"I was pumped he finally got it," Coach Perry said. "He worked so hard this year, and on the biggest stage he stepped up and did it."



Gunnar Couch

Gunnar said his goal throughout the season was to shoot a perfect score.

"After I shot my 300, I honestly couldn't believe it," he said. "I'd told my dad when we were walking to my flight lane that I was about to go shoot a 300. Actually doing what I said I was going to do felt awesome. Doing it at nationals made it 10 times better!"

NASP COORDINATORS, SPONSORS AND SUPPORTERS GATHER IN FORT WORTH, TEXAS

NASP coordinators, sponsors and supporters met in-person and virtually to discuss and share strategies to improve the 22-year-old program. The highly successful event was co-sponsored by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

Coordinators, NASP staff and sponsors enjoyed the 2-day summit with presentations and discussions on all aspects of NASP. Ideas were shared among all those who do the valuable work in 49 states and beyond. One obvious aspect of the annual conference continues to be the camaraderie and networking among attendees that continues to make this conference a huge benefit for attending jurisdictions as well as NASP.

NASP President Tommy Floyd said, "Our 2024 Texas event was simply incredible! So much energy and expertise in one place – all of it related to supporting NASP archers. We believe that these interactions are how we make NASP better. It feels like a family reunion of sorts, where folks gather to help students discover the joy of safely becoming an archer. Our coordinators are driven, passionate, and so collaborative to help each other find success in their respective states. Our NASP sponsors continue to make this conference meaningful for everyone."

The positive relationships that form among this group continues to inspire everyone to find new ways to promote and grow the program. We are very grateful for the opportunity to assemble each year. NASP continues to reach new students each year in grades 4-12 through in-school archery. More than 23.5 million students have experienced the safety and fun of NASP since its inception in 2002.



NASP: Changing Lives One Arrow at a Time

NASP is an activity that doesn't discriminate based on popularity, athletic skill, gender, size or academic ability. It's open to any student — and its biggest supporters are professional educators. NASP promotes instruction in target archery as part of the in-school curriculum in grades 4-12. Through participation in the shooting sports, students are learning focus, self-control, discipline, patience and the life lessons required to be successful in the classroom and in life. For more information, including the four steps for bringing NASP to your school, visit naspschools.org. BW

How to Plan a Future DIY Deer Tour

Pursing whitetails out of state is fun and challenging. Here's how to get started.



BY ERIK BARBER/BOWHUNTERS UNITED

The whitetail is the most hunted big game species in the world, and it offers bowhunters a unique opportunity to embark on a journey spanning across the United States. Generally speaking, archery whitetail tags are far more accessible and affordable than those for other types of big game, and with few exceptions, they can be purchased over-the-counter. Public land for whitetails is accessible across the country, too. And in areas where public land is limited, traveling hunters can consider networking with others to trade private land hunting opportunities.

This challenge isn't just about hunting trophy bucks; it's about trying new tactics in diverse environments, from the dense forests of the North to the arid regions of the Southwest. For anyone who makes a resolution to spend more time in a deer stand in 2025 or beyond, this quest is for you!

PLAN YOUR OWN DEER TOUR

Regardless if you plan on hunting public or private land, now is the time to start planning your adventure. Start by mapping out a high-level plan that highlights the states you hope to hunt in the future, and then start researching the details. States have different rules on tag applications, season dates, etc. To find state applications, go to bowhuntersunited.com where you will find a link to every state's hunting license application.

Starting your search early allows for plenty of time to contact a biologist or game warden in the area you're interested in. Fish and wildlife professionals are typically eager to help hunters by pointing them in the right direction. Most agencies offer a staff directory that filters positions and counties served within the state, which can be a helpful resource for narrow-

Photos: ATA

ing down who you should reach out to. If I was planning my own deer tour in 2025, here's how I'd approach it:

Summer 'Rutcation' in South Florida: Bowhunters can start their season as early as August by heading to the southernmost tip of the Florida Panhandle to chase the Seminole whitetail. Unique to the region, South Florida bucks begin to rut in July and August, giving bowhunters a chance to fill a tag before most other states are open. There's a surprising amount of public land available to hunt, too.

September on the Plains: States such as Montana, North Dakota and Wyoming are known for early season opportunities for velvet bucks. Opening day typically falls near September 1 in these states, when bucks are still patternable and predictable as they congregate near destination food sources like alfalfa or hayfields. Whitetail hunting pressure is often low in these areas because elk and mule deer are more popular with local hunters. With that in mind, don't be shy about knocking on doors in hopes of finding permission to hunt.





Grind It Out in the Midwest: Since I've lived in Wisconsin for most of my adult life, I'm partial to the Midwest during the rut. Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana and Ohio offer some of the nation's best whitetail hunting. All have public land full of potential, with room to roam and a whitetail age class that creates the chance for seeing big, mature bucks. Spending a week of vacation here during the first 14 days of November is a wise strategy for any bowhunter hoping to cross paths with a rut-crazed buck.

Hunt the Late Rut in the Southwest Plains: As the rut winds down in the Midwest, states like Oklahoma and Texas are just heating up. Oklahoma has a lot of public land, offers affordable tags ($300 for a nonresident) and provides the opportunity to harvest multiple deer. Take advantage of the rutting behavior in a new environment to stack the odds in your favor.

REAP THE REWARDS

Hitting the road gives you the chance to immerse yourself in whitetail culture across the country. Undoubtedly, hunting new areas can be frustrating and difficult, but much of the fun can be found in the local experiences across the country, like a Friday fish fry at a bar in Wisconsin, pink shrimp from the Florida Gulf Coast, or barbecue in the Sooner State. No matter how the hunting has been treating you, these are the things that keep you coming back for more. BW

Join Bowhunters United

For more content like this, become a member of Bowhunters United for free. A BU membership gives you access to member-exclusive discounts and rebates on archery and bowhunting products, and you'll be the first line of defense when a legislative issue comes up in the bowhunting world through our Action Alert system. Contact: bowhuntersunited.com

Learn to Shoot Fast

The ability to make a precise shot in a hurry is often the difference between tagging an animal and eating tag soup.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY CHUCK ADAMS

I was recently tinkering with the latest in fiber-optic bowsights, and decided to try single-pin and three-pin designs that move the pins precisely with a dial. A distance scale lets you zero in on exact yardage for pinpoint shots.

The three-pin model was especially appealing, because I could shoot with three aiming pins without moving the dial. But as I experimented, I quickly realized they might handicap my hunting.

A movable-pin sight can be ideal if you bowhunt from a stand, because shots are likely to be close, and you can set up ahead of time for expected shot distance. But as I timed my performance with the distance dial, my shooting speed definitely slowed down. Not only did I have to look at the sight and away from the target as I dialed in — something I never do with fixed pins, but the dialing process also took extra time.

SPEED KILLS

I thought back to the last couple of dozen animals I've harvested, and decided that easily 25 percent would have escaped if I'd been using a movable-pin bowsight.

Plenty of bowhunting opportunities happen quickly. My Wyoming elk from 2 years ago chased a cow into a small opening and paused. I had used my rangefinder on another cow in the same place, so I drew in a flash and let the arrow fly using fixed multiple pins. The broadhead nailed the 360-inch 6x7, and I was field dressing him within minutes.

The shooting process, regardless of animal, usually takes me less than 5 seconds. I believe that bull would have ducked back into cover before I could have adjusted a movable-pin bowsight.

I shot a dandy Wyoming pronghorn 3 years ago, and that critter definitely required quick action. He walked into a ravine where I was hiding and paused. I was already at full draw, and released instantly. Pronghorns never stay put for very long, and it was my only chance after more than an hour of stalking — absolutely no time to use a movable bowsight in such a situation!

One of my friends in Utah has been trying to shoot a trophy mule deer for several years. He's an accomplished target archer, and favors a back-tension style of bowstring release aid. Trouble is, such a release is slow and deliberate to use. It works great on bull's-eyes, but as my pal has discovered, it doesn't work so well on skittish mule deer. He has yet to harvest the buck of his dreams, because deer always move off before an arrow can fly. He's stubborn, sorry to say, and refuses to change his target-shooting routine.

I do most of my bowhunting in the West. Aside from sitting for wa-



↑ The author's 2022 elk offered a quick shot after it chased a cow into the clear. Fumbling with a rangefinder or movable-pin bowsight would have ruined the opportunity.

terhole pronghorns, deep-woods whitetails and baited black bears, most of my hunting is accomplished on foot. This means my shots are sometimes beyond 50 yards. A few bowhunters I know scoff at longer attempts, but they are mostly eastern whitetail hunters. Record book statistics from Pope and Young show that almost all P&Y whitetails are taken at less than 30 yards. By comparison, almost half of record book mule deer are shot beyond 40 yards, 25 percent of elk are shot beyond 40 yards, almost all stalked pronghorns are shot beyond 40 yards, and more than half of wild sheep and mountain goats are shot between 40 and 60 yards. Even a three-pin movable bowsight cannot quickly be used in such situations, because the range is too long.

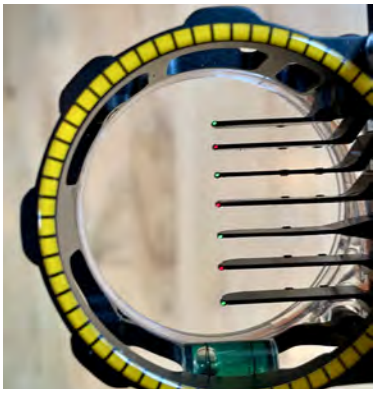
RANGEFINDING BINOS

Most modern sight-using bowhunters carry laser rangefinders to prevent high or low hits. Even very fast compound bows still produce arching arrow trajectory. If you don't know the shooting distance, then missed or crippling shots can occur.

I switched from a belt-carried laser rangefinder to a binocular with an integral rangefinder several years ago, and this dramatically improved my shooting speed on game. The fumble factor was gone, because all I had to do was glass a critter, punch the distance button, and drop the binocular back to my chest. The extra step of grabbing a separate rangefinder and stowing it again was gone. I highly recommend a top-notch rangefinder binocular, especially for spot-and-stalk hunting.

The laser rangefinder can be a bowhunter's godsend, but it can also be a curse when things happen fast. More than once, in years past, I've grabbed for the rangefinder when I should have been shooting. When a situation is lickety-split, trying to use a rangefinder can let an animal escape.

For that reason, I routinely practice distance estimation by eye.



↑ The author prefers a multiple-pin fixed bowsight because it allows the fastest shooting in crunch situations.

I'll double-check my guesses with a rangefinder. Learning to eyeball distance can pay off when you need to shoot immediately.

Sharpening my eye saved the day 4 years ago. I had been bowhunting wild, fair-chase bison in Wyoming for more than a week, and finally spied three bachelor bulls in a remote area. Buffs were few and far between — a genuine challenge to locate in the vast wilderness.

It was 6 degrees below zero that October morning as I followed the bulls through deep snow and heavy timber. One was huge compared to the others, with massive horns and a giant body. He finally stepped out of a thicket, and I raised my rangefinder binocular to get the distance.

Nothing happened. Like all rangefinders, this one's electronic system had frozen in subzero air. I groaned, guessed 25 yards, and shot. The shaft smashed ribs behind the shoulder for a perfect double-lung hit. The bull staggered less than 100 yards and dropped. He later scored 121 6/8 official Pope and Young points — number four in the all-time record list and the current Wyoming state archery record.



↑ The author shot his Wyoming state record wild bison after subzero cold locked up his rangefinder binocular. He estimated the distance by eye … something he practices on a regular basis to ensure quick shooting when it's needed.

Without some serious practice at distance estimation by eye, I might have panicked and blown that rare opportunity.

Here's a final thought about shooting fast: I'm back to my Trophy Ridge React bowsight with seven fixed pins. No, I don't use the 70- and 80-yard beads on game, but I do practice that far because it makes closer shots easier. In the off-season, I work at getting on target quickly and releasing in no more than 3 or 4 seconds. I suggest you do the same. Bowhunters who dilly-dally during the shot can drill paper targets; in the woods, slow shooting might cost you an animal. BW

NEW GEAR

BY GORDY KRAHN



ANXYNT HIGHLAND BOWHUNTING BOOT

In 2019, Company Founder Andrew Miller set out on a mission to end barefoot stalking and create the ultimate bowhunting boot. Purposefully designed for all-day comfort and silence, the Anxynt Highland is constructed from all the premier materials of the previous model, but with a last technology construction that allows for greater versatility with fit and sizing that ranges from men's U.S. 5-14 offerings in half sizes with a wide selection of width variations. The Highland also features an Airfit shock absorption insole between leather layers with anti-microbial properties for comfort and scent control. Approximate weights per pair range from 22 to 36 ounces. MSRP: $239; **anxynt.com**



BIGSHOT ARCHERY X-RAY SERIES 3D TARGETS

BIGshot Archery has announced its exclusive partnership with software specialists from QuivAR to introduce the new Bigshot Archery X-Ray Series 3D Targets that will provide shooters with an unprecedented 360-degree view of an animal's internal organs. This "X-Ray" view allows bowhunters to accurately see where their arrows would hit "inside" the animal! The powerful QuivAR app provides stunning visualization of the actual bone structure and organs inside the 3D target, providing extremely accurate feedback regarding which organs the arrow would hit. These targets are a tremendous training tool for determining where to aim when shooting from treestands or at quartering animals. BIGshot Targets X-ray series will initially include the Big Buck, Mule Deer and Axis Deer. MSRP: $459.99-$549.99; **bigshottargets.com**

LAST CHANCE ARCHERY SQUARE UP

The Square Up from Last Chance Archery is an excellent high-precision squaring device and arrow spinner tool. It uses an adjustable diamond squaring insert that is an ideal solution for squaring arrow shafts or inserts. This tool can be used hundreds to thousands of times without wearing out the diamond insert. With other squaring devices, the sanding disc or the cutter must be changed out after limited uses, not with the Square Up. Combine the diamond insert with high-quality bearings and a precision-milled tool, and it's an effective combo to help build the most accurate arrows possible, which results in much higher accuracy and success in the field. The kit includes the Square Up squaring device and arrow spinner tool, lag bolts and washers. MSRP: $56; **lastchancearchery.com**





OZONICS HR600 OZONE GENERATOR

The Ozonics HR600 Ozone Generator takes active scent control to an entirely new level. Reimagined, reengineered and redesigned from the ground up, it literally breaks the mold of all previous ozone devices. The most powerful Ozonics unit to date, the HR600 is able to produce up to 20 percent more ozone, and its new body style has been redesigned with an overhead air intake and bulletproof fan to minimize noise and ensure reliability and durability in even the toughest conditions. Other key features include extended battery life, removable coil and integrated LED lighting. The HR600 is app and remote control enabled. MSRP: $559.99; **ozonicshunting.com**



GAS HIGH OCTANE BLACKOUT BOWSTRINGS

High Octane Blackout Strings from GAS are a great fit for archers who need a replacement set quickly or for those who are not particular about string colors. They are available for more than 150 popular bow models and are made with high-quality BCY 452X material with black strings, cables and speed nocks. Powergrip center serving comes standard on all GAS bowstrings and its exclusive TTS (Total Tensioning System) technology results in superior string performance, eliminating peep rotation, serving separation and elongation. They are backed by GAS Bowstrings' 1-year warranty, so archers can trust that their High Octane Blackout strings are built to last and withstand the rigors of the archery season. MSRP: $120-$140; **gasbowstrings.com**

BIG & J HEADRUSH DEER ATTRACTANT

The secret to Big & J's Headrush lies in its irresistible aroma, capable of enticing deer from long distances. By strategically placing it across their hunting grounds, hunters can draw deer from neighboring properties and guide them closer to their preferred hunting areas — ensuring a higher concentration of deer on their property. Big & J has enhanced Headrush with the powerful, long-range aroma of its popular BB2, combined with the salt that deer love. This product promotes antler growth and captivates deer with its unique scent and flavor. By strategically placing the attractant and monitoring with game cameras, hunters can draw deer from challenging spots such as thick bedding areas or rough terrain. MSRP: $24.99/20-pound bucket; **bigandj.com**





RINEHART WHITETAIL DARTBOARD

Rinehart Targets recently announced the launch of its innovative line of Game Room Hunt Series Dartboards, designed for outdoor enthusiasts to bring the thrill of the hunt indoors. Utilizing the same self-healing technology as its archery targets, these new dartboards offer a unique way for archers to switch from arrows to darts and continue practicing their aim in the comfort of their homes. The Whitetail Dartboard, the first model in the series, measures 20x28x4 inches and comes with three darts. Rinehart Targets plans to release more exciting models, including lifelike bear and turkey designs, in the near future. The detailed board design showcases a deer with vital target rings similar to a Rinehart target, with an added traditional dartboard bull's-eye. MSRP: $129.99; **rinehart3d.com**



KUIU KODIAK 2000 COOLER BACKPACK

The Kodiak 2000 Cooler Backpack from KUIU combines wet and dry submersible storage into one versatile pack, featuring a watertight insulated cooler compartment for drinks and food, with two fully submersible dry storage compartments that are perfect for extra clothes and essentials. Padded, adjustable shoulder straps make carrying heavy items a cinch, while external lashing points provide secure tie-down locations. Other features of this waterproof, IPX7-rated backpack include TPU-coated fabrics, welded construction, air and watertight zippers and an FDA food-grade liner. The backpack also includes a welded wallet/phone/key pouch, as well as an external access water bottle pocket. The Kodiak 2000 Cooler Backpack is available in five Colors: Valo, Verde, Vias, Coyote Brown and Stone. MSRP: $399; **kuiu.com**


DEAD
DOWN
WIND
BLACK
FIELD SPRAY
KIFARU
KIFARU

FATAL ATTRACTION:
CALLS AND SCENTS TO BOOST YOUR WHITETAIL GAME

Put these tools in your whitetail bag of tricks.

BY DARRON MCDOUGAL



Twenty years ago, I shattered the morning silence on a fairly remote bog in northern Wisconsin with some estrus bleats, grunts and a snort-wheeze. Next, I hit the rattle bag. I stuffed the calls away, grabbed my bow, then scanned and listened. Silence.

Later, I repeated those steps. Strike two. By late morning, I was sure that my whitetail calling or the scent trail I'd laid down on the way to my stand would elicit a response from a November buck — the conditions were too perfect. Determined to extend my reach and get something's attention, I began my third calling sequence with greater intensity than my previous two attempts.

Only minutes had passed when a good-sized buck materialized across the bog. Calling actually does work! He came my way with a purpose, destined to find the bucks who were battling it out in his area. Soon, he connected with my fake deer scent trail, which put him quartering away at 30 yards. Before I knew it, I found my buck at the end of the blood trail, and I recall feeling immense satisfaction with using calls and scents to be successful.

Obviously, calling isn't always as effective as it was on that cold November morning in Wisconsin that I just recounted. I've hit the antlers together and grunted countless times with zero results, but it's those magical encounters in which a grunting, lures or rattling — or all of those things — help us seal the deal that make it worth adding some of the following tools to your bag of whitetail tricks.

CALLS

Why pack a handful of deer calls when you can carry one that does it all? Meet the **Extractor** from **Flextone**. Not only does it flaunt a cool deer-antler design, but it also features the X-Glide sound selector so you can choose between buck, doe and fawn vocalizations at the push of a finger. A secondary chamber is designed for snort-wheezes when you need to challenge a buck that isn't quite convinced by grunting alone. The Extractor is freeze-proof and features a soft body designed to simulate the soft tissue of a deer's vocal box, producing outstanding realism that deer will find enticing. MSRP: $22.99; flextonegamecalls.com



Attract deer for a closer look with the **Dominant Doe Bleat Deer Call** from **Hunters Specialties**. It comes preset to a dominant doe bleat vocal, but simply slide the O-ring to subsequent notches to emit other doe and fawn vocals. The rubbery barrel construction on the call's posterior can be manipulated to tweak delivery and help you cover the gamut of doe music. Whether you're trying to attract does any time of the season or bucks looking for a receptive mate, the Dominant Doe Bleat Deer Call has you covered. Also from Hunters Specialties is the **Rack Jack Rattle Device**, which is a two-piece design constructed of different resins designed to simulate a friendly sparing match or even an all-out battle of the bucks. Forcibly plunge the ram in and out of the housing to clash the rings together. The ram snaps into the tubular housing for silent and convenient carrying. Whether you're rattling blindly or trying to coax a buck 20 yards closer, the Rack Jack delivers authentic rattling in a handy alternative to real antlers. MSRP: $19.99 (Dominant Doe); $29.99 (Rack Jack); hunterspec.com



While you can't beat a good set of real rattling antlers, it's not easy to stow them in a treestand when not in use or transport them quietly, especially when you have a long hike or a hang-and-hunt outing with a lot of gear to carry. **Knight & Hale's Pack Rack** takes up little room in your pack or pocket, giving you the option to rattle without the hassle of real antlers. Constructed from high-density plastic, this two-piece design attaches together for silent transportation, and it features a dull-green finish, which is less distinguishable as you rattle compared to real

white antlers. Create realistic-sounding buck fights with substantial volume that carries even in windy conditions. The Pack Rack is convenient and portable. MSRP: $19.99; knightandhale.com

The deadly duo from **Illusion Hunting Systems** is the **Black Rack & Extinguisher Combo**. Black Rack is an alternative to real rattling antlers and is easy to carry but sounds like the real thing. The realism of Bone-Core Technology and two full racks will floor you, and because they're black, the movement from rattling will blend in so much more than when using real deer antlers. The Extinguisher is one of the most realistic and user-friendly grunt calls available. You don't need to be an expert caller to produce authentic buck, doe and fawn sounds with the patented ModiSlide System, which adjusts the call instantly. The FreezeFree Design ensures dependability no matter the weather, and the dual-layered Throat-Tube Technology revs up realism while allowing for directional calling. Made in the USA, this is an excellent combo to bring rutting bucks charging in. MSRP: $47; illusionsystems.com

A classic never dies, and that's why it makes sense to put a **Primos The Original Can Doe Bleat** in your pack or pocket on every deer hunt. Many bucks looking to breed can't resist the realistic estrus bleats that The Can creates. The cylindrical design takes up virtually no space and is easy to use — just tip it over while covering the hole on the bottom with your thumb to create a quivering estrus bleat designed to draw whitetails, blacktails and mule deer into archery range. This is one of the most effective deer calls of all time, especially when paired with a Primos grunt call, such as the **Buck Roar II**. It's 10 bucks well spent. MSRP: $9.99; primos.com

While writing this, the **Rocky Mountain Hunting Calls** website showed the 2024 **Deer Dialect** 2.0 as "out of stock." If that is any indication as to how popular it is, you'd best get your hands on one as soon as you can. It has all of the proven features of the original version, but it is now rigged with a snort-wheeze chamber and a new-and-improved voice box for unmatched realism. The Deer Dialect 2.0 gives you a wide range of calls ranging from fawn bleats to dominant buck grunts using the tone selector. Whether you're calling blindly or trying to get the attention of a buck cruising through, the Deer Dialect 2.0 is the call for every deer woods scenario. MSRP: $32.99; buglingbull.com







The **Intimidator** is a grunt and snort-wheeze combo call from **Woodhaven Custom Calls** that is anything but intimidating to use. In fact, it is unbelievably user-friendly and requires minimal air to operate so that you can make subtle tending grunts. Want to challenge a hair-raised buck and bring him in? Blow the call with some gusto to issue a dominant buck challenge. Simply adjust how hard you blow into the call to change the tone of your grunts and manipulate the Inflexor Tube for directional calling coverage. The Intimidator is a no-nonsense call with tremendous realism that works well for any deer hunter, novice or expert. MSRP: $23.99; woodhavencustomcalls.com

SCENTS



When a buck works a licking branch above a scrape, he's putting his ID all over the branch with his forehead gland and pre-orbital gland. **Black Widow's Branch Butter** is a gel formula that combines both of those glandular scents so you can impose the presence of an imposter in the area that will keep dominant bucks coming back. It can work well to bring bucks in front of your trail cameras during the early season, but it can also stir up rutting behavior during the pre-rut, peak rut, and even into the post-rut. The gel is long-lasting so you don't have to doctor up the licking branch very often to keep getting results. MSRP: $14.49; blackwidowdeerlures.com

Scent Web by **Buck Bomb** is an innovative way to disperse scent around your stand or blind. It's a foam-based lure that sticks to everything it contacts. By shooting it up into the air and onto trees, branches, and all over the place, you'll have a scent that carries great distances and lasts longer because it isn't being soaked up by the ground as with liquid-based scents and lures. Scent Web is available in attractant scents such as corn, apple and vanilla acorn, as well as in three different deer lures so that you have options for the entire deer season regardless of your hunting style. Not only is it fun to create a scent web, but it's also a great way to apply scent without getting your hands dirty. MSRP: $15.99-18.99; hunterspec.com

Whether you want to attract bucks to

your trail camera or deer stand, hit the licking branch over a real scrape or a mock scrape with the **Forehead Gland Synthetic Scrape Branch Deer Scent** from **Buck Fever Synthetics**, which will drive them wild and keep them coming back. Not only is this synthetic formula like a deer magnet, it will also stay fresh with no spoilage like real deer urine. Forehead Gland is compatible with scent drippers, plus it gets a boost of freshness with the presence of moisture. Made in the USA, this is the ticket to fire up scraping and forehead gland activity. MSRP: $12.99-99.99 (varies by size); shop.buckfever.com

From **Code Blue** comes perhaps the most convenient and effective way to deploy highly attractive deer scent. **PST! Pure-S-Trous Aerosol Spray** consists of 12 ounces of estrous scent that will have rutting bucks coming in for a look. It offers mess-free application and storage. Simply spray it on the ground or foliage on the way to your stand or blind to create an enticing scent trail without the mess and hassle of a drag rag. When the wind swirls, spray it from your hunting location to cover your own scent and lure in bucks. Code Blue guarantees that PST! contains urine from only one deer for the most authentic attraction. MSRP: $14.99; codebluescents.com

Where do deer feel the most relaxed? In bedding areas, of course! That's why **ConQuest Scents** offers the **EverCalm Deer Herd Scent Stick** made from real deer bedding areas. This isn't just for the rut; use it all season long to keep deer relaxed around your hunting areas. The Deer Herd Scent Stick dispenses from a container just like your underarm deodorant, which will keep your scent strategy free from spills and messes. Simply wipe the scent stick on anything you want to apply scent to such as rocks, trees and logs. When not in use, stow the stick in the included zip-top storage bag to maximize freshness. The scent is a wax formula that is weather-resistant for a long-lasting aroma that calms and attracts deer. MSRP: $22.99; conquestscents.com



The secret behind **Raised Scents' Scrape Addict** and why it is so effective for establishing or freshening mock scrapes is it combines five different glandular scents from bucks and does with a little bit of deer urine. It is available in both spray and paste forms. The spray option is ideal for misting the licking branch and dirt and is easiest for deer to detect, while the paste form is designed to last longer due to higher concentration. Bucks and does find Scrape Addict attractive, making it the perfect way to trigger more deer activity at your mock scrape, whether it is beneath your stand or in front of your trail camera. MSRP: $24.99; raisedhunting.com



If you've used **PEAK30** products from **Tink's** with great results, then you'll be happy to know that it's now available in four new forms. Additions to the PEAK30 Premium Doe Estrus line include **Gel, Mist, Fogger, and Stick** forms to offer every hunter an application medium that works for their hunting style. When a buck is cruising downwind, the Mist option can cover your scent and put him in the right mood, and the pressurizing agent is separate from the scent so as not to contaminate it. The Gel option is great for rainy conditions, as it won't wash away. The Fogger is great for making short scent bursts, or you can deploy all 5 ounces continuously to fog the area for the highest level of attraction. The Stick is ideal for those who want to eliminate the possibility of spills and messes. Whichever application style you select, you can be sure that PEAK30 is premium doe estrus that is collected during the 24-hour period when the doe is at peak estrus. MSRP: $14.99-24.99; tinks.com

A great way to spice up buck activity near your stand or trail cam is to create a mock scrape. While any mock scrape has the potential to attract deer, why not incite a lot more deer interaction by hanging the **Wildlife Research Center (WRC) Golden Rope** — made from proprietary natural fiber — above the scrape with the end about 4 feet off the ground? The Golden Rope kit includes three ropes and three cable ties for securing the ropes to overhead branches or limbs. It also comes with 4 fluid ounces of **Golden Rope Scent Concentrate**, which makes 20 ounces of liquid scent that you can use to doctor up the frayed rope ends throughout the season and elicit repeated deer interaction. The entire kit comes in a resealable wide-mouth container so that you can conveniently and cleanly dip the ropes into the scent. Bucks roaming your hunting area won't be able to resist interacting with the rope using their forehead and pre-orbital glands, and WRC guarantees results or your money back. Also try out WRC's new **Attractant Spray** available in Caramel Apple, Sweet Corn, and Acorn Supreme. Decades of research led to the development of these irresistible, long-range scents that are designed to stimulate hunger and bring deer within shooting range. Whether you're hunting over bait, a food plot, or sitting in the timber, invite deer to your setup with these powerful attractants, which are easy to carry and dispense. MSRP: $47.99 (Golden Rope Kit); $14.99 (Attractant Spray); wildlife.com





Odor Control

Address various odors including human odor at the molecular level with **Scent Killer Super Charged** in the new Forest Edge scent, which combines subtle and fresh forest scents to calm and even attract game. Formulated with Hunt Dry Technology, you can apply Scent Killer Super Charged in advance of your hunt to ensure that you'll be hunting in dry gear even in a drizzle. **Wildlife Research Center** has been in the business for 40 years, so rest assured Forest Edge has passed the research, development, and testing with flying colors. MSRP: $15.54/24 ounces; wildlife.com

Deer season often coincides with insects and ticks, and protecting yourself against these pests — and the diseases they can carry — is a high priority. How do you do that without stinking up your skin and clothing with game-spooking odors of generic sprays found in the camping aisle? You use the **Realtree Complete Insect Control Pack** from **Zone Protects**, which protects you for 12 hours from everything from gnats to chiggers to ticks via unscented, odor-free insect repellent and insecticide. The personal repellent is picaridin-based, which is an alternative to deet. The insecticide is a permethrin product for your apparel and gear to kill on contact. This combo will keep the mosquitoes and ticks at bay while you focus on your deer hunt. The non-oily, non-greasy, non-sticky formula won't harm your gear, and the bottles are non-aerosol. The 8-ounce bottles are refillable to save you money, and these products are made in the USA specifically for hunters. MSRP: $29.95; zoneprotects.com

New to **Code Blue's D/CODE line** is **Unscented Hair and Body Foam**. This is the crucial final piece of your scent-elimination program because you can apply it on the go to your hands, neck, face and beard, which is especially important whenever you work up a sweat. Keep it in your vehicle and use it on your hands after you fill your vehicle with fuel or after you finish eating some fast food before heading to your stand. This foam is tough on odors and gentle on skin, which makes it ideal for those instances when you don't have enough time to shower before hitting the woods, and it's also an ideal product to have when you're camping during a destination bowhunt without access to a shower. MSRP: $9.99; codebluescents.com

Dead Down Wind has been a trusted name in scent elimination since 2006, and its constant development led to the **ultra-premium Black line**, which has been expanded this year to include Soft Solid Antiperspirant, Solid Antiperspirant, Laundry Bombs, 40-ounce Laundry Detergent, Wash Cloths, and Dryer Sheets. Black is Dead Down Wind's most advanced formula, using critical components to get to the odor source faster and destroy it. These new offerings complete the Black system and address every angle of scent elimination so you can be as detailed as possible and stay undetected during your hunt. Black products are easy on sensitive skin, and the laundry products are gentle on your apparel to promote longevity without sacrificing a deep clean. From your hair to your socks, Dead Down Wind Black is a proven scent-eliminating system. MSRP: $8.99-29.99; deaddownwind.com

The **HR600** is the new leader of the pack in **Ozonics'** lineup of in-the-field ozone generators. More powerful than its predecessors, this model unleashes 20 percent more ozone to effectively obliterate odor molecules before they reach your quarry's nose. Although previous models weren't loud enough to spook game, some made it difficult to hear game approaching. The HR600 is rigged with an overhead air intake and a new fan to deliver whisper-quiet operation. Optimizations have been made to yield an unbelievable 13-hour battery life so you can keep the machine running during all-day hunts without swapping batteries. The bottom of the unit also features red LED lights so that hunters can get settled in and situate their gear without alerting game. The HR600 can be controlled with a remote (sold separately) or in the Ozonics app to minimize movement while hunting. In the past, customers had to send their Ozonics units back to the company in the event of infrequent coil issues, but with the new removable coil, users can replace the coil themselves. Never has ozone been more effective and user-friendly than with the HR600. MSRP: $559.99; ozonicshunting.com

The **Scent-A-Way MAX Field Kit** offers grab-and-go convenience at an incredible value, providing everything needed for your in-the-field scent-elimination needs. It includes five products: 32-ounce Field Spray, 12-ounce Field Spray, Field Wipes, Lip Balm, and the Windicator. MAX is designed to attract and attack odors at the molecular level so you can hunt more effectively by disguising your human footprint in the deer woods. From checking the wind to moisturizing chapped lips, the MAX Field Kit will help you dial in your scent-elimination program and experience peak results. MSRP: $24.99; hunterspec.com BW





BREAKING DOWN THE BIGWOODS

Looking to hunt wary whitetails where your only competition might be wolves? Start with these tips from some bigwoods fanatics.

BY MARK MELOTIK

It had been one of those marathon mornings. Into my favorite bigwoods rut stand in the inky pre-dawn, with no deer encountered on the long, winding hike in. Avoiding deer was no small victory in this spot near a prime aspen-regrowth bedding area, and I grinned at the thought on the way up into my stand. My trap was set. But now, about 10 a.m., the calm, clear and crisp morning was lacking one very important ingredient: deer.

With no special sights or sounds to quicken my pulse, I passed the morn daydreaming about all the other more-productive places I could, or should, be hunting. Little did I know things would change dramatically after just one more hard-fought hour. And how.



I'm not fanatical when it comes to hunting favorable moon phases—typically I hunt hard when I can. But the previous evening's check of the forecasted moon phase info in my HuntStand app showed the day's peak game activity stretching from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Knowing this, I vowed to give it to at least noon, maybe even 1 p.m., before any stand switch.

The activity forecast proved eerily accurate. Just 5 minutes after 11 a.m. all hell broke loose. First a pine squirrel came bolting out of the woods and up the tree next to me, 2 feet away, its loud scolding piercing the silence. Two minutes later I jumped again. Sudden, crazy-loud thrashing had erupted from the thick aspen stand just to the east. An unseen buck had snuck in and was battling the brush not 20 yards away!

I had just enough time to grab my bow from its hook, pivot on stand and draw — as the corner of my right eye caught a brown blob topped with serious headgear. I'd bent sharply at the waist and held steady as the rutty buck disappeared again — hidden behind the neighboring pine. Then, more heavy footfalls as the buck strode directly toward me. There was just one thin trail down there and so that's where I held, as a deer brisket suddenly appeared — then stopped. He was right below me. I recall pivoting to my right, watching the sight pin move slowly from brisket to shoulder to chest, then pausing. The buck was 3 yards away.

At the shot, mayhem. First the solid thunk of a good chest hit; the buck whirling, crashing, sprinting back 15 yards, maybe 20 — then hitting the brakes. It staggered and stumbled, paused a good while, then limped, slowly, away down the trail. Soon it was out of sight, swallowed by the thick aspens. Glancing below me I caught the glint of my shiny arrow, stuck vertically in dirt and painted a glistening bright red.

Hunting bigwoods deer has been a passion of mine since I first began whitetailing some 40 years ago, and the excitement still hasn't waned. I know I'm not alone. As proof, I spoke recently with three bigwoods fanatics willing to share their hard-earned secrets for success.

KYLE HERR

Although relatively new to the bigwoods game, Herr, 42, has caught on quickly, and it's no wonder. I've written

↑ Kyle Herr expends a lot of energy to get back into isolated bigwoods hot spots, but his sweat equity is worth the effort. To take this recent Wisconsin bigwoods buck, Herr made use of his ATV to run a couple miles on a narrow two-track, then pack his climber and other gear another mile on his back.



→ Kyle Herr's first goal in finding a solid bigwoods spot is getting away from local hunter pressure; he makes use of a few trail cams to locate quality day-walking bucks.

"If you have two big chunks of woods separated by a swamp, the deer will travel those swamp edges and they'll typically cross over at any available beaver dam."

before in these pages about Kyle and his father Mark, both of whom are masters at ambushing trophy bucks in suburban settings—skills honed on the outskirts of their hometown, just outside sprawling Minneapolis, MN. But a relatively recent move has given Kyle easy access to the big woods of both Minnesota and Wisconsin, and he's been making the most of it.

"For me, goal number one is getting away from pressure," Herr said. "I'm looking for areas where bucks are comfortable moving in daylight; I just don't want guys walking in and out to affect the deer in my area. And in those big woods areas it's not necessarily deer hunters. If an area is getting heavy pressure from grouse hunters, I think mature bucks avoid those areas. And if they can't, in my opinion, it's likely they're going to be nocturnal."

To find prime isolated areas Herr studies maps and takes note of any roads or two-tracks that might allow too-easy access; he also notes areas where ATV use is prohibited, a definite plus.



NATURAL FUNNELS IN HILLY TERRAIN

"I'm also looking for terrain features that will funnel deer into your lap; I really like hilly terrain," Herr said. "When you have plenty of steep hills with ravines and washouts, those things not only keep out other hunters, they help predict where deer will be traveling. I'm a big fan of isolated ridges that neck down, with fingers that shoot off into the bottoms. If you can get an area where a few of those fingers come together, those are good areas. During the rut bucks will be cruising for hot does along the downwind sides of those fingers, beginning late morning, once the local does have bedded down."

In flatter terrain Herr looks for prominent edges, including the edges of isolated balsam thickets and ash swamps. Another favorite is beaver dams.

"Cruising deer just seem to be drawn to those wetland areas with beaver dams," Herr said. "If you have two big chunks of woods separated by a swamp, the deer will travel those swamp edges and they'll typically cross over at any available beaver dam. I've killed a couple bucks like that."

↓ Herr regularly hunts both suburban and bigwoods areas for mature whitetails; lots of smart boots-on-the-ground scouting lead him to success in both areas.



AARON WARBRITTON

Warbritton, 36, of Missouri is one of 10 hunters who comprise The Hunting Public team that chronicles its hunting adventures on YouTube. One goal is to show others that "everyman" work-a-day hunters can score big on both public and private lands.

A good part of figuring out successful hunting strategies in the big woods and other remote stretches, Warbritton says, comes from familiarity with how bucks relate to specific terrain features. And the more you hunt a certain area the more helpful intel you uncover.

"Every hunt we make we go into with an open mindset, and try to learn about it," Warbritton said. "And that type of optimistic, curious attitude creates a snowball effect. Over time, you keep gathering info and data on an area, and eventually that puts you ahead of everyone else.

"The hunter that's been there for 40 years, those are the ones who are going to have the knowledge to get

around that area like no one else. It's a big advantage."

Warbritton says learning an area with maps is great, but there is no substitute for boots-on-the-ground scouting and research.

ON-SITE SCOUTING POINTS THE WAY

"There are all kinds of factors, and fine details, that you can only see by being there on site," he said. "Time spent out there is learning, and if you go in there with that mindset, and ask yourself, 'What did I learn today?' There are all kinds of details you'll discover that can be important to success."

Warbritton knows that big woods hunting can be daunting to some, and many times, simply require some good old-fashioned hard work. If you need inspiration, it might be helpful knowing many hunters aren't willing to expend the extra effort required in the big woods.



↑ This solid rub was discovered in a hilly bigwoods area that Kyle Herr prefers; the steep terrain limits competition yet offers ridges and fingers that provide predictable travel paths for cruising bucks looking for does.

"Sometimes we try to work harder, and sometimes we try to work smarter," Warbritton said. "Ultimately, it's all about the landscape and the holes that are in it. We've had some great hunts that were within sight of the parking area, that most people walk right by. It might be a thicket that can hold only two-three deer, but if a doe in heat is in there it can hold a great buck."

↓ For the author, this three-image sequence shows both the allure and challenge of some isolated Upper Midwest bigwoods hotspots. Despite this being the same stand site on public land, the author believes the solid buck below (top photo) grew into this monster (below; middle photo) 2 years later. However, a pair of wolves cruised through the area just a few hours later (bottom photo). Without much doubt, the author believes the large predators have negatively impacted several hunts in the area.









Proven Bigwoods Gear

Like many whitetailers I like to stay mobile when hunting bigwoods areas, which means compact hang-ons and climbing sticks, and saddle systems.

One of my all-time favorite hang-ons, a great mix of compact roominess and light weight, is the Lone Wolf Custom Gear D'Acquisto Series Hang-On 1.0 ($599.99), which weighs 8.1 pounds and is constructed of 6061 American Made Metal. Those looking for further weight savings should check out the company's similarly constructed .75 Hang-On (7.5 pounds) and .5 Hang-on (5.8 pounds). I pair my 1.0 with LWCG Compact Climbing Sticks ($109 each) that I also use with my saddle.

When I need a truly ultralight option, over the last couple seasons I've been very impressed with Trophyline's Venatic Saddle ($319.99), the lightest and most comfortable I've used. I simply wear it while on the way to where I'm going and half the time forget it's there. The ultralight ripstop fabric is so thin it almost appears fragile, yet is tough as nails.

I've been pairing my Venatic with the Trophyline EDP Platform ($189.99) that's another good mix of light weight (3 lb. 13 oz.) and compact size (13.5 wide by 13 inches deep).

For hauling around either stand/saddle option I've been impressed with the roominess (2,200 cubic inches) and versatility of the Sitka Cargo Box pack ($419.99). With 23 storage compartments you have room for all your hunt accessories plus rain gear and lunch, but I really like the unique way this smart design holds either a hang-on or saddle platform in comfort and silence, while easily toting four climbing sticks.



BRAD KUHNERT

Kuhnert has lived in far northern Wisconsin for the past 40 years, and has bagged some very impressive bucks there. Now in his 60s, Kuhnert has worked with Lone Wolf Custom Gear to develop a saddle-hunting platform he perfected in the bigwoods, and this year they've introduced an all-new saddle harness he believes will greatly simplify that specialized pursuit.

Like many big-buck experts Kuhnert is adept at reading sign, and he knows the difference between hunting where you have your best chances for success, versus where a tree will let you. That's why Kuhnert was a pioneer of saddle hunting back in the 80s—a tactic he continues to promote today.

↑ Northern Wisconsin's Brad Kuhnert has had a long, successful career targeting mature bigwoods bucks. As one of the pioneers of saddle hunting, Kuhnert believes they are ideal for ambushing bigwoods bucks in some of their favorite haunts that can't hold full-size treestands.



↑ Aaron Warbritton (left) of The Hunting Public team knows the value of boots-on-the-ground scouting that, over time, helps uncover subtle clues that lead to more success in bigwoods areas.

"A lot of the areas I was hunting in northern Wisconsin, were slashings [clearcuts] next to hardwoods, and out in those slashings it's hard to find a tree that can support a hang-on," Kuhnert explained. "But with a saddle and small platform, I can get in most any tree in the woods."

Kuhnert says ultimate stealth is a huge factor in ambushing cagey mature bigwoods bucks, and smart access that prevents the local deer from knowing he's around is critical.

"Once I find an area I want to hunt, one of the key things is getting in and out undetected," Kuhnert advises.

When locating those prime areas Kuhnert leans on his well-honed ability to read and interpret available sign.

"What I like to do is narrow down a spot, from everything that I can see, where my best shot at this buck will be within a 100-yard area," Kuhnert said. "Once I narrow that down, then I'll see, what is my best access?"

The next step for Kuhnert is setting up three to five stand locations, which consider all wind directions.

"Then I'll hunt that area, day in and day out, especially in the pre rut. Up here, I believe bucks are on a three to five-day cycle, or rotation, through their core area, and you've just got to wait them out."

One of Kuhnert's tell-tale signs that he's found a mature bigwoods buck is track size. And although you likely can find hunters who believe large tracks don't automatically equate to a large buck—or even a buck versus a doe—that's not been Kuhnert's experience. In Kuhnert's bigwoods haunts big tracks mean big bucks, and once found it's time to piece together preferred trails and travel patterns.

A FAVORITE STRATEGY

Many hunters struggle with bigwoods stand placement, but Kuhnert uses a unique strategy to tip the odds in his favor. In the spring, when he finds what he believes is a big-buck trail, Kuhnert will use downed branches and logs to block a portion of the trail, to force the deer using it to travel north and south for several yards.

"The reason I want the buck to travel north and south, is because the prevailing wind in my hunting area is from the west," Kuhnert explained. "So I can set up on the east side of that trail but if things change I can just take my saddle and in 10-15 minutes, move to the west side. You don't often find areas where those big mature deer are traveling cross-wind, but with this setup I have a real advantage."

PATIENCE IS A MUST

Kuhnert stresses there are few

shortcuts to big-buck encounters in the big woods, and patience is critical. "When you hunt the big woods, you've got to be willing to not see deer every day, but still have confidence that if you did your scouting right, good things will happen," Kuhnert says. "I've always believed that if I was in a well-chosen stand from morning to dark, for five days in a row, I would more than likely see the deer I had targeted."

LATE CAN BE GREAT

Logging many hours on stand in the big woods during the rut—for several consecutive days— can test the mettle of the toughest hunters. By late November physical and mental burnout can be a real factor. But if your tag remains unfilled Kuhnert warns against hanging up your big woods gear too soon.

> **"When you hunt the big woods, you've got to be willing to not see deer every day, but still have the confidence that if you did your scouting right, good things will happen."**

"After the gun deer season, the second whitetail rut can hit around the middle of December," Kuhnert advised. "This is a great time to be out bowhunting, for several reasons. There is very little deer hunting pressure at this time, and the bigger bucks seem to be up on their feet feeding more during daylight — and they're looking for those last does that haven't been bred."

FINAL THOUGHTS

Are you ready for the bigwoods challenge? Take heart that it will likely be a rollercoaster run of highs and lows, but in the end, if you do your part, as satisfying a hunt as there is. Case is point is my recent buck encounter detailed earlier. Despite what appeared to be a slam-dunk recovery, the hard-hit buck had other ideas. After bumping the deer from its first bed, the blood trail petered out and the deer moved farther into the surrounding sea of cat-hair thick aspen regrowth. After combing the area for most of 2 days and coming up empty, my travel schedule prevented more searching, but redemption loomed.

In March I returned to find the cleaned carcass and heavy, palmated 9-point rack of that 5.5-year-old bigwoods buck; the area was so thick I'd walked within 30 yards of its final bed a few times in the days after it was shot. Then another surprise: I soon recognized it as the same buck I'd captured on trail camera 2 years previous, as an impressive 3.5 year old. It remains one of my favorite bowhunting trophies, and I'll be back out there this fall looking for another. BW







BE PREPARED!

Be it prepping your gear or carefully choosing your hunting spots, "showing up" entails some serious forethought and planning.

BY CHUCK ADAMS

It is commonly said that 80 percent of success is simply showing up. I believe it. If you aren't out there sitting on stand or hiking the hills, you certainly won't fill your game tag.

But showing up in bowhunting means more than just hitting the woods. Success should start long before archery season begins. You need to lay careful groundwork so nothing goes wrong later on.

Here are two examples of what I mean. One friend of mine patterned a big whitetail buck near his home by glassing summer food plots and monitoring trail camera footage. On opening day, that massive 5x5 walked right under my pal's stand. He drew, lowered his bow for the steep shooting angle … and watched in horror as his bowsight clattered to the ground!



↑ Shooting a hunting bow can be pure pleasure when arrows fly perfectly without the slightest wobble.

He had neglected to tighten the quick-detach knob on the sight, and it slid away from the bow like a bad dream. Try as he might, my friend never saw that smart old deer again. As I'll discuss later, paying attention to such bow attachments should be part of showing up long before the hunt begins.

Another buddy loves to bowhunt pronghorns over water. He purchased a new trigger release last spring, and decided that shooting was more comfortable if he kept his index finger in front of the trigger as he drew.

Then pronghorn season began. After 3 days of waiting, a massive-horned buck sauntered to the stock tank. My friend was sitting in a windmill above the water, and drew for the first time on his perch. His elbow smacked a steel strut behind him, the jarring collision jerked his bowstring hand, and his trigger finger crushed the release. The arrow sailed over the largest pronghorn my buddy saw the entire season. No big surprise that the whopper never visited that windmill site again.

When shooting on his backyard target, my pronghorn-loving friend should have thought twice before drawing with his finger forward of the trigger. In a perfect world — which is never the case on a bowhunt — the technique might work fine. But it didn't work on the windmill. If the guy had tried a practice draw or two after he climbed into his stand, he might have nailed the buck. Better to bump your elbow with no animals around to miss.

PRESEASON PREP

Preparing for a bowhunt should begin months before you go afield. Nobody shoots with tip-top archery form unless they practice to strengthen muscles and sharpen their aiming eye. If there's a winter archery league near where you live, it would be wise to participate. Target shooting during the off season is fun, especially with other enthusiastic archers. It also lets you work out bugs in your shooting form at a relaxed and leisurely pace.



↑ A perfectly tuned bow will shoot "bullet holes" through stretched paper with a tape-wrapped arrow.



↑ You should spin your hunting arrows over rollers to check for the slightest wobble in nock, shaft, or broadhead. Wobble can degrade accuracy.

Shared shooting or not, you need to show up for some target practice and serious bow adjustment at least 2 months before you hunt. I have a modest indoor archery range in my basement that lets me tinker with gear and get it just right.

Among my most important tools are an EZ-Green bow press from Last Chance Archery, a draw board from the same company, an accurate grain scale, ball-bearing arrow rollers, a bow poundage scale, and a homemade paper-tuning easel made of PVC pipe. I use all of these before bow season to make sure my gear is exactly right.

I'm extra-picky about shooting gear, but it pays off. I show up in my basement in late spring to sort and spin arrows. I will not hunt with shafts unless they spin exactly true over rollers. Tests by Easton and others have shown that a wobbling nock, shaft or broadhead can degrade accuracy. Nock and broadhead are most crucial, especially if you use fixed-blade heads. Even a mechanical broadhead flies better if it spins true over rollers.

All my serious hunting arrows weigh within plus-or-minus 1 grain. If you put your "ammo" on a scale, you might be amazed how much shafts and broadheads vary in weight. This can affect arrow speed or front-of-center balance, which in turn can degrade your bow/arrow tune.

Tuning your setup should not be difficult, provided you have purchased the correct arrow size to match your bow. I always double-check draw length and draw weight of my hunting bow well before season, using the bow press and draw board to make adjustments if necessary. All my release-aid setups are set at 70 pounds with a 27.5-inch draw. Any well-stocked archery shop can check such things if you don't own the necessary equipment.

Next comes tuning. Strip vanes or feathers from your straightest arrow, weigh all the fletching, and cut a strip of plastic electrical tape that matches fletching weight. Wrap this tape around the shaft in the exact area where fletching was glued. This will give you a "tuning arrow" that launches from the bow exactly like a fletched arrow, but minus the steerage of fletching. A tape-wrapped bare shaft is super-sensitive, and shows the slightest arrow flight problem.



↑ A tape-wrapped tuning arrow will let you precisely remove the slightest wobble from arrow flight.

Adjust your arrow rest, bowstring nocking point, bow draw weight, and other factors according to manufacturer's instructions. There are excellent bow tuning videos available on the Internet, but most show tuning with arrow fletching intact. A tape-wrapped tuning arrow is more precise.

Your no-fletch tuning arrow with a field point should make a neat "bullet hole" through stretched paper from 6, 10 and 20 feet. You must eliminate the slightest tail-high, tail-low, tail-right or tail-left paper tear.

The final step is paper tuning with a broadhead. Install a head on the tape-wrapped shaft, spin it to make sure there's no wobble, and shoot from 8 or 10 feet. The only hole in paper should be made by the broadhead, with the nock end following precisely though the broadhead cut. At that point, your setup is tuned, and will probably group arrows better than you ever thought possible.

"Shared shooting or not, you need to show up for some target practice and serious bow adjustment at least 2 months before you hunt."

Please note that anything you change in your setup will alter the tune.

Arrowheads must weigh the same, and so must your bow. If you add a bow quiver, change bowsight or stabilizer, or do anything else, you must tune again.

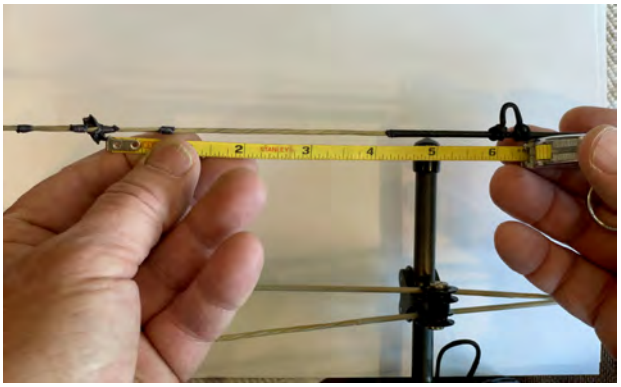
All bow attachments such as arrow rest, bowsight, release-aid D-loop on the string, stabilizer, and bow quiver should be solidly anchored in place. Worst-case is having a horror show like my friend did when his bowsight fell



↑ It is wise to tighten and dab all bow attachment screws and bolts with fletching cement to prevent unexpected movement or noise.

off the bow. More likely are slipped connections that ruin the tune, or loose nuts or screws that loudly rattle when you shoot. All can affect a precious shot at game.

Once the nuts, bolts, and screws on my bow are snug, I dab each head with fletching cement like Bohning Fletch-Tite so there's no chance of anything moving. Then I take a few key bow measurements that I can check every few days on a hunt — brace height of the string, distance from handle riser to arrow rest, upper compound axle to top of D-loop, bottom of bowstring peep to top of D-loop, etc. If anything moves on my hunting bow in the field, I'll instantly know it and be able to correct the problem before I shoot at game.



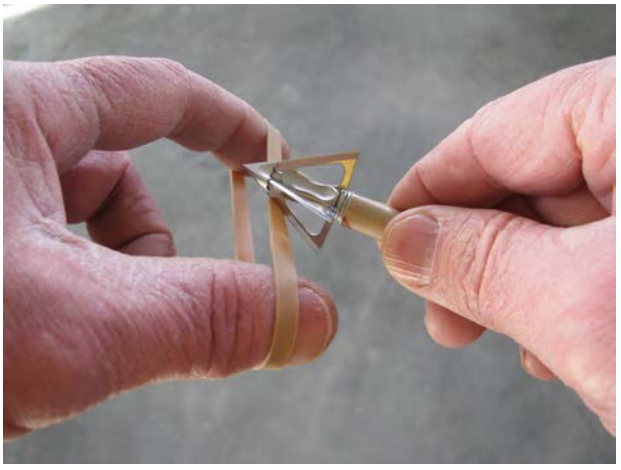
→ A few key measurements make it easy to check the status of your bow during a hunt.

DEADLY BROADHEADS

Another crucial way to "show up" before archery season is making sure your big game broadheads are perfect. As already discussed, they need to spin precisely over arrow rollers, with no visible wobble. Some heads, like the Magnus Stingers I currently prefer, are so well machined that they almost never wobble when attached. Others might need to be jockeyed around by pressing the tip against a block of wood and applying gentle pressure in one direction or another.

Also important is broadhead sharpness. If they won't easily shave hair, they need to be honed or discarded. One easy way to test an edge is dragging it across a rubber band stretched between thumb and forefinger. A shaving-keen head will slice the band with little or no pressure.

The alternative to sharp broadheads can be sad. One fellow I know decided to cut costs a couple of years ago. He purchased economy broadheads, screwed them to his arrows, and went hunting for elk on a mountain near my home. A few days later, he gave me a call.



↑ Broadhead sharpness is easily determined by dragging an edge across a stretched rubber band.

"I have a problem," he moaned. "I shot a bull through the lungs, but he walked 200 yards and disappeared. I can't find blood. Will you help me look?"

I don't necessarily believe that every double-lung shot I hear about was actually through the lungs. Arrows hit high, low or too far back as an overly excited bowhunter sees what he wants to see. But my acquaintance was experienced enough to give me hope.

We did find his bull — 2 days later and a half-mile away. Coyotes and ravens had enjoyed a fine feast. The antlers were beautiful, so not all was lost. Enough of the carcass was still intact to show a clear broadhead entry hole almost exactly in the center of the lung area. I held my nose and turned the beast over with a stout stick. The exit hole was perfect, too. Clearly a double-lung pass-through.

"Let me see your arrows," I said.

The broadheads looked great, but edges skated across my arm without slicing a single hair. I tested an edge with my thumb — gingerly at first — and realized it would not even cut skin. The guy admitted he had not checked for sharpness, and he paid the price. That bull would

have dropped in sight with a Magnus, G5 Striker, NAP Thunderhead or any other scary-sharp broadhead. As it was, the cheaper head had plowed through tissue and let the bull stagger many times farther than it should have. Check broadhead edges before you hunt!

DON'T FORGET THE DETAILS

Preparing for a bowhunt should cover more subtle but equally important things. Something as simple as installing a fresh battery in your rangefinder or cleaning binocular lenses might enhance chances of success. I know a guy who stalked a mule deer in Colorado and discovered too late that his laser rangefinder was dead. He guessed the distance, and shot a foot under the deer.



Another bowhunter told me he tried to glass an elk with the morning sun in his face, but lenses on his rangefinder binocular were so soiled he couldn't see clearly through the glare. The rutting bull stood a few seconds and wandered off.

The coloration and surfaces of your hunting clothes can also make or break success. I have always favored knitted wool because it is amazingly quiet to the touch. Unlike many attractive synthetic garments, wool absorbs light rather than reflecting it.

Just last year, I watched a bowhunting partner climb a distant slope. He was wearing the most expensive camo clothing money can buy—duds that looked great in the store. But the slick synthetic surfaces almost glowed in early morning light. It is wise to check out garments you plan to wear hunting by draping them over a bush or log and then backing off to moderate archery-shooting distance. You might be unpleasantly surprised how dramatically they stand out.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Showing up means more than just charging into the woods. The most successful bowhunters scout before they hunt, checking out multiple places before they decide where game is most plentiful, or what sort of terrain gives them an edge.

For example, I tried one place in Montana where elk populations are superb, but the countryside is broken with almost no change in elevation. After hunting there for a couple of days, I realized there was no such thing as consistent wind direction. Every bugling elk I chased smelled me on shifting currents. I decided to move several miles to a high ridge with dependable morning and evening downdrafts. There were not as many elk, but I stalked and dropped a bull with a steady breeze in my face.



↑ Carefully tuned gear helped the author take this big Alberta mule deer beyond 40 yards.

The same principle applies to places I spot-and-stalk pronghorns. I avoid big, sweeping vistas loaded with "goats" because the critters can see me as well as I can see them. I seek out choppy foothills that let me lurk in low places and avoid those awesome pronghorn eyes.

I've learned through experience that your success in the field will come down to your skills as a hunter, and certainly luck plays a bit of a role, too. And as I stated previously, simply showing up is critical. That said, your chances of tagging an animal go up dramatically with proper scouting and diligent preparation of gear. BW





MORE THAN JUST EYESIGHT.

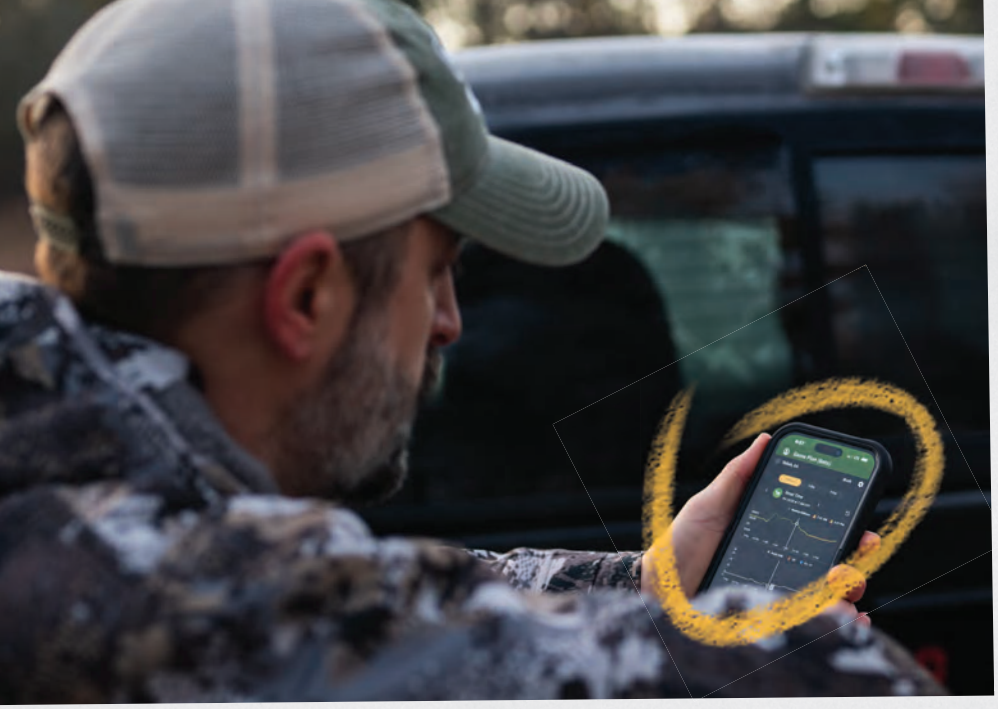
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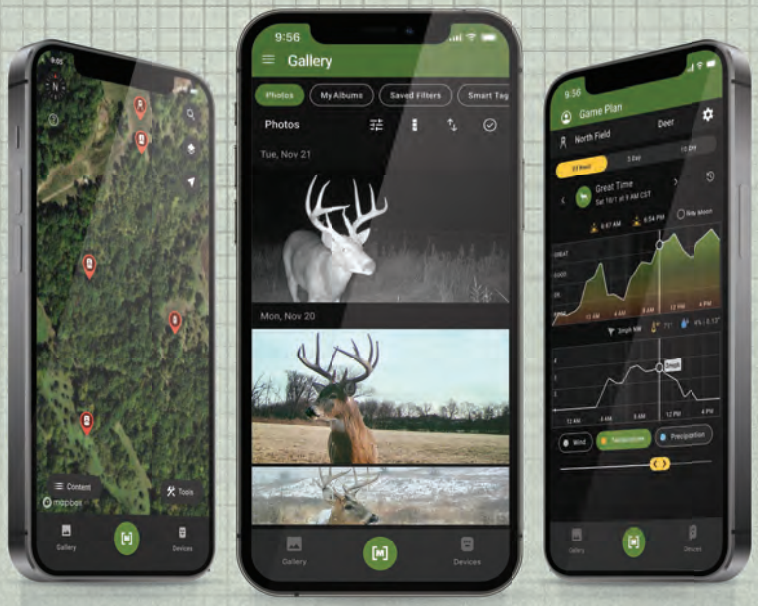
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RUT CRAZINESS REALITY CHECK

Smart whitetail hunters will consider several factors as the rut approaches and then set sound expectations.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY MARK KAYSER

The whitetail rut resembles something of a white elephant gift game during the holidays. At the end of the game, you might be holding the best gift of all or walking away with a dud if you gambled during the swaps. The reason the rut becomes a white elephant gamble relates to the fact you just never know what could show up on your hunting property when breeding launches.

During summer, early fall and pre-rut, you get a solid review of the whitetail buck gifts on your property. Bachelor groups often mingle in daylight, and once the pre-rut testosterone boost begins, your trail cameras beg for batteries to keep up with the action. The gamble begins as estrus nears if you have not filled your tag. Do you hold out for one of several garden variety bucks on your property, wager on that one mature buck is lurking in the shadows, or really venture a chance that a once-in-a-lifetime buck appears out of nowhere to become a grand white elephant prize?



↑ Rutting bucks can show up any time, anywhere. Stay alert!

ARE YOU BOWHUNTING IN REALITY?

A few seasons back, racing into my third decade of serious whitetail bowhunting, I was setting my whitetail goals higher and higher. Each season I strived to shoot a bigger buck than the previous year. Admittedly, I kicked off my whitetail hunting by living in a good Midwestern region and traveled to hunt, but looking back, I was not particularly savvy about realistic goals.

I could run into a whopper anywhere I hunted in the Midwest and Great Plains regions I tromped, but not every property was whopper worthy. And not every county could produce a top-notch, mature animal. In some farmland areas, the hunting pressure was just too intense for bucks to get old, and other areas simply didn't have the genetics to push a buck into trophy territory. Regardless, I held dreams of giants and often passed on good-sized bucks to keep up the search for the best white elephant gift out there. Many times, I returned home with no rack and an empty cooler.

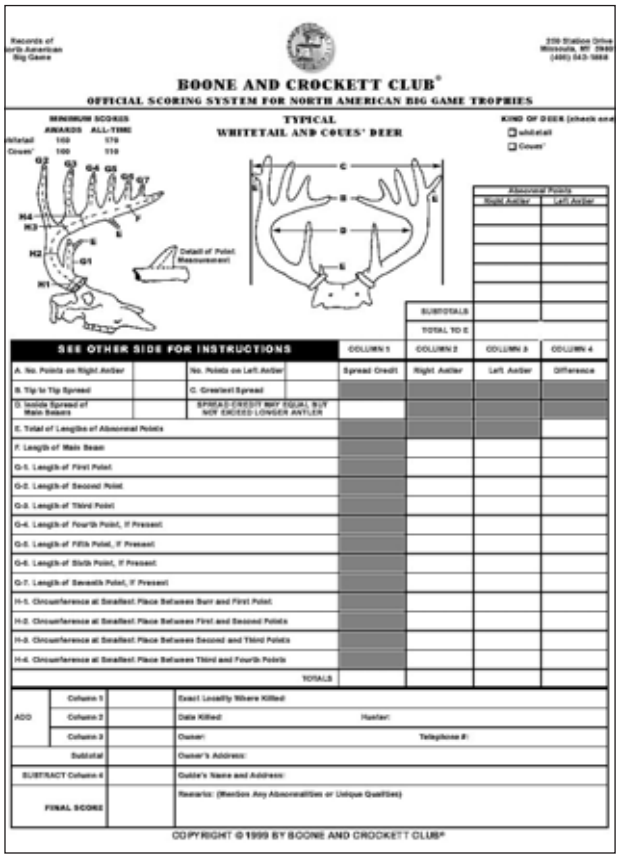
Experience has taught me to evaluate areas with more scrutiny, and my addiction to shed antler hunting boosted the notion I might be setting my sights too high for some hunts. I simply did not find giant sheds while scouring hunting properties. Over the years, my accumulating pile of shed antlers told a real story, if only I would have listened. I eventually began to set my sights for a good hunt, not a crusade for the Holy Grail unless I had solid evidence of its existence.

This all sounds logical until you consider the previously noted rut. The white elephant gift could show up unexpectedly. Depending on your whitetail hunting



→ The author usually hunts for a mature buck during the rut craziness and worries about score later.

"I eventually began to set my sights for a good hunt, not a crusade for the Holy Grail unless I had solid evidence of its existence."



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KIND OF DEER (check one) ☐ whitetail ☐ Coues'

SEE OTHER SIDE FOR INSTRUCTIONS

			COLUMN 1	COLUMN 2	COLUMN 3	COLUMN 4
A. No. Points on Right Antler		No. Points on Left Antler		Spread Credit	Right Antler	Left Antler	Difference
B. Tip to Tip Spread		C. Greatest Spread					
D. Inside Spread of Main Beams		SPREAD CREDIT MAY EQUAL BUT NOT EXCEED LONGER ANTLER					
E. Total of Lengths of Abnormal Points							
F. Length of Main Beam							
G-1. Length of First Point							
G-2. Length of Second Point							
G-3. Length of Third Point							
G-4. Length of Fourth Point, If Present							
G-5. Length of Fifth Point, If Present							
G-6. Length of Sixth Point, If Present							
G-7. Length of Seventh Point, If Present							
H-1. Circumference at Smallest Place Between Burr and First Point							
H-2. Circumference at Smallest Place Between First and Second Points							
H-3. Circumference at Smallest Place Between Second and Third Points							
H-4. Circumference at Smallest Place Between Third and Fourth Points							
TOTALS							

ADD: Column 1 | Column 2 | Column 3 | Subtotal
SUBTRACT Column 4
FINAL SCORE

Exact Locality Where Killed:
Date Killed: Hunter:
Owner: Telephone #:
Owner's Address:
Guide's Name and Address:
Remarks: (Mention Any Abnormalities or Unique Qualities)

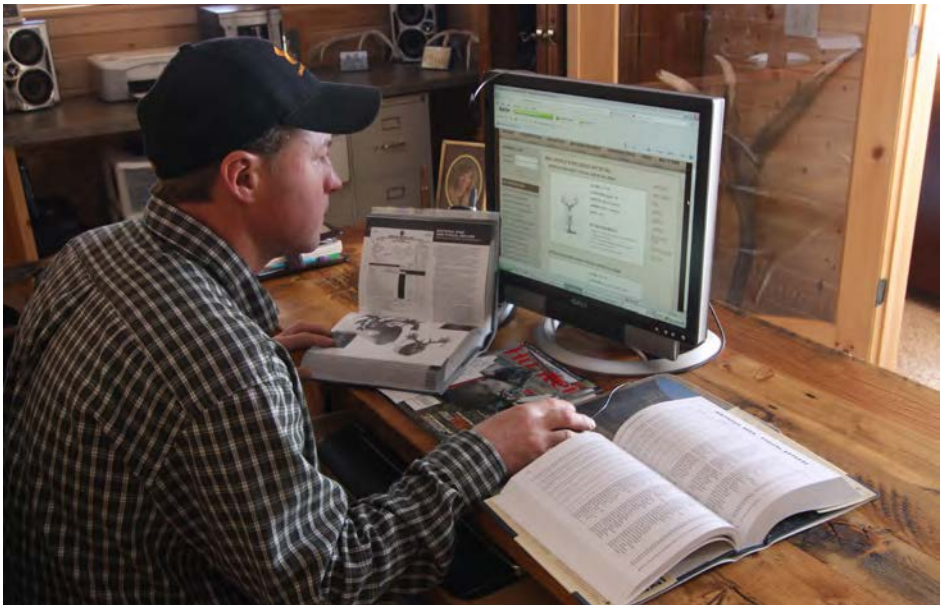
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➔ The Boone and Crockett Club has the same score sheet for typical whitetail and typical Coues deer.

region of choice, new data suggests that whitetails begin a wider search for estrus does during the brief window of breeding. Whereas most bucks adhere to a 1-square-mile home before the rut, GPS data illustrates some bucks traveling 3 miles or more away from that area to search for an estrus doe. Most bucks return, typically after a 3-day hiatus, but they could leave again before returning to their digs for good.

In addition to a solid preseason assessment of your property, you need to be aware of the possibilities awaiting you on surrounding property. In brief, set your goals for unachievable results. There is nothing wrong with having goals and objectives, but do it with purpose that is driven by reality.

Here are some ways to ensure you aren't setting your goals too high for the coming season and keeping the door open for a rut surprise.



↓ Recordkeeping organizations are a good place to start your research.

RESEARCH LIKE A THINK TANK EMPLOYEE

Before you decide on your trophy aspirations, you need to take an honest look at your current hunting area. Begin with looking back at the bucks you have shot, what your friends have taken, and what some of the better hunting properties in the area have produced, especially neighboring lands.

Do not overlook what others have been taking in a hunting area. Hunting

My Favorite Midwest Rut Stand

When the rut explodes and you see deer everywhere one day, but nowhere the next, you need to make drastic choices on your stand selection. For me, I prefer the periphery. Unless food plots continue to be active, I retreat from edges and slink back into the shadows. Timbered corridors that sit adjacent to either major food sources or significant bedding cover stand out as my rutting whitetail favorite stand locations.

A hunting app such as HuntStand helps to pinpoint the best of periphery pathways. The junction of coulees, creek bottoms, draws and hidden benches all show up using various mapping aids. Use topographical layers, 3D flyovers and hybrid mapping to uncover these travel corridors hidden under a canopy of trees.

One of my preferred rut stands sits at the bottom of a heavily timbered draw, below an upland food plot and at the junction of a seasonal creek. Bucks habitually visit the food plot under cover of darkness, but cruise the draw and dry creek bed all day during the rut as they seek females. Pack a sandwich and sit in the periphery of traditional hotspots for rut action.

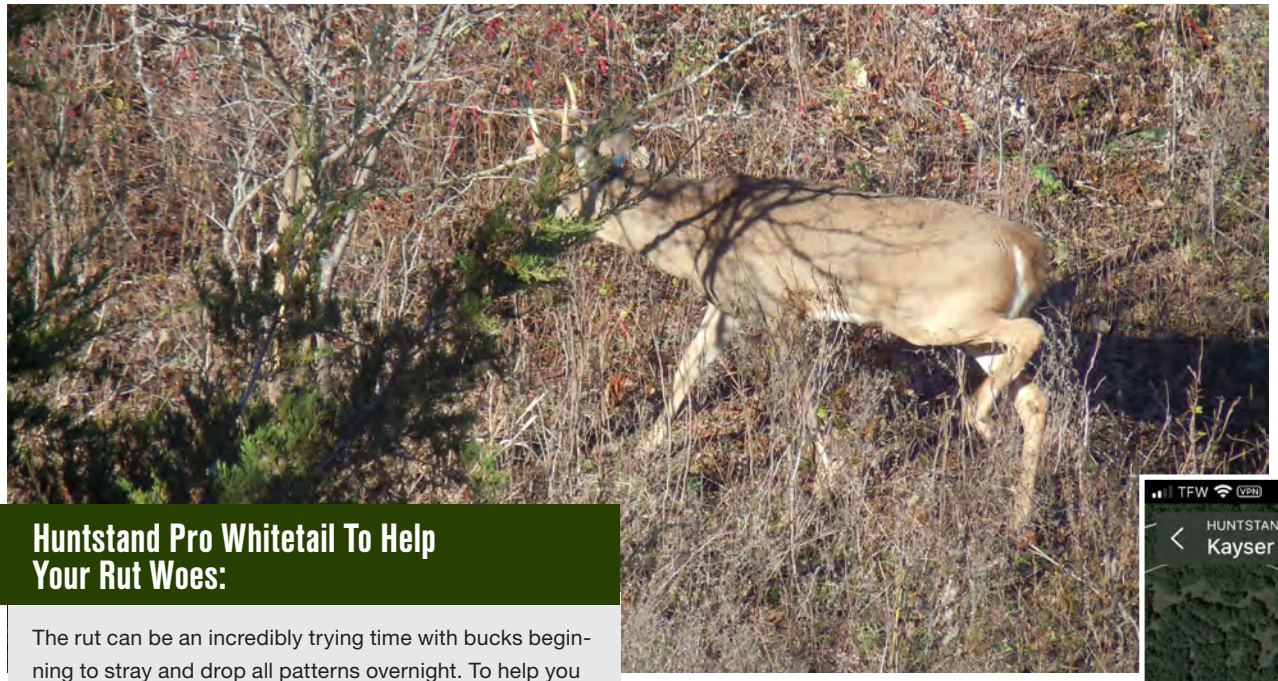
contacts in the area, social media forums and even big buck social media accounts can splash some light on the trophy quality of an area. Some areas may even hold trophy buck contests with results posted online from the previous year along with winning scores. Of course, many of those contests are statewide and probably won't provide specific locations of where a trophy was taken.

Two trophy-scoring organizations can help you with precise trophy determination, Boone and Crockett, and Pope and Young. Both use the same scoring system, but P&Y accepts only archery records whereas B&C accepts all legally shot animals and even trophies found dead in the field. Who cares — it still shows you what is possible in an area.

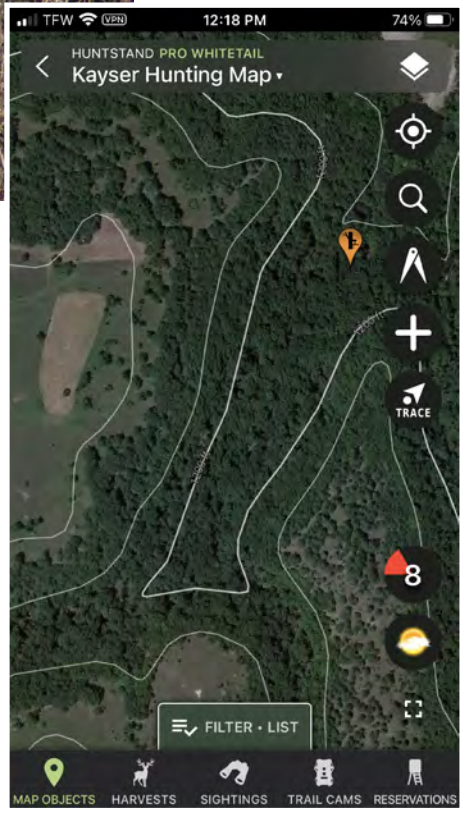
Trophies are scored through a combination of measurements including length of points, length of main beams, circumferences and the inside spread. Scoring calculation is based on inches, but recorded as points. B&C minimums for inclusion are higher than those of P&Y. As an example, B&C accepts typical whitetails of 170 points or higher for its all-time records, and P&Y accepts typical whitetails scoring 125 inches or higher.

You can review scores online, and both organizations have different programs to allow access to their records. Accessing the records is a worthwhile investment to track down accurate information on a future hunting location or a way to confirm outfitter claims if pay-to-play is in your future.

As you scour pages of data, you should focus on two components: county and date. The county of the recorded kill is an obvious no brainer to give you insight on whether a region can consistently produce high-end bucks. A plethora of listings, like you see in Buffalo County, Wisconsin, says it all. This is the nation's top whitetail producing county and the records show it. Just as important, be sure to check dates of kills. This is important because deer populations, management and other factors may significantly



← During the whitetail breeding season, bucks will search widely for a doe in heat at any time of the day or night. Tip: Hunt all day so you don't miss the action!



↓ This stand always provides ample action for Kayser when breeding begins as whitetails cruise the hidden corridor.

Huntstand Pro Whitetail To Help Your Rut Woes:

The rut can be an incredibly trying time with bucks beginning to stray and drop all patterns overnight. To help you with craziness and inconsistencies, consider hunting app help such as HuntStand. If you are new to HuntStand, you will stumble onto it with the opportunity for the free version, but to get more out of it, especially for whitetail information, consider HuntStand Pro Whitetail. It is a subscription for $69.99, a deal when compared to many hunting apps and what you receive for your dollar.

What is the difference between free and the subscription option? With Pro Whitetail you receive a wealth of whitetail information including detailed rut activity models for your exact area. You receive all HuntStand enhanced maps and tools, plus a 15-day peak whitetail activity forecast and detailed movement times. Add to that the United States rut and whitetail map for detailed hunt planning. Property boundary layers, topographical layers, 3D maps and specific weather forecasts also help you with making sense of the whitetail rut. Check it out and more at huntstand.com.



↑ The author is an avid shed antler hunter and uses his finds to evaluate properties he bowhunts for whitetails.

trophy quality over time.

Common sense will tell you that if you uncover lots of entries over 140 points for P&Y, you will probably want to set your sights on that goal. If you find only a handful of scores barely hitting P&Y's minimum of 125, then you might be better served setting your goals a bit lower.

A hunt I pulled off a few seasons back offers a prime example of holding out for a good buck due to my thorough research. I had drawn Iowa and Kansas archery tags, both equally good for giants. I started in Kansas, but the rut had not kicked off with gusto and buck sightings were few, so I drove to Iowa. There, I started seeing the beginning of the rut, but not the buck quality I hoped for.

That's when my Kansas buddy texted me that a bruiser had appeared on trail camera with some consistency. I packed my duffel and drove back to Kansas. The hunt was not a slam dunk, but after another 4 days of hunting, the heavy-duty buck appeared again, and this time I was waiting. Passing other bucks and putting on the miles between the two states paid off with my best buck to date, a bruiser gross scoring 180 points (**SEE PAGE ??**).

Fast-forward two seasons and trail cameras were not confirming any giant bucks on the same Kansas property. Even so, several 150-class bucks called the oak hills home, and after a week of bowhunting I had a chance encounter with a mature buck in that category. I cut loose an arrow and was more than pleased scoring on an older buck that fit my definition of a satisfactory hunt.

FIELD JUDGE LIKE A PRO

Whether you decide to jump into the trophy ring or not, you will have to brush up on your field judging abilities. Field judging is the ability to gauge a buck quickly and accurately, either through antler score/frame or body size. For antler aficionados, let's look at field judging antlers first.



It takes years of experience, knowledge of antler scoring systems, and getting your hands on a lot of racks to field judge accurately. Even with years of practice, some people just cannot field judge effectively due to buck fever, hasty calculations and poor optics.

My hunting experience over several decades has helped me acquire fair field judging skills. At home, I know the scores of the whitetails on my wall. I look at them on and off all day, so their dimensions burn into my mind. In the field, I can mentally place a rack of mine up against a buck I am field judging to get a solid idea of the buck's true score. This usually puts me within 10 inches.

For those who often hunt like me during the rut, searching for a mature buck instead of a score-worthy dude, use this method of field judging. Bucks make huge jumps in antler growth between 2.5 and 3.5 years of age, and from 3.5 years to 4.5. They reach most of their potential by the time they are 4.5 years old. Being able to differentiate a 2.5-year-old from a 4.5-year-old can boost the possibility for bruiser bucks on your property, plus targeting older bucks that may never jump into the trophy league.

Years back, Dr. Grant Woods, a wildlife biologist and host of the popular GrowingDeer.tv deer management program, shared with me an easy technique to age bucks without years of experience. You simply must visualize a buck in front of you balancing on a wooden 2x4 board. Mentally place the board crossways behind its front legs as it's supported on each side.

For 1.5-year-olds, skip the board and do a quick body inspection. If the deer looks like it is all legs and has the features of an average-sized doe, it's a 1.5-year-old buck. The buck might sport spikes or a small rack, but it will look like an antlered doe with a slim neck. Pass on it unless you simply want to fill the freezer.

If you suspect an older buck, deploy the 2x4 board trick. Imagine the wooden board behind the front legs of a buck as it's wedged up against the chest. Now envision a friend on the other side helping you lift the board as the buck stands on all fours. If the buck tips backward it's a 2.5-year-old; his chest and neck is light compared to his hind quarters.



Aging bucks gets trickier as they grow older. Muscles bulge, chests and necks enlarge, and racks can be very, very tempting. Keep your eye off the rack and mentally put the board trick back to work. Using the 2x4 test, a 3.5-year-old will balance evenly when the beam is lifted; his chest and neck are large enough to balance with his hind quarters. If this buck has an average rack or has potential, you still might want to give him a free pass depending on the trophy potential in your area.

At 4.5 and 5.5 years of age, put the 2x4 aside and begin to look for a huge front end and these other characteristics. Look for a large muscular structure, a sagging gut and drooping back line. Bucks beyond 5.5 years old are at 100 percent, and hoping for them to grow larger by passing on them could cost you the experience of a lifetime.

FINAL THOUGHTS

There is nothing wrong with having trophy aspirations and trying to best your best. Just do it with a smart plan to ensure you are hunting with purpose, especially during the rut. Anything can happen, but with research and a plan, you stand a much higher chance of scoring a memorable hunt this rutting season. BW

Field-Judging Excellence With The Sig Sauer Kilo6

Sig Sauer Electro-Optics' latest addition for a lightweight optic is the KILO6K HD Compact binocular rangefinder. It is available in both 8x32 and 10x32 versions depending on your magnification needs. It truly is compact. The overall length of the Compact is just 5.7 inches with a height of a mere 2.2 inches for both powers. The overall width is 5 inches. The weight is 1.625 pounds. It works as advertised with a device that ranges in single-digit yards, plus you can range reflective surfaces to 6,000 yards, big game to 2,500 yards and trees, and bushes to 3,000 yards. You can use it for both close-range bowhunting and put it to use if you are a two-season hunter. I tested it from the Wyoming backcountry to the Midwest whitetail woods for a thumbs up. Visit Sig Sauer Electro-Optics at sigsauer.com.



← The author held out for a giant due to research and solid scouting to tag his best archery buck, a whitetail with a 180-point gross score.

BIG SHOT TARGETS

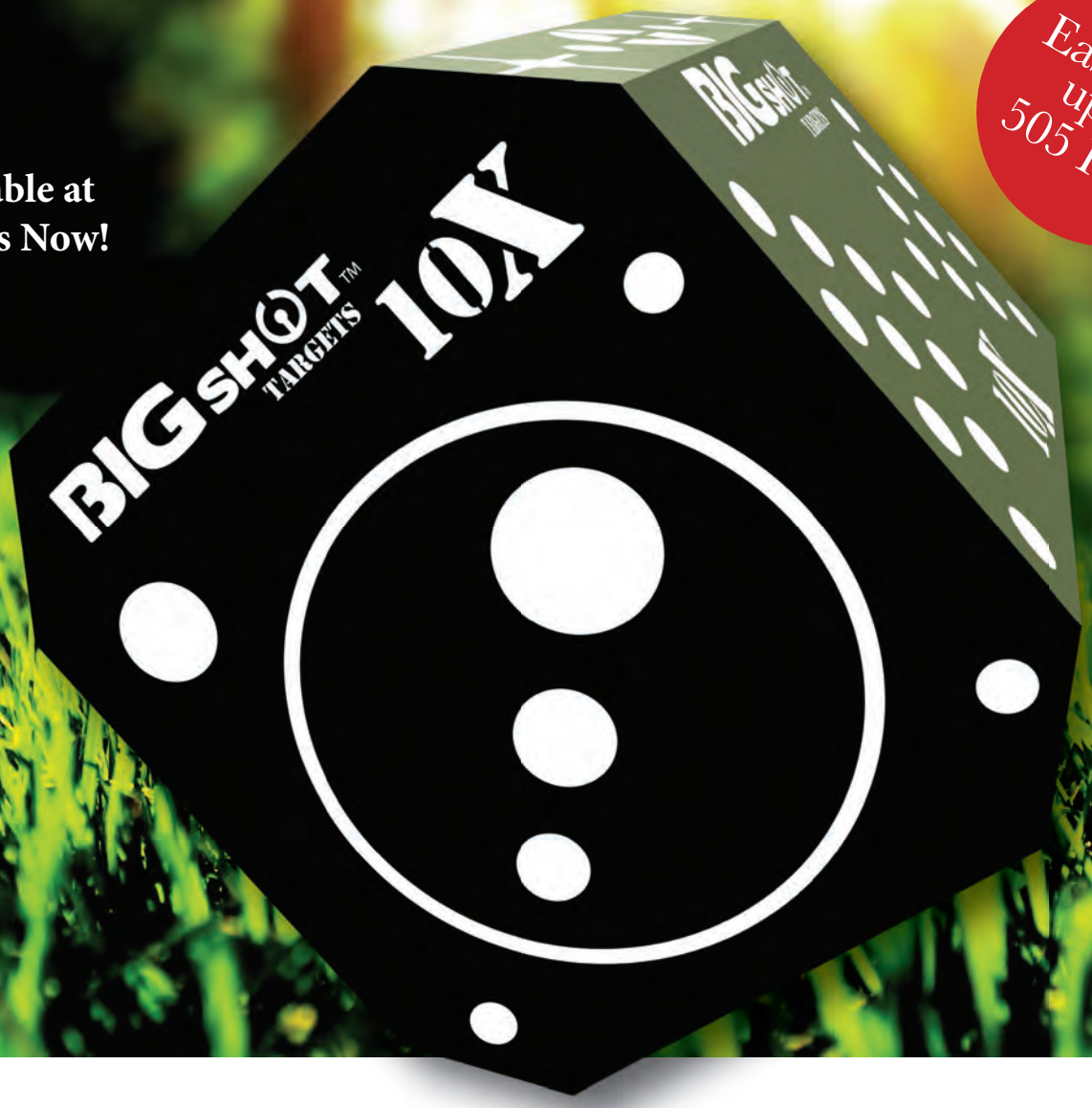
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3 KEYS TO DECOYING DEER

I have a love/hate relationship with deer decoys — but the more I understand where and when to use them, the more I love them.

BY BOB ROBB

It was a frosty November morning in southwestern Kansas, and I had climbed into my river-bottom stand 2 hours before daybreak. The reason for the extra-early arrival was I'd decided to try something relatively new, at least for me – using a deer decoy.

Now, this was back in the days when the Dewey Decimal System (look it up) was used as my primary library research tool, not Google or DuckDuckGo. It was well before the food plot craze, trail cameras, QDM and the explosion of YouTube videos and a plethora of hunting TV shows on cable. Yes, before the internet. So everything I did was a trial-and-error thing, and this was to be no different.

By today's standards, the life-sized doe decoy I had was crude, and I really didn't know what I was doing. So I set it up 20 yards upwind from my tree and got ready. At very first light, a dandy 4x4 stud buck came cruising down the cottonwood bottom, saw that decoy, and slammed on the brakes. His hair bristled up, he pawed the ground, and circled the decoy with bugged-out eyes. I was so amped that when the buck came up behind the decoy, I rushed the shot, and my arrow flew right over his back. Lord, was I hooked!



→ In the early years, doe decoys were the most common type used. Today, however, in many cases buck decoys have gained favor with hunters.

MY EARLY EDUCATION

To serious whitetail hunters of my generation, the name Gary Clancy is a familiar one. Minnesota native Clancy was one serious outdoorsman and whitetail hunter who was taken from us far too early in 2016 by cancer, which was caused by Agent Orange when he served as an infantry point man in Vietnam in 1969-70. Gary, a quiet guy with a quick laugh, never talked about all that. What he did talk about was how using life-sized deer decoys during the whitetail rut could be a game-changer. He detailed his tactics and techniques in his classic 200-plus page book, "Rattling, Calling & Decoying Whitetails." As a pioneer, he learned by making mistakes, and what he learned, and shared with me, fueled an interest in using decoys that lives to this day. His simple yet effective techniques are even more deadly when using modern decoys that are lifelike and can have added motion.

SECRETS TO SUCCESS

While there are several nuances to using decoys successfully, Clancy stressed three things above all else:

1) The most important part of the plan is decoy placement. "The wind must always be blowing from the decoy to your stand, right?," Clancy said. "You don't want a deer coming in downwind of you. Also, always place a buck decoy facing toward or slightly quartering-to your stand, and a doe decoy facing away or slightly quartering-away from your stand. Never mind all of that 'sage' advice that says to never face a decoy towards your stand, that doing so will naturally draw an approaching buck's eyes to where you're trying to hide. When a buck deer approaches a buck decoy, it will virtually always circle downwind of the decoy until it is nose-to-nose. When that happens, the buck is facing away from you and giving you the shot angle you need. Conversely, a buck deer will almost always approach a doe decoy from the rear, checking her for estrous."

2) Don't scrimp on scent products. Clancy recommended that, after setting up the decoy, to liberally spray it down with an odor-neutralizing spray. "Using a decoy that smells like a human won't



↓ A deer cart can make hauling a bulky, heavy decoy a long distance into the hunting area much easier than trying to backpack it along with all your hunting gear.



cut it," Clancy said. "If you can, wear rubber gloves when handling the decoy, then after it is in position, spray it down liberally."

3) Don't surprise the deer. "The more visible and the greater distance at which the decoy is visible to an approaching buck, the better the odds he will commit," Clancy said. "Decoys in heavy cover scare more deer than they attract." Field edges, dry creek-bottoms and sloughs, and fence lines are great decoy spots, as are open stands of mature woods. In fields, place the decoy up on a small mound, especially if you are hunting a depression or hollow, so it will be visible to deer no matter where they enter the area.

WHAT'S THE BEST TIME?

Though I've used decoys at various times of the deer season, like Clancy, my experience has been that the chances of having a mature buck come visit a decoy are best during the 10- to 14-day period just prior to the first estrus. During this time, bucks are actively scraping and roaming, and often respond to both grunting and rattling, which is a very effective way to draw a buck's attention to a decoy it might otherwise not see. During the peak of the rut, when most mature bucks have already found does to breed, bucks still come to a decoy, but I've mostly had immature bucks come then. However, a mature buck that is between does might also commit, but everything has to be "just right."

I like using decoys in the afternoons, especially if I can set up in the corner of a field I know does are using regularly. However, I've had my best luck with decoys during morning sits, when bucks return to bedding areas after an unsuccessful night of seeking out a hot doe. I call a "morning" sit during the rut one that extends from daybreak until 3-4 hours before sunset. This sometimes means I might hunt a stand in a funnel or known travel corridor between food and bedding areas from sunup until early afternoon, when I might then move my stand location to near a food plot or other agriculture area where doe groups are known to appear for an evening meal.

SETUP TIPS

Using some of today's full-body decoys can be a pain in the petunias when you have to haul it into your hunting area quietly in the dark, then setting it up without sounding like a marching band. This is especially true for big decoys that have to be assembled before they're set up. There are a couple ways to help alleviate this problem.

The first is to simply bring the decoy to the hunt area during midday, assemble it, drive the stakes into the ground, and leave the decoy itself lying on the ground nearby when you're not hunting that spot. When I leave mine in the woods, I carry them a short distance from the stand and stash them in a blowdown, brush pile or small depression, and cover them up with some burlap, or maybe some brush. (I tried plastic tarps, but they are just too noisy.) A decoy glistening with frost in the

8 Top Decoy Manufacturers

Deer decoys vary widely in terms of price, as well as structure — from two-dimensional fabric designs to 3-D models that look incredibly real. For many serious whitetail hunters, it makes sense to own a couple of different models, some of which are lightweight for carrying a quarter mile or more to an ambush location, and others that require the use of an ATV or cart to transport to a hunting spot. Setting up a full-bodied decoy can be a hassle and noisy, so careful planning is required before venturing forth. Many hunters hide a large decoy in the woods near their stand rather than carry it out each time after a sit. Buying tip: Check out Facebook Marketplace to see if someone local is selling a decoy; you can often buy a seldom-used one for less than half the price as new.

Come Alive Decoy Products: tail-wagger.com
Dave Smith Decoys: davesmithdecoys.com
Flambeau Outdoors: flambeauoutdoors.com
Montana Decoy: montanadecoy.com
Primos: primos.com
Renzo's: gamecalls.net
Rinehart: rinehart3d.com
Ultimate Predator Whitetail Stalker: ultimatepredatorgear.com

"I've had my best luck with decoys during morning sits, when bucks return to bedding areas after an unsuccessful night of seeking out a hot doe."

morning will spook deer. You can quickly uncover it and set it up quietly before climbing into your stand. Putting a bright eye or spraying the decoy stakes and/or decoy stand with a fluorescent paint that shines brightly in your headlamp makes them easy to find. The second is to haul the assembled decoy to your stand sight on the kind of wheeled deer cart designed to haul out a dead deer. In the right terrain you can do this quietly as well.



↑ Setting up a decoy along the edge of standing crops, where cruising bucks can see it from a distance, can be magical during the pre-rut and rut periods.

When using a buck decoy, set it up where its appearance won't threaten other deer when they first see it. That means when hunting an open field, set up away from the areas the most deer are known to enter the field. That gives does and youngsters a chance to get comfortable in its presence. And don't worry about missing a shot opportunity by setting up on the wrong side of the field. When a mature buck spots the decoy and wants to challenge it, he'll eventually make his way across the field, usually displaying his aggressive posture of bristled hairs and crazy eyes and that often-intimidating side-step as he comes nose-to-nose with the intruder.

Once I get the decoy set up, I spray it down with a no-scent spray, then add some real deer scent to the mix. If the decoy doesn't have a place for scent, I take a small stick, jab it into the ground underneath the deer's belly, and place a scent wick on the stick. When using a buck decoy, I use both rutting buck and a doe estrous scent on separate wicks. I also like to run a drag line from near my vehicle to the decoy's location.



BUCK OR DOE, ONE OR MORE?

A widely accepted rule of thumb is a doe decoy can be effective during all three phases of the rut, while a buck decoy is most effective during the mid- to late pre-rut into the full rut. Doe decoys with their head in the full upright position — all we had early on — have never worked well for me. Better is a doe decoy with its head in a feeding position, or a bedded doe. Using doe decoys means you're trying to attract a buck out cruising looking for love, and once he spots her, he'll come over to pay his respects. And sometimes they do just that.

For me, I much prefer using a buck decoy. When a mature cruiser sees another buck — especially one he thinks he can give a whipping to — and he's in full rut mode, he's coming. And when he comes, I am going to get a shot. Where I'm hunting dictates the size of the rack I'll use on my decoy. I want it to be mature, but not so large as to be intimidating to most of the bucks in the area. I have friends who swear by using only one antler, thinking that a missing beam indicates a vulnerable buck that has already taken a licking, and is ripe for more.

What about multiple decoys? Using more than one decoy can be a major hassle, especially if you are hunting solo. But there are times when adding a doe decoy to your buck can make a big difference. When I do this, I generally like to place the buck where it is most visible to cruising deer and where I want to make the shot, and place a doe decoy off to the side. Ideally this is on the edge of the woods if I'm on a field, partially hidden by some flora or a bump in the landscape. One killer setup is using a rutting buck decoy hovering near a bedded doe decoy.

Safety First

Bowhunting World Editor Dave Maas shares my love of decoying deer. He offers this insight regarding decoy placement: "The No. 1 concern with decoying deer is safety," Maas said. "I decoy deer ONLY on private land during archery season, and even then I'm careful to avoid placing a decoy (doe or buck) where it can be spotted from any road. In my opinion, it's simply too risky to set a deer decoy where a poacher can find it in a riflescope and then send a bullet in my direction."

ADD SOME REALISM

All game animals, from ducks to turkeys to deer, are more readily drawn to a decoy that exhibits some motion. In the old days, I used a number of things to try to impart movement to my deer decoys, including toilet paper, and fluffy white cloth strips hanging from the ears and tail of my full-bodied decoys.

Today, of course, there are decoys with built-in motion. Some of it is conveyed simply, with parts that flap and sway in the breeze. Some decoys have electronic motors that allow the tail and neck to move on command from a hand-held control (they are not legal in all states, so check your local regulations before using one). There are even heads and tails that can be moved with a string pulled by the hunter. One thing I do today is take a real deer's tail — one that I cut off last year's deer, skinned and fleshed out, and cured with salt and Borax — and attach it to the decoy's butt end with a small nail. That tail wiggling in a breeze really seems to get them going! Adding motion adds realism — and that translates into more effectiveness.

When using decoys, I also do some calling, everything from rattling to using grunts and bleats. How aggressively I call depends on my feel for how the deer are acting on a given day. Some days I'll be boisterously loud, others soft and alluring. There is one given for me, though. If I see a buck cruising out of range that obviously isn't coming my way, I'll call loudly enough so I can hopefully get him to stop and look my way — and a snort/wheeze can be dynamite. If he sees the decoy, then I've got a chance. One time I yelled "Stop!" as loudly as I could to stop a buck, which turned to see what that was all about, spotted my decoy, and it was game on. I figure, if he's cruising by and I do not stop him, he's gone anyway, so what do I have to lose?

If you're trying to stalk a buck, or run and gun hunting, the Ultimate Predator Whitetail Stalker Decoy is a solid option. Weighing just under 9 ounces, it mounts to your bow and provides you with a shot window, so you don't have to peek around the side of the decoy when you draw, allowing you to stay hidden when a buck trots into range. It's a unique tool and one that is gaining increasing popularity in many areas, especially those west of the Mississippi River.



↑ A good-sized rutting buck from southwest Kansas that couldn't stay away from the author's buck decoy.

MAKING THE SHOT

When a buck heads for your decoy, don't rush the shot! One of the advantages of using a decoy is deer will usually parade around the decoy and give you plenty of time to draw and make a good shot once the buck has presented a broadside or quartering-away angle.

Of course, this is easier said than done. When a big buck is all bristled up and starts strutting sideways around your decoy, breathing fire with his eyes bugged out, keeping your wits about you is anything but easy. Get your release attached and be ready. You've already used your laser rangefinder to pre-measure distances to and around the decoy, so be prepared to draw and shoot when the window of opportunity opens. However, don't dawdle. I once had a good-sized buck doing the dance around my decoy until, without warning, he viciously attacked it, knocking it to the ground. When that happened, he was so startled he blasted off to the woods, never to be seen again.

Decoying deer — when it works, it's like calling in a big bull elk or a strutting tom turkey — the excitement is unparalleled. But it doesn't always work, and sometimes can scare deer off. Which is why I love it and hate it, all at the same time. But I still do it. A lot. BW

SLIDING ON ICE

While stalking late-season mule deer across the ice-coated prairies, the author's plans change when he encounters a mature, wide-racked whitetail.

BY DARRON MCDOUGAL

Once the small mule deer herd dropped over the horizon 200 yards away, my wife, Becca, and I parked the truck. I grabbed my bow and we took off across the rolling prairies to see if we could spot the deer and stalk them. With a few different bucks in the herd, the largest one was really a dandy.





With the wind to our advantage, we reached a vantage point where we relocated the herd a few hundred yards away. However, the deer weren't approachable. We were virtually sky-lined, and minimal terrain contours separated the deer from us. We posted up on the sun-soaked hilltop and endured the biting winds as we waited for the deer to move into a better position for stalking.

Suddenly, a beaming orange figure illuminated by the blazing morning sun decorated a distant hilltop; it hadn't been there when I previously scanned the hill. There wasn't a tree in sight, but it just had to be a whitetail. After a glance through my bino, I said aloud, "I thought so." Becca replied, "What?" I explained that a wide-racked whitetail buck had crested the horizon about 300 yards distant.



↑ As usual, Becca McDougal joined her husband on the hunt.



→ Ice sheets on the prairies from a freezing rain that fell before the hunt made it difficult to stalk deer. Crunch, crunch, crunch!

SODAK SOLO TRIP

I applied for and drew a South Dakota archery deer tag during the spring 2023 drawing. I've hunted the Mount Rushmore State many times for both mule deer and whitetails since 2009. In 2021, I nailed a 140-inch whitetail on public land with my rifle after cashing in preference points on a good unit. Then, in 2022, I returned to that same area and bow-killed a big 5.5-year-old 8-pointer.

Where do you think I went in early November 2023? I spent 4 days on a solo mission hiking many miles and glassing tons of ground — some I'd previously hunted and some I had not. I couldn't turn up a shooter buck anywhere. Becca had accompanied me the previous 2 years when I was successful; perhaps my good luck charm was all that was missing.

With a guided South Dakota rifle hunt with some hunting-industry friends on tribal ground only a few days out, I moved closer to that area and spent a couple of days hunting on some property that I'd acquired permission to hunt. I didn't chase up a shooter buck there, either. During the tribal hunt, I passed up a 125-inch buck on the first afternoon, but he was the biggest buck I encountered in several days of hunting.

I drove home to Wisconsin through the night, regrouped, and then Becca and I headed to Kansas a few days later. I was unsuccessful there, too, despite a couple of close calls with big bucks. About a week after Thanksgiving, I attended another guided rifle hunt (odd for me since most of my hunting is DIY), this time in Illinois, with some other hunting-industry friends. There, I killed a mature buck and doe on the first afternoon of hunting.

WHERE NEXT?

In classic Darron McDougal style, my success in Illinois gave way to the realization that I still had two out-of-state bow tags in my pocket. I keep a busy writing schedule to make ends meet and chase my hunting lifestyle, and I had many hours to log behind the screen to catch up from all of the hunting I'd done in November. But, I couldn't get those Kansas and South Dakota tags off my mind.

As I caught up on work, Becca and I discussed our options. With Christmas coming, we'd hunt one state or the other, not both. For some reason, I felt my odds for

Photos: Darron and Becca McDougal

success were better in South Dakota, plus there was an area I'd been wanting to try for several years. I couldn't quite get my work squared away before Christmas, so we decided we'd leave the day after our Savior's birthday.

PLANS CHANGE

In between our Christmas get-togethers, I checked the weather for the area that I wanted to hunt. Shoot! A foot of snow was scheduled to fall on the area over about 48 hours. Not only would it make traveling questionable, but the weather would warm up following the snowfall. Spotting and stalking in crunchy snow would prove nearly impossible.



↑ The author is pictured here doing what he loves: bowhunting deer in open country.

But wait! I had yet another area in mind that I'd been wanting to try. Lo and behold, the big snow event would miss that part of South Dakota. Only some freezing rain would fall prior to our departure, and after that, the forecast looked ideal. So, we switched destinations.

Per usual, we spent a lot of time with our families on Christmas Eve and Christmas, and we woke up the following morning and weren't ready to leave. In my 20s, I would've rushed us and gotten all stressed out in the name of getting an extra day of hunting. But, at 34 years old, I'd wised up some; taking some extra time to get ready reduces a lot of pressure on both Becca and me, and I can begin the hunt in the right frame of mind. We mutually agreed to leave on December 27.

REMATCH ON THE PRAIRIE

We arrived at our destination and noticed the city streets were covered in ice from the freezing rain that had preceded our arrival. We settled in at the motel and got some sleep.

The following morning, we drove to the public



My SoDak Deer Gear

On this hunt, I shot the Mathews LIFT 29.5. Extremely stable due to its long, well-balanced Bridge-Lock Riser, it anchored nicely in the wind for my longer-than-average shot. I rigged it with UltraView Archery's UV Slider, which adapts directly into the Bridge-Lock sight mount. My rest was the UltraRest Integrate MX2, which adapts to the riser and fully contains the arrow — ideal for spotting and stalking. A 12-inch Mathews Bridge-Lock front stabilizer coupled with an 8-inch Bridge-Lock stabilizer fixed to the Bridge-Lock Adjustable V-Bar provided tons of stability.

My Victory VAP SS 350 arrows, which have impeccable tolerances to optimize downrange performance, fit nicely in the Mathews LowPro Quiver. The LowPro mounts tight to the riser, improving full-draw balance. A Rage Hypodermic NC yielded full penetration and a stunning blood trail. Hawke Optics' Frontier LRF binocular rangefinder was ideal for spotting deer and confirming yardage. Becca packed out her share of the meat with a Mystery Ranch backpack, while I used a Stone Glacier pack. We wore Sitka Gear, which kept us comfortable.

lands I had marked up on my HuntStand app. It didn't take long to start seeing deer, and we even found a nice tall-racked mule deer buck almost immediately. He was with at least a dozen other deer, and the terrain was very open.

We bumped around on a few different roads and glassed numerous deer. Eventually, we spotted another nice tall-racked muley with some solid width. He was visibly more mature than the first nice buck we had seen. The stalk was on, but the problem was the terrain was very open, plus the freezing rain had left ice sheets on the prairies, making for crunchy walking. Antlerless deer also accompanied the muley buck.

Becca and I used the little terrain available to get closer, and then we popped up to see if the deer had shifted. We saw a handful of does, but the buck was nowhere. The does eventually moved off, so we proceeded, acting as if the buck was still there. Despite the open country, we couldn't find him, so we headed back to the motel for a quick nap.

That afternoon, we hiked the hills and spotted the herd with the first tall-racked muley we'd seen that morning. The deer weren't approachable, plus I felt it best to leave him for another year since he already survived the rifle season. He was nice but not a monster. The herd eventually moved over a hill, and we headed back to the truck.

Once our truck was in view, we were surprised to see the herd standing around it. Two does were even tip-toeing toward it and bobbing their heads. They moved off and we reached the truck just before dark.

"Each time the buck's head lowered, I slid downhill across the ice patches to cut the distance, keeping a low profile since there was zero cover."



↑ The Victory arrow blew right through the buck.

DAY TWO

Let's pick back up where I left off in my opener. While watching the wide whitetail feeding on a hillside a few hundred yards away, we heard the telltale sounds of antlers clacking together. I trained my bino toward the mule deer bucks and noticed they were fighting. I wondered how the whitetail, which was obviously within earshot, would react.

He began inching toward the rattling, his posture being both bristled and curious. I slid downhill on the ice patches to get a better visual of the drainage that held the muleys and to see if a stalk was possible because the bucks were distracted. Once the whitetail saw the mule deer, he transitioned back to feeding. I was having the time of my life watching mule deer and a whitetail and wondering which to pursue.

As if a gift from God, the wide whitetail altered his course and was walking toward a ditch that led to a larger ravine about 250 yards beneath Becca's perch. Each time the buck's head lowered, I slid downhill across the ice patches to cut the distance, keeping a low profile since there was zero cover. The wind masked the crunching ice. Finally, he walked behind a hill, clearly heading up the ditch toward the ravine. I hustled to the edge of the ditch and found a spot to tuck in against a hillside so as not to be sky-lined. I nocked an arrow and then ranged the trail in the bottom of the ditch. It was 46 yards. I waited for the whitetail buck to appear.

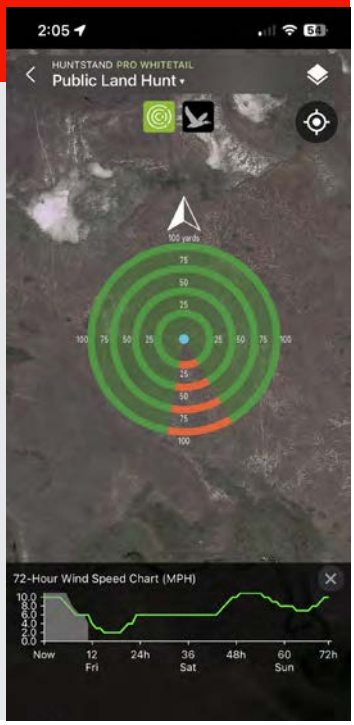
A few minutes passed. Nothing! Curiosity got the best of me, so I slowly rose up and scanned the area. Still nothing. I stood hunched over and eased in the direction I expected the buck was coming from. Antlers! He had gotten distracted by a patch of something tasty. Occasionally, he would lift his head, glance back toward the mule deer, then lower his head and feed.

I was hoping he'd continue up the ditch and walk

Mapping Out the Hunt

For any hunt, but public land hunts in particular, pre-hunt mapping is crucial to success. I used HuntStand Pro Whitetail's Public Lands and Hunting Lands base maps to find an area with prevalent access. From there, I used the Hybrid and Crop History base maps to find habitats suitable for mule deer and whitetails — whitetails tend to stick to ag ground and wooded creek bottoms while muleys prefer the hills. In the public lands base map, I identified the road systems in the area and planned my access.

On the hunt, HuntZone, which provides an overlay showing how our scent would disperse, helped us decide where to enter. As another measure, we carried wind checkers to confirm the winds. The app is also nice to reference for navigation since everything looks the same on the rolling prairies. And when the time came to pack out my buck, HuntStand showed us the fastest route back to the truck. I highly suggest this app for your next hunt, especially if it's a DIY hunt. Learn more at huntstand.com.



by me, but then I realized his body was broadside if not slightly quartering away, and that he was likely within range. My rangefinder read 55 yards, and I went into shoot mode. I dialed my sight to 55 yards, inhaled deeply, and exhaled. Here we go, I thought.

Becca had a stadium seat from above but couldn't quite see the buck when she realized I was drawing my bow. A slight crosswind blew my pin on and off the mark, and when it calmed down and my pin steadied, my arrow launched. It dropped right into place through the lungs.





The buck exploded, running up the ditch bank and out across the wide open. By then, I had my binocular on him, and a crimson stain confirmed that my hit was lethal. He stopped about 200 yards away where his legs stiffened up before he toppled over. I had not taken a deer with my bow during the 2023 deer season until this point, so I jumped up and down and fist-pumped while looking uphill at Becca. While she had been unable to see the deer when I hit it, she had watched it fall.

SLOW DOWN AND ENJOY IT

As badly as I wanted to run over to my buck, I hiked back uphill to Becca, where we sat, soaked up the sun, and discussed the stalk while enjoying a commanding view of the sun-lit sea of prairies surrounding us. Remarkably, there wasn't a tree in view. It was by all means a mule deer spot, but God put a beautiful, mature whitetail in my path.

After 15 minutes, we descended downhill to my buck. On the way, we stopped where he'd been hit and immediately found my Victory VAP SS arrow, the Silent Knight vanes soaked in crimson. Tipped with a Rage Hypodermic NC, the arrow had passed completely through the buck.

Beyond the arrow was a vivid blood trail, and though we didn't need it, we followed it to the buck. I hadn't paid the buck's tines much attention because I was focused on his post-rut body size and his wide antler frame. As it was, he really had only 5 points. His right antler hadn't grown a G-3, and he broke off his brow tine on that same side. I didn't care one bit. He was an old buck that was as good as he was going to get, and he'd evaded rifle hunters for four seasons (based on a knowledgeable friend's tooth examination). And, he had a cool mane on his neck to boot.

After shooting some photos, we began the labor of love, which is breaking down the quarters to be packed out on our backs, the truck being a half-mile away. Usually, I'm in a hurry to do this, but we had the entire day ahead of us and nowhere to be, so we took our time and enjoyed the warm sun and the snow-less landscape. What a perfect ending to a long deer season! BW

↑ Becca and Darron are all smiles behind the buck he killed on the second day of the public land bowhunt.

← The author took his time and soaked up the sun while butchering the buck.

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TREESTANDS AND GROUND BLINDS

Whether it's hunting from a treestand or ground blind, creating an effective ambush has never been easier.

BY GORDY KRAHN

There are two schools of thought when it comes to setting up an ambush for that buck or bull that dreams are made of—hunt high or hunt low. Both have their advocates, based on personal preferences and application. Sometimes the choice is obvious, sometimes not so much. As an example, those who are hunting on public land have some important decisions to make about the use of treestands vs. ground blinds.

Most states require the removal of portable stands and blinds when exiting the field each day, and that means setting them up and packing them out in the dark. For those hunters who decide to go with a treestand, advanced scouting and selecting specific stand locations and even specific trees is extremely important. That way, they can get in and get their stands set up without causing a lot of disturbance to their hunting area.

A better option might be to use a portable ground blind. They're quiet and easy to transport, set up in minutes, and are very effective for concealing movement. But one of the disadvantages of using portable ground blinds is unless they're expertly concealed, whitetails might regard them with suspicion.

One of the reasons treestands are so effective is hunters are able to gain elevation, which gives them a better vantage point for spotting game while helping to conceal movement and human odor. But if the terrain permits, this strategy can be applied to portable ground blinds, by finding a ridge or other high point in the terrain that overlooks a game trail and setting up the blind much in the same way as a treestand, being careful not to skyline the blind.

Whether you prefer to hunt from a state-of-the-art treestand or the comfort of a ground blind, you'll want to check out these latest and greatest models.



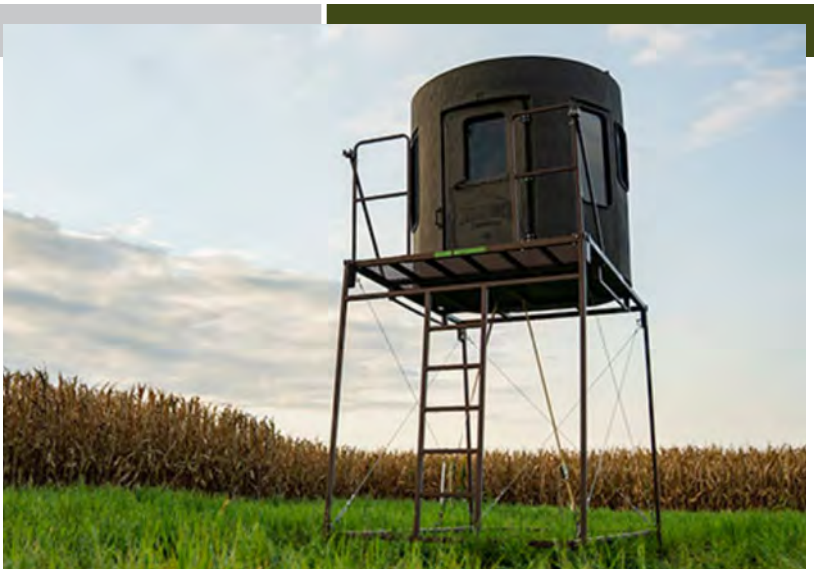
BROWNING ENVY HUNTING BLIND

The Envy Hunting Blind from Browning Camping & Hunting Blinds features a roomy 82-inch center height and 74-inch shooting width and silent-operation features such as a Silent-Trac window system and QuickConnect silent-entry/exit door system that utilizes magnets along the door seam. A durable 600D polyester fabric comprises the Envy's wall and window curtain construction while shoot-through mesh is used across the 180-degree window openings. Support comes from strong and flexible fiberglass poles connected to aluminum hubs featuring engineered tips and pins. The Envy also incorporates a 360-degree ground skirt to deliver maximum concealment, minimize light intrusion and to help keep scent in. Available in Realtree Excape and Mossy Oak Country DNA. MSRP: $319.99; **browningcamping.com**



MILLENNIUM PRO-LITE LADDER STAND

Millennium Treestands' Pro-Lite L124-SL Ladder Stand was designed for dependability and versatility in the field. Built with the solo hunter in mind, it is constructed from powder coated rigid oval steel, ensuring unparalleled strength and longevity. Weighing 64 pounds, this ladder stand is robust enough to withstand the rigors of the hunt, providing a spacious platform and treebrace stability. It features Millennium's exclusive ComfortMAX seat for superior comfort for all-day hunts. Accessory hooks are conveniently located to help make sure essential gear is easily accessible, and an integrated shooting rail provides a rock-solid rest for crossbow hunters. The L124-SL has a weight capacity of 300 pounds and a Safelink 35-foot rope, prusik knot and carabiner system are included. MSRP: $249.99; **millenniumstands.com**



KEEN OUTDOORS ALPHA HD BLIND PLATFORM

Bowhunters can hunt from high places faster and easier with the new-for-2024 Alpha HD Blind Platform from Keen Outdoors — designed to maximize mobility with fast and easy setup. This versatile, completely collapsible, fully portable hunting stand platform provides rock solid stability from a heavy-duty steel frame. With a floor height of 8 feet, the Alpha HD can be set up or taken down in less than 10 minutes using a loader or tractor and accommodates blinds from most manufacturers. MSRP: $2,799; **keenoutdoors.com**



DIXIE DEER BLINDS HEX BOW BLIND

The 7-foot Hex Bow Blind from Dixie Deer Blinds is a seamless, one-piece, 100 percent marine-grade fiberglass enclosure, coated in Polyurea (similar to a spray-on truck bedliner) with a welded steel base — made for comfort, durability and longevity. It comes with an insulated aluminum door with a security lock, carpeted floors and optional carpeted walls to enhance soundproofing, .25-inch thick smoked plexiglass windows and composite interior shelving for storage. Dixie Deer Blinds offers many different sizes and customizable accessories. Optional Hybrid and Steel Riser/Lift kits, a camo upgrade and a 36-inch wheelchair accessible door with a window are also available. MSRP: Starts at $3,337; **dixiedeerblinds.com**



FAMILY TRADITION TREESTANDS LD14 LADDER STAND

The LD14 Ladder Stand from Family Tradition Treestands is built tough with galvanized tubular steel for structural integrity and rust resistance — with baked-on textured powder coating to provide seasons of worry-free use. It features the company's ergonomic support system with 2-inch-wide nylon strapping webbed onto a fully welded seat frame to take the load off the spinal column, back, hips and legs. It has a fully welded upper platform frame for added strength and ease of assembly, and a full-body fall restraint system is provided for added safety. The LD14 ladder stand seat height is 12 feet, 3 inches off the ground and an additional 41-inch ladder extension is available. Retail: $479.99; **familytraditiontreestands.com**



COOPER HUNTING CHAMELEON TREESTAND BLIND

Add amazing coverage to existing treestands with Cooper Hunting's Chameleon+ Hunting Blind in Mossy Oak Breakup or NWTF Obsession camo. The Chameleon+ is an innovative way to get that shooting house effect without all the expense and hassle — engineered to be lightweight and collapsible, making it transportable to virtually anywhere. By utilizing the weighted drawcord system and new double hexagon rod system, hunters can reduce 95 percent of wind movement. These blinds are made from high-quality materials and are designed to hold up to the harshest environmental conditions for years. The average customer gets 8 to10 years of service from a Chameleon+ Blind when cared for properly. MSRP: $219.99; **cooperhunting.com**



PRIMOS DOUBLE BULL RAISED HUNTING GROUND BLIND

The Primos Hunting Double Bull Raised Hunting Ground Blind, a collaboration between Double Bull Hunting Blinds and the Raised Hunting team, is constructed with the original SurroundView one-way see-through design that allows hunters full vision in all directions while effectively concealing them from game animals. The blind is equipped with windows specially optimized for both filming and bowhunting, but work well for any hunting application. It also offers a double-wide door with wired window system plus horizontal window openings for vertical windows. For effective setup and transport into the field, the blind comes with an easy-to-fill blind bag to transport the blind and upgraded brush straps and anchor stakes. MSRP: $599.99; **primos.com**



SHADOW HUNTER GHOSTBLIND PREDATOR GROUND BLIND BUNDLE

For on-the-go hunters who want to blend into their surroundings, the GhostBlind Predator Ground Blind Ultimate Bundle Kit includes everything they need for a stealthy hunt — the GhostBlind Predator ground blind, Predator carry pack, two sets of extenders (four extenders), Predator chair, tie-downs, stakes, shoulder strap and bungees. Weighing just 12 pounds, the GhostBlind is 102 inches wide and 46 inches high, making it a portable solution for hunters who want to be able to move often and set up quickly. MSRP: $389.99; **shadowhunterblinds.com**







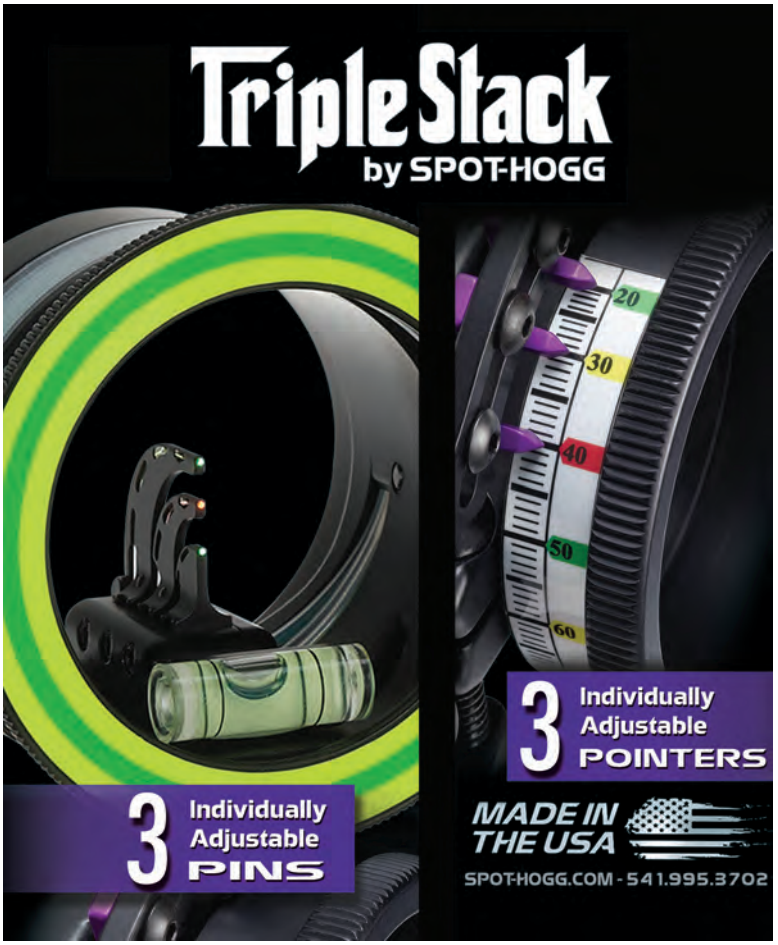
SUMMIT TREESTANDS DUAL THREAT PRO SD TREESTAND

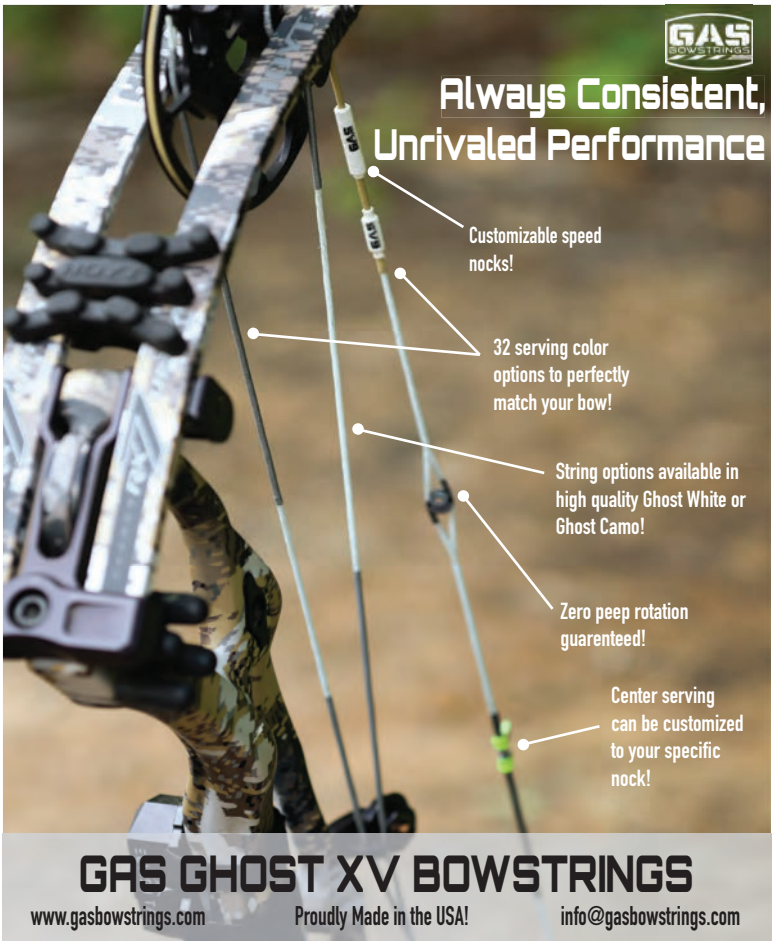
The Dual Threat Pro SD Treestand from Summit Treestands features the adjustable Dual Threat front bar, which allows hunters to tailor the climber to their preferred hunting method. Bowhunters can move the bar all the way down and under the seat to achieve the optimal open front bowhunting position. And with its new Dual Position seat, they will have full control over their sitting height, ensuring an optimal vantage point for spotting game and taking the shot. The Dual Threat Pro SD is also equipped with the FasTrack accessory system for keeping gear close at hand. Other features include the Quick Draw cable retention system, Dead Metal Sound-Deadening (SD) technology, SummitLokt structural enhancement and RapidClimb stirrups. MSRP: $449.99; **summitstands.com**



ORION MODULAR BOX BLIND

Swamp, ridges or valleys originally thought to be inaccessible to box blinds are now accessible with the Orion Modular Box Blind — composed of a set of lightweight 2-inch-thick aluminum structural insulated panels, easily assembled with the Orion quick latch system. In its disassembled form, the Orion blind can be placed into the back of a full-size pickup truck or UTV and hauled to the nearest access point to the hunting location. Then, thanks to the lightweight panels — ranging from 15 to 40 pounds — the blind can be carried to the desired location and assembled in 5 to 10 minutes. The Orion is resistant to weather and water ingress with the use of EPDM seals on every seam. MSRP: Starting at $2,999; **huntorion.com**





ELITE ETHOS

Pinpoint accuracy and unrivaled comfort intersect right here.

BY DARRON MCDOUGAL

Ethos. Merriam-Webster defines it as "the distinguishing character, sentiment, moral nature, or guiding beliefs of a person, group, or institution." Elite Archery's 2024 aluminum flagship hunting bow perfectly conveys the company's ethos. For years, Elite has staked its claim on "shootability" — virtually any archer can pick up an Elite bow, get comfortable with it fast, and start pounding bull's-eyes. The Ethos, by name and its distinguishing character, embodies shootability in every way.

Fact: Elite Archery was founded in 2005, which makes the company quite young when you consider that some bow brands date back to the 1930s. But, "young" isn't synonymous with inferior or inexperienced. Far from it. All I've seen from Elite Archery in relation to its youngness is an unstoppable energy that keeps pushing technology forward, and the result is a bow that can perform right next to any other bow.

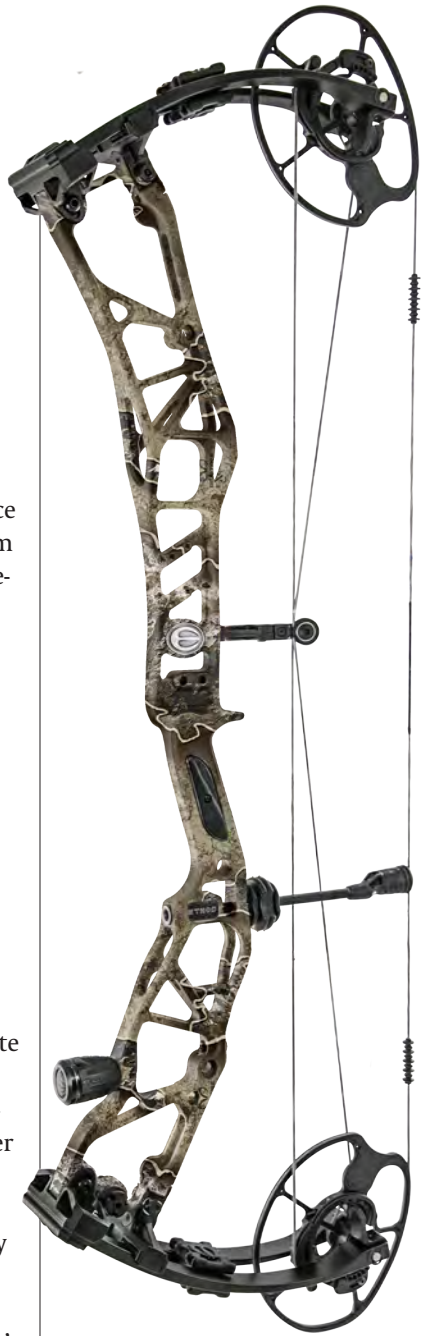
Speaking of energy, one thing about well-known bow brands is loyal customers tend to remember favorite models from years past. One Elite bow model that most Elite fans fondly recall is the Energy 35, which launched in 2014. What does a 10-year-old bow have to do with the Ethos? Well, Elite engineers harnessed a feature that made the Energy 35 a fan favorite and wove it into the Ethos. More on that soon.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

One of the first things archers will notice about the Ethos is it holds rock solid with target bow stability. I noticed it when I drew it back fresh out of the box, and that attribute really cemented itself into my shooting experience once I was launching arrows from longer distances. It feels absolutely outstanding.

The stability is thanks to features such as a long riser with Dual Riser Cages, advanced riser geometry, stout 4.5-pound mass weight, and a Delta VRT weight/dampener combo mounted just above the bottom limb pocket. Let's not forget the oversized limbs and pockets, which widen the bow's working platform.

Now, let's discuss where the Energy 35 from 2014 comes into play. Longer bows have a less acute string angle, and most archers find it easier to settle in with longer bows for that reason. Whether Energy 35 fans knew it or not, its bowstring angle was largely why it was so comfortable to shoot. By tweaking the amount of flex in the limbs and the cam size, Elite engineers achieved the Energy 35's string angle on the Ethos. That's a fancy way of saying a 33-inch bow feels like a 35-inch bow. Pretty



TEST BOW SPECS

AXLE-TO-AXLE LENGTH: 33 inches

BRACE HEIGHT: 6.75 inches

DRAW LENGTH: 28 inches

DRAW WEIGHT: 70.5 pounds

LET-OFF: 70-90% (tested at 90%)

BOW-ONLY WEIGHT: 4.5 pounds

ACCESSORIZED TOTAL WEIGHT: 6.5 pounds (including sight, rest and front stabilizer)

VELOCITY: 275 fps (with 468-grain Easton 6.5mm Acu-Carbon 340 arrow); 278 fps (with 456-grain CX Maxima Triad 350 arrow); 280 fps (with 441-grain Victory VAP SS 350 arrow)

KINETIC ENERGY: 78.61 foot-pounds (Easton); 78.27 foot-pounds (CX); 76.79 foot-pounds (Victory)

TEST-BOW FINISH: Outdoor Green

MSRP: $1,299.99

CONTACT: elitearchery.com

In-the-field photos by Becca and Darron McDougal



amazing attention to detail if you ask me.

DRAW CYCLE OPTIONS

With most bows, you're stuck with a certain draw cycle and sometimes a specific let-off, too. The Ethos flaunts the proven SP Cam, which is compatible with a few different modules depending on the feel an individual archer prefers. It's almost like having a few bows in one.

I fell in love right off the bat with the Performance Mods, which come standard on the Ethos. Of the module options, these deliver the most velocity because they store more energy throughout the draw cycle. This also means they increase draw effort, but I felt right at home with the draw cycle, even at 70.5 pounds. The draw weight stacks nice and evenly, and is very smooth.

As for the Ethos' velocity with Performance Mods, I tested it at 28-inch draw length with mid-weight hunting arrows. It was right around 280 fps, which is similar to most of the bows I've tested, but the Ethos has a 6.75-inch brace height, which is more generous than the brace heights of most flagship bows from other companies, making it more forgiving.

TINKERING AND TUNING

Aside from the different module options, your Elite Archery bow technician will have the latitude to really dial in the Ethos specifically to you. And, all of the tuning features are straightforward enough that the more technical bowhunters should have no trouble using them. Let's discuss some of those features.

First, the SP Cam ends with a nice and solid back wall right out of the box, but optional draw stops are included and can be attached to the let-off adjustment module for those looking for a different feeling back wall. Speaking of the let-off module, it can be adjusted from 70-90% in minute



↑ The LTR (Linear Tuning Roller) is adjustable for vane clearance and to reduce or increase the lateral cable load. It also smoothes out the draw cycle.

↑ With a bowstring angle similar to that of the wildly popular Elite Energy 35 from 2014, the Elite Ethos feels like a 35-inch bow but measures 33 inches between the axles.



↑ The SP Cam is compatible with a few different modules, but the Performance Mods that come standard on the Ethos create a perfect blend of speed and smoothness. And, with a 70-90% let-off range and draw-length adjustments in 1/4-inch increments, this is the cam to beat.





↑ The Ethos' limbs and pockets widen the bow's working platform to enhance stability.

increments. As well, the draw length can be tweaked in 1/4-inch increments, making it the ideal bow for perfectionists.

With tuning, the most impressive feature is the proven S.E.T. Technology (Simplified Exact Tuning). Two bolts are located at each end of the riser on the inside edge of the limb pockets. While paper-tuning a bow, a nock-left or nock-right paper tear is common, and a lot of folks try to adjust the rest to correct these tears. Well, if the rest is properly set, the issue is more likely cam lean. In the past, fixing cam lean was a matter of shimming the cam on the axle or twisting or untwisting the buss cables (if applicable).

With S.E.T., addressing a left or right paper tear by adjusting cam lean is as simple as loosening the locking bolt, micro-adjusting the S.E.T. bolt, and then tightening the locking bolt. It's in small print, but a guide for adjusting based on the type of tear you achieved is located right by the adjustment bolt for easy reference. It's a stupid-easy system that eliminates a lot of the guesswork.

Another worthwhile mention is the LTR (Linear Tuning Roller) roller-guard system. Beyond smoothing out the draw cycle, it is laterally adjustable in fine increments. This allows for cable clearance with large-profile vanes and an extra level of tuning by increasing or decreasing lateral cable torque.

RANGE REMARKS

I already articulated my satisfaction with the Ethos' comfort and stability, so let's get into the rest of the shooting experience. It is pleasantly quiet and vibration-free due to the silencing and vibration-dampening features, not to mention a robust riser designed to avert flexing. The dampening products decorating the Ethos are VibeX Limb Dampers, a bowstring cushion outfitted with an extra dampener, and the Delta VRT that I mentioned earlier.

Accuracy? Well, it's exactly what you'd expect from a bow so stable. I spent some time shooting the Ethos out to 70 yards in a crosswind. If I do my part and execute good shots, my arrows hit home every single time. Because the bow is so comfortable, acquiring the target is fast, which allows me to begin executing the shot faster than with some bows.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The Ethos doesn't have a Picatinny sight mount

or Integrate Rest Mounting System as many bows now do. I could give it a strike for that, but it feels so good — even when accessorized — that I see no reason to complain. Elite rigs its bows standard with a Winner's Choice bowstring-and-cable set, which is pre-stretched to deliver positive peep alignment and virtually zero creep after the first few shots. The finishing touch is the Precision Grip. This isn't new, but worth noting because it is one of the most comfortable grips out there. Oh, and one more thing: The Ethos is available in 19 camo and solid finishes — there's something for everyone.

To tie the bow on this report, don't forget about Elite's Hunt Guarantee. If you're unfamiliar, in the event of an unfortunate bow breakdown while hunting, Elite will send a loaner bow the very next day so the individual can finish his/her hunt.

If all of the positives I've noted here don't convey Elite Archery's ethos as a company to you, then put the Ethos bow in your hands and it will.



↑ Cam alignment can be tuned via the S.E.T. Technology adjustments, which are incredibly user-friendly and located on both limb pockets.

ADDITIONAL NOTES:

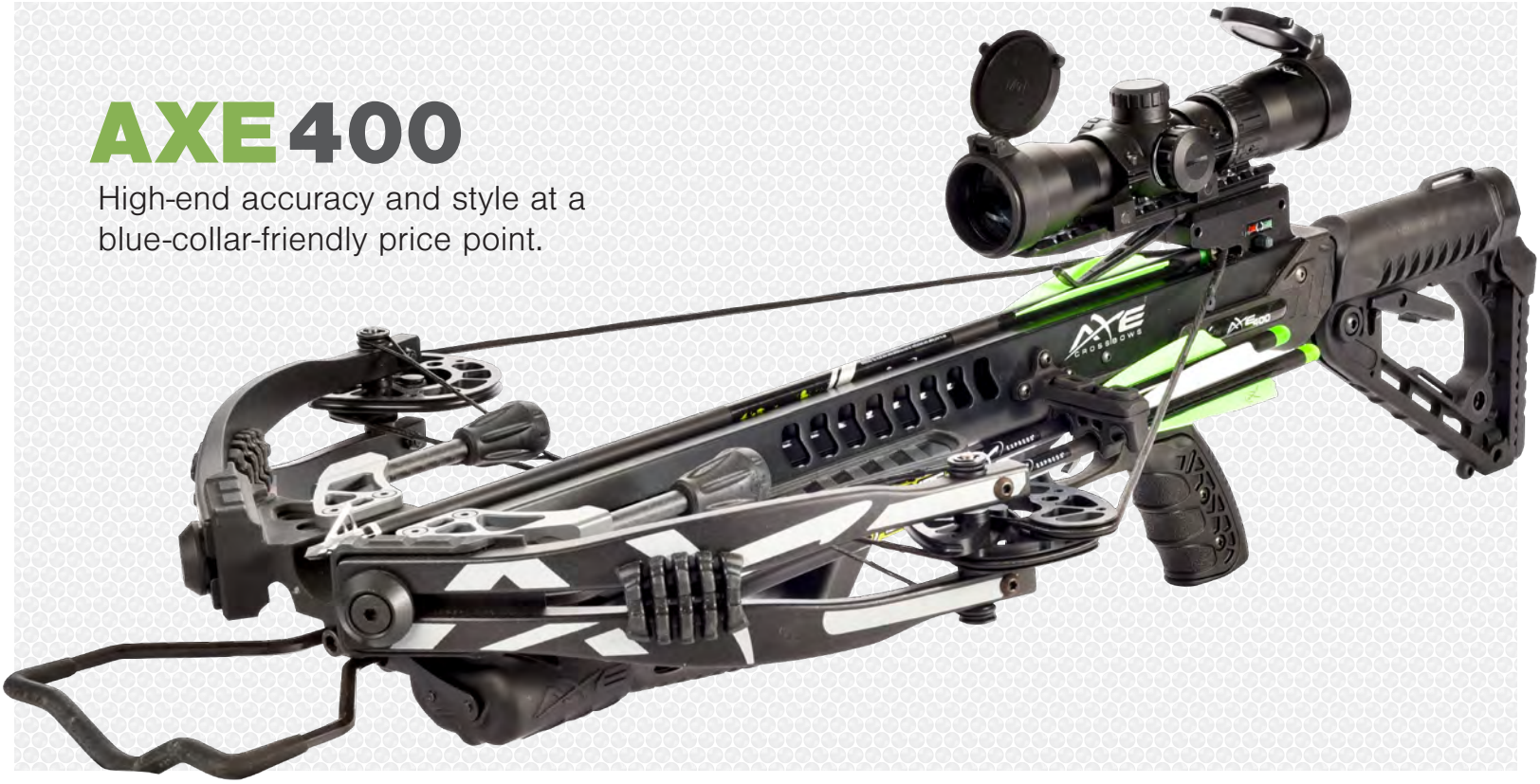
The Elite Ethos was set up using a Last Chance Archery EZ Green Bow Press and EZ Green Bow Vise, and the draw weight was calculated using Last Chance Archery's Digital Bow Scale. A Caldwell Ballistic Precision Chronograph measured the arrow velocities. Other products used were Easton's Nock and D-Loop Pliers and Pro Hex Fold-Up Allen Set. Arrows were weighed on Last Chance Archery's Pro Grain Scale. BW

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AXE 400

High-end accuracy and style at a blue-collar-friendly price point.



BY BECCA MCDOUGAL

Have you ever walked into a home improvement store to buy a tool, but didn't have a lot of money to spend? In the tool world, there are lots of options. For blue-collar people, some tools are way too expensive, especially if they will be used here and there. Others are dirt cheap, but lack quality and dependability. Ah, right there in between are the happy mediums; tools that will do the job but don't cost an arm and a leg.

I think a lot of whitetail hunters shop for crossbows that same way. Oh, you'll get the bowhunter who doesn't care what he/she spends, and they'll buy something in the $2,000-$3,500 range. Of course, there will be a few who will look for the cheapest crossbow that money can buy, regardless of where they buy it. But, most deer hunters are blue-collar folks who have modest incomes and families to support amidst their passion for whitetails. These people often seek a crossbow that blends get-it-done performance with affordability.

That's the parking space that the Axe 400 crossbow package fits into. I'm not going to claim it outperforms the market's highest-priced crossbows. But, I will tell you that when a deer steps out 40 yards away, you can count on it to deliver an accurate hit, as long as you do your part. At least that is the way I feel after testing it.

If you're interested in diving a little bit deeper, follow along as I review the Axe 400 crossbow.

THE NUTS AND BOLTS

The Axe 400 flaunts a stunning, tactical style complete with an

TEST CROSSBOW SPECS

MAKE/MODEL: Axe 400
FINISH: Black
MASS WEIGHT: 7.2 pounds (without accessories); 8.4 pounds (accessorized)
OVERALL WIDTH: 17.75 (uncocked) 14.25 inches (cocked)
OVERALL LENGTH: 35 inches
DRAW EFFORT: Not listed
POWER STROKE: 14.25 inches
BOLT LENGTH AND WEIGHT: 20 inches; 440 grains (including 100-grain point)
MANUFACTURER Listed Velocity: 400 fps (measured with a 380-grain bolt/point)
TEST VELOCITY: 368 fps (w/440-grain bolt; found with Caldwell Ballistic Precision chronograph)
MANUFACTURER LISTED TRIGGER PULL: 3.5 pounds
COCKING DEVICE: Removable Quiet Crank and Rope Cocker
SCOPE: Axe 340-460
MSRP: $699.99
CONTACT: Feradyne.com

adjustable stock butt to fit various crossbow shooters. While the stock is made of lightweight composite material, the rail is made of aluminum to maximize dependability, though it is ventilated to minimize weight. The foregrip is also ventilated. By the way, the foregrip is also adjustable on a Picatinny rail that is integrated into the stock. The long scope rail allows virtually any shooter to position the scope for easy, comfortable acquisition.

As with most crossbows, the Axe 400 is up to par with an ergonomic pistol grip for advanced user control. Even when set up with a quiver and arrows, the platform balances just about perfectly. Overall, the Axe 400 is pleasing to look at and comfortable to handle once all of the adjustment features have been set to the individual shooter.

PACKAGE DETAILS

The Axe 400 ships as a package that retails for $699.99. The 2-7X variable-power Axe scope offers crystal clarity, red and green illumination, flip-up scope caps to keep dirt, rain and debris off the lenses, and holding dots from 20 to 100 yards in 10-yard increments. It also has a feet-per-second dial that can be set and locked into place to ensure that your hold points are dead on.

The quiver is really something to sing about. It is a minimal two-piece design that mounts extremely tight to the stock. The placement and next-to-nothing weight are why the crossbow balances so well. Additionally, it can be swapped to either side of the stock in minutes to accommodate right- or left-handed shooters. I'd rate it the best crossbow quiver I've tested because of how tight it mounts and how lightweight it is.

The Axe 400 also includes three 20-inch CX PileDriver Crossbolts with half-moon nocks and 100-grain points. These bolts have excellent tolerances, laser-checked to +/- .002 inch and all weighing within 2 grains of each other. They are straight, durable and hard-hitting.

Two devices for cocking the Axe 400 are included. The removable Quiet Crank cocking device allows the crossbow to be cranked with minimal effort. The downside is it is a little bit cumbersome, particularly in hunting situations. To re-cock for a follow-up shot, you'd have to remove it from your coat pocket, attach it to the butt pad, unwind it and loop it around the scope and onto the string. Then, you'd have the easy part of winding the crank. But, once the bow is cocked, you'd have to remove it and put it somewhere secure be-



↑ Speaking of 100 yards, how about these back-to-back 12-ring shots from 100 yards? Darron shot the first one, and Becca jumped in and followed suit.



↑ The included Axe scope is rigged with red and green illumination, scope caps and hold points for 20 yards all the way out to 100 yards.



↑ The Axe 400 package includes top-notch accessories, including a Quiet Crank cocking device, which winds quietly and smoothly.

In-the-field photos: Darron McDougal

fore loading your bolt and trying to make a shot. I guess you could leave it attached to the stock, but it's kind of in the way.

The crank is nice enough for shooting on the range, but because the package includes a rope cocker, I believe that is the superior option for hunting situations. I'll note that I am spoiled after testing some of the market's crossbows that feature integrated cranking devices. But, keep in mind the Axe 400 sells for about half the price of the least-expensive crossbow I know of that has a built-in crank. That's all for accessories, so let's discuss how the Axe 400 shoots.

HOW IT SHOOTS

As usual, my husband, Darron, and I spent some time testing out the Axe 400 at various yardages. Darron sighted it in. The very first time I shot it was at 40 yards, and I put all three CX PileDriver bolts into the heart of a GlenDel 3-D Bear target. I'm not an expert shooter, so I think most customers who can shoot from shooting sticks and squeeze the trigger nice and easy can expect similar accuracy.

We also stepped way back to 100 yards to test out the scope's bottom aiming dot. Darron shot twice to get comfortable, and both were in the kill zone of a big Rinehart elk target. Then, he shot one more and felt great about how the shot broke. His bolt hit the 12-ring. He started coaxing me into taking a 100-yard shot. The farthest I've ever shot previously is about 70 yards, so I was a little hesitant, but he got me behind the crossbow. I got settled in and squeezed the trigger until the crossbow fired, and the sound of my bolt hitting foam was reassuring. My bolt had struck the 12-ring right next to Darron's. I don't believe you can get more accurate than that for $700.



↑ The Axe 400 is lightweight, featuring a composite stock and a ventilated aluminum rail. It also has an adjustable fore-grip, long scope rail and adjustable stock butt to optimize comfort.

Looking beyond the accuracy, let me quickly note a few things that you might notice while shooting the Axe 400. First, it does have a little bit of recoil. It's also not the quietest crossbow ever, but it is quiet enough since it is outfitted with two string cushions. Thirdly, it's not nearly as narrow as some of the market's latest models. And, the trigger is heavier than those of most high-end crossbows, although it has virtually no travel and breaks nicely.

Finally, our Caldwell chronograph measured the actual velocity at 368 fps, which is 32 fps below the manufacturer rating. On closer review, Axe tests the 400 with a 380-grain bolt, but the included PileDriver bolts weigh about 440 grains apiece (checked on a Last Chance digital grain scale). That might be a huge factor for some, but it made little difference to us, as we dialed the scope to about 370 fps and found that all of the hold points were on. Just be sure you understand that the Axe 400 won't shoot 400 fps with the included bolts. Despite these critiques, let me remind you once more that it retails for $699.99.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Just like a DIY homeowner hunting for a tool that will do the job without emptying the wallet, many crossbow shoppers are seeking a model that isn't necessarily the quietest, fastest or smoothest, but will dependably put a bolt where it needs to go. When they discover the Axe 400, most will believe they've found the perfect tool for the job at an unreal price point. BW



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The Corner-Crossing Debate

Unless you hunt out West, you're probably not familiar with the corner-crossing debate. But you should be.

BY BOB ROBB

To briefly summarize the corner-crossing issue, in the fall of 2021, four nonresident hunters from Missouri wanted to access public land in Wyoming that heretofore had been off-limits to the public due to the fact that two tracts of private land met at a corner, theoretically blocking the public from crossing the private land holdings without permission. To do so without trespassing, they built an A-frame ladder across the fenced intersection where the four parcels met — two private, two public — so when they climbed up and down the ladder, they would never set foot on the private land.

They were subsequently accused of trespassing on Iron Bar Ranch land near Elk Mountain; a Carbon County jury later found them innocent of the charges. However, Iron Bar Holdings, LLC, filed a civil lawsuit claiming the four had violated the ranch's air space — thereby diminishing its property value — claiming damages of between $3.1million and $7.75 million. The 22,042-acre ranch was appraised at $31.31 million in 2017.

In a huge victory for both the defendants and the general public, on May 26, 2023, the District Court of Wyoming found their actions were, in fact, legal, and that crossing through the airspace where they did not touch or otherwise damage private property did not constitute trespassing. As this is written, the corner-crossing lawsuit is on appeal at the United States Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit in Colorado after moving from state court in Wyoming, to federal court in Wyoming, and now to federal court in Colorado. So it's far from over.

These disputed "corners" were created generations ago, when most of the land in the West was mapped and platted based on square, 640-acre sections arranged in neat rows and columns, a system known as the Public Land Survey System. In this system, four tracts of land meet at a single corner point with four 90-degree angles. As land was doled out to homesteaders and the newly formed states, a complex patchwork of ownership formed. And while over generations properties were combined or split, some tracts were transformed into every imaginable shape. However, the underlying square 640-acre section can still be found all over the West.

onXmaps has researched the corner-crossing issue extensively, and found there are 8.3 million acres of corner-locked public lands, with 27,120 land-locking corners, currently in existence in the western states. Of these acres, onXmaps calculated that the Federal government's Bureau of Land Management (BLM) oversees management of 70 percent of the affected acreage, with state governments owning 26 percent. Also, heretofore there have been no laws on the books that make corner-crossing expressly illegal.

MY EXPERIENCE WITH THE ISSUE

For generations, it has not been at all unusual for private landowners throughout the West to use their land ownership as a way to block general public access to literally millions of acres of public lands for any purpose whatsoever, including hunting and fishing. In so doing they have, by default, kept for themselves the resources found on those public lands, often profiting from this exclusive access by conducting pricey outfitted hunts on public ground.

It's an issue I first discovered nearly 50 yards ago, when I started traveling the West as a low-budget deer and elk hunter. To navigate around it, before the internet, I spent untold hours in state offices and public libraries, studying maps and researching property boundaries, looking for unadvertised access points around private ranches to landlocked state and national forest lands. Though the idea of hopping over corners never entered my mind, I found a few unadvertised access points, and can remember more than one instance being confronted by a rancher as I accessed public ground. I had the maps and documentation, so that was that. But they were not happy about it.

Nobody is disputing the rights of a landowner to control access to their own property. Private property rights are one of the cornerstones of our society. And if a rancher doesn't want to allow public access to his land to hunt and fish, so be it. But when he wants to prevent reasonable access to adjacent public lands by saying a person is trespassing by invading his airspace, isn't that a little much? Does that mean an airplane flying over that same land is also trespassing? In the case of the Iron Bar Ranch, by claiming that corner-crossing is illegal, the ranch owner essentially has access to some 6,000 acres of public land — that we all own — for his own exclusive use.

You'd think that state game departments, whose primary source of revenue is the sale of hunting licenses and tags — and out West, in most states the majority of that revenue comes from nonresidents — would do everything in their power to make it easier for tag holders to find and access a place to hunt on public land. That's not necessarily the case here, though.

For example, shortly after the corner-crossing case verdict was announced in Wyoming, Montana issued a statement that said, "Corner-crossing remains unlawful in Montana, and Montanans should continue to obtain permission from the adjoining landowners before crossing corners from one piece of public land to another. Wardens will continue to report corner-crossing cases to local county attorneys to exercise their prosecutorial discretion."

If the courts rule that corner-crossing is in fact legal, that will open up more than 8 million acres of public land that John Q. Public has not been able to recreate on at no cost for generations.

That's a very big deal. BW

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