

How to Deer Hunt

Table of Contents

1. [Where to Deer Hunt](#): You've got to hunt where they live. Here's our advice for finding great hunting ground on public and private land.
2. [When to Deer Hunt](#): Is today the day to skip work? Key tips for hunting all phases of deer season.
3. [Deer Scouting](#): There's a lot more to it than studying tracks and poop.
4. [Gear for Deer Hunting](#): Your shopping guide for this fall.
5. [Setup Fundamentals](#): You've done your scouting. You've gotten your gear. Here's how to set up and make the shot.
6. [Aggressive Deer Hunting Strategies](#): How to use calls and decoys to pull a buck into range.
7. [Shot Placement: on Deer](#): It's time to pull the trigger. Where should you aim?



Whitetails are the most popular game animal in North America. (Photo by Russell Graves.)

What makes deer hunting – and especially whitetailed deer hunting – so overwhelmingly popular?

Whitetails are ubiquitous. They're the most widely distributed hooved animal we have in the Americas – maybe in the world. And they're the definition of a hunter-driven conservation success story. These days, whitetail populations thrive from Maine to Washington, Manitoba to Peru. They're as at home in a dense national forest as they are raiding a suburban flower bed in New Jersey.

True, a guided deer hunt for a trophy buck on select ground can cost a small fortune. But Joe Hunter can also

take a vacation day from work, grab his rifle and head to the Wildlife Management Area down the road with reasonable hopes of returning home with a deer in his truck.

At least as appealing as the availability are the whitetail's qualities as a game animal. Many a traveled hunter has tested his skills against critters on other continents only to realize that the whitetails he left back home are significantly more challenging to hunt. A mature whitetail buck or doe is unquestionably one of the wariest, most intelligent big game animals out there.

A buck's antlers can grow to impressive size. They're tangible evidence of a buck's maturity, and the degree of difficulty it takes to kill him. If cave drawings are any evidence, we humans have been admiring antlers for some time. It's in our nature to be fascinated by them.

Perhaps best of all, lean whitetail venison is renowned for its mild flavor and outstanding health benefits. A venison dinner can take the form of a succulent roast prepared by a trained chef, or a heaping pile of deer-burger spaghetti whipped up by a busy country mom on a school night. Both meals end with a full belly. Human beings have been eating deer meat for some time, and that's not apt to change in the foreseeable future.

Yes, the American hunter's love for deer hunting – whitetail deer hunting in particular – has fueled an economic engine that's kept companies like Realtree going over the years. And that's largely why we've compiled this "How to Deer Hunt" guide. You may be a grown woman, embarking on your first ever hunting season, with no clue how to begin. Or you might've started hunting back when "just seeing a deer track was something to talk about."

Either way, we bet you'll learn something – and enjoy yourself – by reading through this collection of deer hunting tips, tricks and tactics, compiled by Realtree.com writers.

– *Will Brantley, Editor, Realtree.com* **1Where to Deer HuntHere's how to find a hunting spot.**



Public land deer hunting is generally more difficult, but the rewards can be sweet. (Photo by Russell Graves.)

Public Land

– *By Tony Hansen*

Plenty has been written about tactics for hunting deer. But here is the single best piece of deer hunting advice you'll ever get: Hunt deer where deer live. Genius, right?

In all seriousness, finding a place to hunt deer can be one of the more difficult aspects of the hunt. But it doesn't have to be. [Hunting deer on public land](#) isn't just an option for many hunters, it's their only choice. But you need not feel at a disadvantage. Public land hunting is tougher. There's no denying that. But it can also be extremely rewarding and, with a little legwork, plenty productive. Here's how to get it done:

Finding It

The first step is just finding a public parcel to hunt. Fortunately, that's one of the easier tasks in the process. Most state game agencies offer a section on their website dedicated to helping hunters find publicly accessible lands. Some are traditional publicly-owned parcels, while others may be privately-owned but open to public hunting through special programs or agreements with state game agencies.

Don't overlook lands owned by local units of government – counties, cities and, in some states, school districts. Many of these lands offer public hunting and are less pressured simply because they're not as well-known.

When it comes to public hunting lands, there are generally three types of ownership: federal, state and local.

- **Federal.** The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

manage millions of acres of land owned by the people of the United States, and much of it is open to public hunting.

- **State.** Most states own some amount of public land, usually in the form of state forests or Wildlife Management Areas. Again, the majority of these lands are open to, and even managed for, public hunting.
- **Local.** Don't overlook lands owned by local units of government – counties, cities and, in some states, school districts. Many of these lands offer public hunting and are less pressured simply because they're not as well-known.



Public rule No. 1: Feel free to brag. But never reveal your hunting spot. (Photo by John Hafner.)

Hunting it

The key to successfully hunting public lands is to determine from the outset what you're after. Of course, whitetails have to live in the area. That's a prerequisite regardless. But if you're specifically looking to tag a big, old buck, you are usually going to seek out areas that are more remote and difficult to access. But if you simply want to spend a few days in the woods and have a reasonable expectation of killing a deer, you usually have more options. Here's how to narrow things down.

- **Desk Research.** To find these areas, just look at a map. Most federal agencies will include fairly detailed maps of public lands and include trails, roads, terrain types and any hunting closures and exceptions. The U.S. Forest Service also offers paper topographical maps for purchase, and many GPS units offer special mapping cards and software that will show property boundaries. State lands are also usually well-defined by state agencies with website links to maps, details and hunting information. Most state areas are also included on quality GPS mapping cards and systems.
- **Secret Spots.** Many locally-owned lands and private lands with public hunting arrangements will not be featured on maps or GPS units. In a way, that's part of their appeal. To find them, you must find them. And that

will eliminate a lot of the pressure usually associated with public land hunting. Start by contacting local units of government, and they should be able to get you started.

Other Considerations

Now that you've found a parcel of public land and narrowed down your prime location, it's time to think about what you'll need to actually hunt it – and what you'll do after you've downed a deer.

Here are some tips to consider:

- **Access.** Most public lands will not allow motorized vehicle access beyond trailheads and parking areas. Does that mean you're left to foot traffic only? It might. Or it might mean you can use a bicycle or, perhaps, a horse for deeper access. Check all rules and regulations, and then make a plan.
- **Trim the Weight.** Foot access is usually the only means of transportation on public lands. And that means you're going to need to haul stands, climbing sticks and assorted gear into your location. Plan – and pack – accordingly. Inventory every piece of gear that you intend to take with you. If it's not absolutely essential, consider leaving it back in the truck. Save weight where you can and your back will thank you for it later.
- **What About Your Deer?** Getting your gear into an area is one thing. Toting a 200-pound whitetail out is quite another. A wheeled game cart can be a life-saver here. Literally. A study conducted by a team of heart specialists in Michigan has shown that hunting can cause heart rates to skyrocket to dangerous levels – with the act of dragging a deer causing spikes in cardiac activity of lethal rates. Your best option for hauling a deer out of the woods? A team of buddies. Take plenty of breaks, take your time and enjoy the haul.

Private Land

– *By Will Brantley*

Leasing It

Leasing hunting land – as in, paying a landowner for the hunting rights to his property – is such a popular trend among today's deer hunters that in some areas, it's considered standard hunting procedure.

Some hunters view leasing as a negative thing. The subjects of the complaints are varied and complex, but suffice it to say that when money is changing hands, some are bound to dislike the results. The truth is, when done properly and professionally, leasing can be your most economical option for having a very good deer hunting spot.

Most leasing agreements are arranged on a dollars-per-acre basis. The rates per acre vary widely across the country. The perceived quality of an area's deer hunting combined with area hunter demand and the quality of the actual dirt at stake determine the rate. Prime farm country in the heart of southern Illinois, a region known nationwide for producing big bucks, is probably going to cost more to lease than a heavily wooded West Virginia hillside, for example.



Deer camp. It's an American tradition. (Photo by Russell Graves.)

Leasing agreements range from a handshake and a few bills between a single hunter and a farmer to formal, legal contracts between multiple members of a hunting club and a farming operation. Regardless of the arrangement you choose to make, it's always important to lay the ground rules ahead of time. The property owner needs to know what you intend to do. Plant food plots? Clear some brush with a bulldozer? Build permanent box stands? Set up a camper? Are you signing a multi-year agreement? If not, can another group of hunters step in and offer the farmer more money than you're willing to pay next year?

At the same time, potential lease partners need to be in agreement on the rules at the outset. Are there limits on shooting young bucks? Who does the work and pays for the food plots? What about guests? Can your buddy bring his six cousins in for opening day of gun season?

These things may seem inconsequential, especially when you're planning to lease a neighbor's farm with a group of close friends. But be aware that friendships have been dissolved as a result of hunting lease disagreements. Iron out the details ahead of time, and the experience will be better for everyone in the long run.

Buying It

Many a hunter dreams of owning his or her own little slice of heaven. Realtree.com is the place to be for hunting advice, but we don't give financial planning advice. Whether or not you are prepared to purchase hunting land is strictly your decision. And maybe your bank's. But, as the old saying about land goes, they ain't making any more of it.

As with leasing rates, the cost of hunting ground varies widely depending on location and the perceived quality of

the property. Typically, the price is determined on a per-acre basis. If shopping, check around for land prices in your area, keeping in mind the location and layout. Fifty acres of prime, tillable farm land may cost significantly more than 100 acres of clear-cut thicket, for example (even though the clear-cut thicket may provide better hunting). Increasingly, the hunting value is being considered in the overall per-acre cost of land in many areas.

Whether or not you are prepared to purchase hunting land is strictly your decision. And maybe your bank's. But, as the old saying about land goes, they ain't making any more of it.

You can shop for hunting land on your own, or enlist the help of a real estate agent. These days, there are many real estate companies that specialize in brokering hunting property. We recommend Whitetail Properties, but there are good agencies right down to the local level. If you go this route, it's important to be up front with your agent about the type of ground you're after, the money you have (or don't have) to spend, and the debt burden you're willing to take on. This way, no one's time is wasted.

Buying land is more expensive than leasing land. No doubt about that. But to many who do it, the extra cost is more than offset by the pride and satisfaction of having "your own place" to do with as you wish. Shoot only big bucks. Shoot all bucks. [Plant food plots](#). Build box blinds. Wheel in a mobile home, stake out some pink flamingos and throw a raucous party the night before deer season, if that's what you like. The ground belongs to you.

Just be safe and have fun. Check out more [tips for buying hunting property here](#).

Improving It

Identifying Existing Food Sources



Browse and mast are key food sources wherever whitetails live. (Photo by Tony Hansen.)

Regardless of the time of year – early season, late season, even the rut – a whitetail’s daily movements are dominated by food. While a deer’s dietary requirements and preferences change throughout the season (and sometimes, even by the week), some food sources are standout favorites every fall.

Food sources on a new hunting spot can be basically broken into one of two types: existing and introduced. If you’re scoping out a new farm to buy or lease, or maybe even a public spot you’d like to hunt, identifying the existing food sources will tell you a lot about the current deer-holding potential, and what could potentially be done with food source enhancements.

Natural Browse: You’d think any block of trees would be full of the small bushes, twigs, seeds, berries and leaves that make up the bulk of a whitetail’s daily diet, but you’d be mistaken. Old-growth hardwood forest and dense evergreen canopies shade out the forest floor, preventing that thick understory – and the browse it produces – from growing. Though open ridges with big timber are productive hunting spots at certain times of the year, thick, early successional stuff like clear-cuts and even selectively logged woods provides tons more browse and much better cover.

Mast: Nuts, acorns in particular, are hugely important to a whitetail’s fall diet. And that’s where those big, open stands of hardwood timber can come into play. There are some 60 species of oak in the United States, and deer preferences for their acorns vary too widely by region to cover here. But in general, white oaks are preferred to other oak species because the acorns they produce have lower levels of tannic acid, which give acorns a bitter flavor.

Crops: If you’re scouting an area that has browse, cover and water, you have the basic elements required for whitetail habitat. In the East, most of these areas have at least a few mast-producing trees as well, and this natural, woodland style habitat comprises the bulk of available public hunting areas. But a food source on a potential hunting spot doesn’t have to be “natural” to be pre-existing. And it’s no secret that more whitetails live in farm country. Row crops, namely corn and soybeans, are a huge reason why Midwestern states like Iowa, Illinois, Missouri and Wisconsin have so many deer. The way the in which deer use these crops changes during deer season, since fall is also harvest season, but there’s no question that the presence of row crop agriculture typically makes a huge positive impact on area deer numbers.

Introducing Food Sources

For many of today’s deer hunters, the first thought upon acquiring a new lease or buying a new farm is enhancing the available food supply. Although adding more food sources isn’t universally the answer to getting more deer to use your hunting property (in some situations, creating additional cover can be more effective), it does help in many situations. And there are two basic strategies for doing this: planting food plots or baiting.



Where legal, baiting can be a great strategy for getting a shot. (Photo by Russell Graves.)

Baiting: Where legal, baiting can be a great strategy for getting a shot. First, some ground rules on this polarizing topic. We're not here to advocate for or against baiting. In many places, hunting deer over bait is illegal. In others, there are laws regarding how close you can set up to bait. And in a few, you can pour out a corn pile, climb a tree 20 yards away and shoot the first deer that walks in, if you so desire. It's up to you to learn and adhere to the regulations in the area you hunt.

From a management standpoint, baiting has its drawbacks. It's widely believed that concentrating animals over bait is a fast way to transmit dangerous diseases, including CWD. Baiting inherently requires more human interaction, which means more scent left behind and a potentially spookier overall deer herd. But baiting, where legal, can be the fastest, most effective technique at your disposal for putting deer within range. And that's the whole goal of going deer hunting, right?

Although apples, feed blends and myriad other goodies are sometimes used for bait, whole shelled corn is the overwhelming favorite. It's easy to obtain, not overly expensive and whitetails love it. It also works pretty well when used in conjunction with a timed feeder. Such feeders have the advantage of holding substantial amounts of corn secure from the weather for an extended period of time, and limiting how much the deer (and raccoons) are able to eat in a given day. The drawback to them is that it can take months, even a full year, for area deer to become conditioned to them. And even at that, my success at drawing mature bucks in to timed feeders has been limited at best.

Corn poured straight onto the ground, or into a feed-on-demand "gravity feeder" – [learn how to make one](#)– is the better bet to start drawing in deer fast, especially older bucks. Deer will often find a corn pile overnight if it's established in a high-traffic area, and will continue to visit it even a day or two after the last kernels are consumed. A corn pile on the ground is one of the quickest, deadliest ways to get your deer on a small tract of ground that otherwise lacks top food sources. It's especially effective early and late in the season.

Food Plots

The food-plotting topic is so large that entire books have been dedicated to the subject. For near endless reading and video food plot tips, we recommend visiting the [Land Management](#) section of [Realtree.com](#). But in the meantime, here's the crash course.

Types of Food Plots



Turnips are a great food plot choice for the late season. (Photo by Tony Hansen.)

Turnips are a great food plot choice for the late season. In a perfect world, deer managers who have big chunks of acreage, fat budgets and good equipment plant numerous food plots that vary in size and plantings for maximum nutrition and attraction. In the real world, deer managers are doing their best on small farms, planting the

openings that are available with an old, broken down tractor, an ATV, or maybe nothing more than a [hand-sprayer and a rake](#).

The good news is, even a small-time manager can improve his or her hunting with the addition of food plots, and good plots can be established with minimal equipment. It's simply a matter of how hard you're willing to work on them. Here's a look at the general types of food plots, and who should consider planting them.

Perennial Food Plots: Perennials like clover, chicory and alfalfa last for several seasons once established (maintenance provided, of course), and they offer near year-around nutrition to your deer herd.

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They're a good bang for the buck, and likely the most popular style of food plot. Perennials work in ¼-acre kill plots and 30-acre destination plots alike. [Learn more about perennial food plots](#).

Annual Food Plots: Annuals, including cereal grains, corn, brassicas, soybeans and peas are good for a single season, but can provide amazing deer-drawing power with some careful planning. If you have ample tillable ground, equipment and time to plant, it's tough to argue with the effectiveness of row crops like soybeans and corn. If you need to grow something fast that's highly attractive, cereal grains and turnips are usually a good choice. [Learn more about annual food plots](#).

When to Deer Hunt Three days at the right time beats three weeks at the wrong time. Here's when to call in sick.



The early season can be a great time to score on a good buck. (Photo by Will Brantley.)

The Early Season and Tactics

– *By Will Brantley*

There's a romantic image of deer hunting in the fall. The deer camp setting includes a wood-burning stove and roaring fire to knock off the nighttime chill, and getting dressed for the stand means layering up enough insulation to keep warm.

Truth is, though, quite a bit of deer hunting takes place in the late summer and early fall, when it's hot outside. Archery seasons for whitetails open in September and October across the country. In a few rare instances (South Carolina and Florida, for example), hunters take to the woods as early as August.

[\(Check out state-by-state regulations by visiting Realtree's Antler Nation.\)](#)

There's good reason to hunt the early season, comfortable weather aside. Here's why:

- Deer that have been unpressured by hunters for nearly a year are as lax and vulnerable during the first week of season as they will be until the final day. There are also more deer in the woods right now than there will be all season.
- Deer are worried about one thing in the early season: food. And because food sources are changing by the day in the late summer and early fall, the meals they prefer become quite predictable, and deer as a result can be easy to pattern. Crop fields (soybeans and corn, especially); food plots, and acorns are all top early season food sources. If it's legal in your area and other food source options are limited, baiting is a great way to draw deer to within bow range.
- Bucks are typically gathered in "bachelor groups" during the month of September. Typically, these bachelor groups consist of one or two big, mature bucks, and two or three younger subordinate bucks. These groups, because they haven't been pressured and because they use the predictable food sources listed above, are often up and moving an hour before dark on early season afternoons. This situation offers one of the very best opportunities of the year at killing a truly big buck.

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How to Hunt: The early season is the easiest time of the year, strategy wise, to hunt. It's all about finding the food deer are using in daylight hours and then ambushing them either when they get there or on their way to it. Much of early season success, then, hinges on scouting. Trail cameras hung in strategic locations over food plots, crop fields and bait sites can tell you a great deal. In areas where you can see but remain undetected from a distance, no type of scouting is more effective than actually glassing a field edge in the evening and marking exactly where deer are entering the field to feed, and at what time of the day.

The Pre-rut and Tactics



Deer behavior changes in each phase of the season. Smart hunters know how to adapt. (Photo by John Hafner.)

September turns to October, and things, they are a-changing fast in the whitetail woods. The bachelor groups of bucks that were so predictable just a few weeks ago are now breaking up, and individual bucks are establishing territories for the fall. They mark these territories with rubs and scrapes. Encounters with other bucks now lead to aggressive posturing, and, as the month goes on, violent fighting. Bucks show an increasing interest in does, as they know it's only a matter of days before the first females are ready to breed.

In addition to deer behavior, food sources are changing. Chilly nights and shorter days are killing off the abundant green browse that was in the woods on opening day. Soybean fields are yellowing and losing their attraction. Acorns are falling. This time of year is considered by many to be the toughest of all to hunt – but it does have its upsides.

- Food sources are changing, but options are more limited. With browse options dwindling by the day, deer must focus on what's available. Harvested corn fields, food plots and mast become more attractive than ever. Although the rut is around the corner, during the early stages of the pre-rut, it's still all about the food.
- The weather is improving. Nobody likes to sit in a treestand and swat mosquitoes when it's 90 degrees out. Those first chilly days of October, whether you see a deer or not, are simply a glorious time to be in the woods.
- Buck sign is appearing. Finding big rubs and clean scrapes can help you hone in on a particular buck's routine. And they're a sure sign that the frenzied pace of late October and November are just around the corner.

How to Hunt: [During the pre-rut, deer are in flux.](#) They've seen some hunting pressure by this point, so they're a bit leazier about moving in the open during daylight hours. Bucks know the breeding hasn't begun yet, and mature animals, especially, are extremely cautious right now. Food sources have changed, with acorns being option No. 1 where they're available. So hunting the pre-rut often means backing into the timber. Play it safe around the bedding areas, but don't be shy about setting up in funnels and pinch points between those beds and food sources. And be prepared for some slow days. The best thing about the pre-rut is that the rut is on the way.

The Rut and Tactics

– By Tony Hansen

If there is a time that best defines whitetail hunting, [it is the rut.](#) That's when bucks throw all caution to the wind and run willy-nilly across the landscape in search of does to breed. Killing one of those lovesick brutes is as

simple as perching a tree and [waiting for one to stumble past](#).

Well it's not quite that easy. Unless it is. That is the beauty—[and the frustration](#)—of the rut. It can be the ultimate in roller coaster experiences. Here's how to hunt it.

Define It



Late fall and the rut. It's the best time of all for deer hunting. (Photo by Michelle Brantley.)

The first step in hunting the rut is determining exactly what phase of the rut you're dealing with. Not all does will be ready to breed at the same time. And this will definitely impact how the bucks you're hunting behave.

The "seeking and chasing phase" is the phase most hunters closely associate with the rut. Generally speaking, rutting activity will begin trickling in mid-October and gain steam toward the end of the month, hitting a peak somewhere around the second week of November. Much of this activity is actually pre-breeding. Very few does are actually ready to be bred, but there are a few. And that puts bucks into a frenzy. This is when daylight rut activity is most intense and bucks are moving most often.

At some point, usually around mid-November, most does will be available to breed. And the action will decline dramatically as bucks and does disappear into the thickets to breed. This is known as the "lockdown" phase. Bucks will stay with a doe they're breeding for about 48 hours, and will move only when the doe moves.

How to Hunt: Hunting the rut can be incredibly exciting. And incredibly frustrating.

The seeking and chasing phase offers an excellent time to hunt areas with maximum deer movement. Funnels, pinch points and primary food sources are all worthy of attention. All-day sits are very effective this time of year,

but that doesn't mean you have to sit in the same stand all day long.

All-day sits are very effective this time of year, but that doesn't mean you have to sit in the same stand all day long. Try targeting a prime funnel that deer use to travel from feeding areas to bedding areas in the morning before moving to a stand near a known doe bedding area during the midday hours.

Try targeting a prime funnel that deer use to travel from feeding areas to bedding areas in the morning before moving to a stand near a known doe bedding area during the midday hours. Then, in the afternoon, change locations to a primary food source.

The seeking and chasing phase is the ideal time to employ calling tactics, particularly during the early stages of the phase. With competition for available does high, bucks are far more willing to respond to calling and rattling. Grunt calls mixed with doe bleats can be dynamite. Antler rattling simulates a fight between bucks over a hot doe, and can draw in bucks from long distances.

During the lockdown phase, you may see limited activity until a hot doe is in your area. This is a good time to hunt near known doe bedding areas much of the day and to target primary food sources in the evenings. It's unlikely that you'll be able to call a buck away from a hot doe, but rattling and calling can still be effective at pulling in bucks that have just finished with one doe and are moving on to find a new mate.

The Post Rut and Tactics

With the frantic, action-packed days of the rut behind us, we enter the post-rut phase. Often, this period of the deer season is also referred to as the "late" season. In many ways, the tactics and experiences are the same. Deer are finished breeding and winter is impending. They have two things on their minds: Food and safety.

In most areas, the rut will be all but over by the first week of December. And in areas of the upper Midwest, snow will begin falling in late November, and the cold temperatures won't recede until spring. In those situations, the post-rut period occurs hand-in-hand with true late-season hunting tactics.



This bowhunter scored on a late-season deer while hunting over a bait site. (Photo by Michelle Brantley.)

In other areas, however, there may be a small window of time in which the deer have put the rut behind them but aren't yet enduring cold winter temperatures. These post-rut deer can be some of the toughest to hunt.

Following the rut, doe families will begin to reassemble. Does, fawns and button bucks will start to hang out together again, bedding and feeding in the same locations. These deer will also have endured a full season of hunting pressure and will be reluctant to move much in daylight. Bucks will also start to reform into bachelor groups, sometimes hanging out with does and fawns as well.

How to Hunt: The best tactics for hunting these post-rut deer are of the low-impact variety. Scout food sources from afar before making a plan to hunt them. As in the early season, your best chance of taking a deer off a food source in the post-rut period is the first time you hunt the location. So make it count.

In some cases, you may also encounter some "second" rut behavior. Does that were not bred during the initial rut may come into estrus again about 30 days later. Because of this, you should keep your call and rattling antlers handy when hunting the post-rut period. You never know when you might need them, and you really don't have much to lose by trying it this late in the game.

3Deer Scouting You know where to hunt and when to hunt. Now it's time to make a plan.— *By Brian Strickland*



Sure, there's plenty of luck involved with deer hunting. But those who put an emphasis on scouting are always more successful. (Photo by John Hafner.)

Scouting is the foundation to consistent deer hunting success. Whether you're hunting a small 10-acre patch of urban timber or larger expanses of farmland, the effort you assert in understanding your property and how the deer use it will largely determine the outcome of your season.

The First Steps

Ideally, scouting should begin well before the season opener, but for the traveling hunter, this may not be possible. Regardless, the best starting point to understanding your hunting property is with the use of topographical maps and aerial photos. Using these tools allows you to visually see what the property offers, and also provide detailed topography.

In general, when scoping an area on an aerial map, check for these features:

- **Rivers and creeks.** These are prime locations for traveling deer. It's not uncommon to find trails running along

their banks, as well as water crossing locations at gradually sloping and shallow water areas.

- **Travel corridors.** A saddle, which is just a low point between two hills, is an easy spot for deer to travel. East-west ridges allow rutting bucks to use prevailing north-south winds to efficiently scent check an area for estrus does. Draws or gullies leading from open fields to bedding areas can be potential travel routes as well.
- **Fields.** Although you may not be able to tell what a field contains from an aerial map, they are often prime feeding areas, and are always worth investigation.
- **Thickets.** They provide the bedding and security cover deer require, especially in areas with heavy hunting pressure.

Boots on the Ground

Once you have a clear understanding of your hunting ground, it's time to put boots on the ground and take a closer look. This is best done weeks ahead of the opener, but scouting during the season can be amazingly effective if you're careful about it. Be sure to bring your maps and aerial photos along and use them to make notes as you gain a clearer picture of the property. If you are technically savvy, using a GPS (Global Positioning System) can also be useful in noting deer sign and travel patterns.



Every deer track tells a story. (Photo by Tony Hansen.)

Be on the lookout, specifically, for this sign:

Tracks. If a track is dry and eroded, it was made a few days or even weeks prior, but a fresh track will be well-defined and distinct. If it is a very large hoof print compared to others, then it was probably made by a mature buck. Also take notice of the distance between the large tracks. Mature bucks generally have a longer stride.

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Droppings. This is easy enough to figure out. The freshness and amount of them will give you a clue to the number of deer living in a particular area. The size of the dropping tells a lot about the size of the deer that left them. Large clumps indicate that a large deer is in the area, and because mature bucks often defecate as soon as they leave their beds, near a thicket will give you an idea where they might be bedded and the direction they are traveling from their bed.

Trails. As you are walking the property, make note of the deer trails you run across and the directions they are going. They will provide insight on how deer travel between feeding and bedding areas.

Rubs. These start appearing as early as September when bucks begin rubbing the velvet off their antlers, and as the November rut approaches, rub activity increases substantially. Although sometimes not as distinct as rubs made during the rut, early September rubs are often located between feeding and bedding areas, and they will help you narrow down prime locations.

Scrapes. Although they are mostly thought of as "rut sign," scrapes can show up throughout the year and are made to display territorial dominance. Early season scrapes are frequently found near food sources and defined travel corridors.

Beds. Bedding areas are key locations you should locate while scouting; however, if the season opener is just days away, the risk of bumping deer from them far outweighs the actual need to find them. Instead, focus your attention on locating travel routes between potential bedding and feeding areas. Day bedding areas are typically located in the densest, thickest, swampiest and nastiest cover in the area.

Seeing From A Distance



Bean fields can provide outstanding glassing opportunities in the early season. (Photo by Will Brantley.)

Glassing feeding fields in the late afternoon summer sun can be an excellent way to not only see what bucks are on your property, but to also learn how they are using a particular field. Typically, bucks will start entering the fields within the last hour of light, and will travel in bachelor groups of three or more animals. Their red coats and thick velvet racks are a sight to see against a lush green field, but you're not there for just show and tell.

Pay close attention to where they enter the field, which could tell you the direction of their bedding area. Also, keep your distance when glassing. Ideally, you should be anywhere from 300 to 400 yards away from their feeding areas and always make sure you set up downwind. At this distance, having a quality pair of 10X42 binoculars is a must, and in some cases a spotting scope is a benefit. [Learn more about optics below.](#)

4Gear for Deer Hunting **Break out the debit card. It's time to go shopping.**



The treestand is the single most effective way to set up on deer in most situations. (Photo by Russell Graves.)

Treestands and Ground Blinds

– *By Brian Strickland*

Elevated treestands are without a doubt the most effective way to kill a wary whitetail deer. An elevated perch not only improves your field of view, but it also significantly reduces your chances of being spotted by whitetails, especially when you're bowhunting. There are three types of treestands available to hunters today: the lock-on stand, the climbing stand and the ladder stand. Each provides its own uniqueness to various hunting situations.

Elevated treestands are without a doubt the most effective way to kill a wary whitetail deer.

- **Lock-on stands** are the most common and simplest available today, and for the hunter on a budget, the most affordable as well. They secure to the tree with high-strength belts or chains and must be hauled into place with the use of screw-in tree steps or some type of climbing stick system. Ideally, you want to hang the stand at least 12 to 20 feet from the ground and in a tree that offers a trunk that is at least 12 to 16 inches in diameter. This not only provides good cover to keep you hidden, but trees that size or larger sway less in strong winds and are obviously stronger. A relatively straight tree is ideal; however, many hang-ons offer adjustable platforms and seats that provide the ability to use them in crooked trees. [To learn how to hang a lock-on stand, watch this video.](#)
- **Ladder stands** provide a platform from 10 to 20 feet in elevation that is securely strapped to the tree, and they have a built-in ladder that allows you to enter and exit that stand in a more controlled manner. They're great for beginning hunters and anyone a little leery of heights, but seasoned veterans shouldn't overlook them, either. Ladder stands provide quick, silent access, and most of them are comfortable enough for an all-day sit. Most of the time it takes at least a pair of hunters to secure a ladder stand safely into place, and they are designed for

relatively straight trees with trunks ranging in diameter from 12 and 16 inches as well. [To learn how to hang a ladder stand, watch this video.](#)

- **Climbing stands** are specifically designed for trees with straight trunks, and they consist of two sections: a seat and a platform. Climbers are ideal for the public land hunter who does not wish to leave stands unattended, and many are light weight making them easy to haul into the woods. You ascend and descend the tree by “walking” the stand up or down the tree, utilizing both the seat and platform in conjunction with one another.
- **Safety first** It’s estimated that between 10 to 30 percent of hunters who use a treestand will have a treestand accident sometime in their lives, and what is so sad about that statistic is that nearly all of them could be prevented with the use of proper equipment. Besides common sense, the most important piece of equipment you need when hunting from a treestand is a full-body safety harness that allows you to ascend and descend the tree and treestand while being securely attached throughout the whole process. Most accidents occur while transitioning from the stand to the climbing steps, and while ascending and descending the tree. Keep away from the old fashioned safety belts, as they are not as effective as a fully body harness and can cause injury or even death from asphyxiation if used in a fall. [Watch HSS safety vest and lifeline video.](#)

Ground Blinds



Ground blinds can be very effective in areas with limited treestand options. (Photo by Russell Graves.)

Ground blinds are nothing new for deer hunting, but the modern pop-up style has given life to their popularity. Unlike treestands, you really can't fall out of a ground blind. And in cold, rainy weather, they provide warmth and keep your bones dry. They are a great option for both bow and gun hunters when hunting fields or other open country. And they are an exceptional choice for introducing fidgety kids to hunting.

Ideally, ground blinds should be set up weeks before the season opener, giving the local deer time to accept them. If that is not an option, using the natural vegetation to brush them in will do a good job of fooling the local population in a pinch. Most of today's portable ground blinds offer straps or some type of ties for securing brush to their outer shell. You can also cut a hole in the brush and insert the blind, being careful not to have limbs rubbing against the fabric making unwanted noise. You don't want to skyline the blind on a hill or ridge if at all possible, and to keep deer from noticing movements inside the blind, wear dark clothing and keep as many windows closed as possible to reduce natural light.

What to Wear Deer Hunting



Cold Weather Gear

There's nothing worse than being cold on stand, but with today's insulated hunting gear Mother Nature's worst doesn't have to keep you home. To battle the elements, think layers. Not only does layering do a better job of keeping body heat in and cold out, but when it gets warm, you can always peel some away.

- Start with base layers (aka, long underwear). Modern base layers are designed with materials that wick away moisture to keep you dry, as well as offer scent reducing qualities.
- Mid-level layers (hoodies, insulated pants) tend to be a little thicker and can be used as outerwear on warmer days, or as another warming layer.
- Thick outer layers (coats and bibs) are for those cold days when you wonder why you are even out there in the first place. You want these to be thick but not so bulky that they hamper movement.
- Don't forget insulated hats, face mask and gloves when the temperatures dip, but don't use gloves that are so thick you can't use your hands effectively.

Hot Weather Gear

During early season hunts you're going to get hot and sweaty. No way around it. With that in mind, consider wearing lightweight clothing that offers scent control qualities. Although this is not foolproof, anything you can do to reduce human scent is always a good option. Clothing that is breathable, stretchable and cool on the body will do an amazing job keeping you cool.

Boots

When picking the right pair of boots, comfort, climate and environment are essential elements to consider. Hunting whitetails sometimes requires long days in the field, so having a pair of boots that are comfortable in any situation will keep you on stand longer and increase your odds of killing deer. Because elements can change drastically during the whitetail season, having a couple pairs of boots for the varying conditions might be necessary if you intend to bear the brunt of an entire season. For stationary hunting from a stand or ground blind a quality pair of calf-high rubber boots—insulated or not, weather depending—is an excellent, and popular, option.

When still-hunting, participating in deer drives or hiking long distances in more rugged terrain is involved, choosing a comfortable leather or Cordura boot might be a better option. They offer better all-around support. Non or lightly insulated boots are more breathable on warm hunts, but many styles of lace-up boots have Thinsulate insulation for colder days, as well as Gore-Tex or other water-proofing materials for wet conditions.

Hunter Orange

According to the International Hunter Education Association, approximately 1,000 people are shot in hunting related accidents in the U.S. and Canada each season, and about 100 of them end up being fatal. I bet if we were to dig a little deeper into those stats, a good many were not wearing hunter orange at the time. Most states require firearm hunters to wear at least some hunter orange, and many even require a particular amount. It only takes a bullet to come whizzing by your stand once to understand why.

Packs

When it comes to selecting the right pack, size should be your first concern. With the gear most whitetail hunters carry, having a pack that offers at least 1,200 cubic inches of pack space is a must; if you're one who tends to be gear heavy, packs of up to 2,000 cubic inches are even better. When you start piling in water, food, rainwear, jacket, rattling antlers, calls, camera, flashlight and all the other odds and ends we haul to the woods, the right pack with enough small pockets that allow you to organize and retrieve gear with as little movement as possible can be a plus while on stand. Skip the cheap ones, too. For just a few extra bucks you can get a high-quality, comfortable pack that will last season after season. There are tons of pack options available today, but for overall quality it's hard to beat what Tenzing, ALPS, Badlands and Easton have to offer.

Optics for Deer Hunting

Quality optics are essential for deer hunting, and there are three primary types to consider: Binoculars, spotting scopes and rangefinders. Although not all of them are necessary in every hunting situation, each is useful enough to justify owning them all. In the past, deer hunters were forced to choose between cheap optics that were often junk, or high-quality glass that cost a small fortune. Today, there are numerous middle-of-the-road binoculars, rangefinders and spotting scopes that will do the job effectively, but at reasonable prices.

Binoculars



A good binocular is essential for deer hunting. (Photo by Russell Graves.)

Binoculars are among the most important all-around tools for deer hunting. When shopping for the right binocular, there are many factors to consider and understand. The most important and most basic is the magnification and brightness. Magnification is the optical power the binoculars provide, and the brightness is largely determined by the size of the aperture or objective lens, but lens coatings also play a role. The number on the binoculars describes these configurations.

For example, an 8X42 configuration means that the binoculars offer 8-power magnification, or that the object you are looking at appears eight times closer than what you can see with the naked eye. The 42 is how many millimeters in diameter the aperture or objective lens is, which largely determines its light-gathering capabilities. This is an important consideration since most hunting situations occur in low-light conditions.

At first thought, many feel having higher magnification is better, but higher magnification decreases the field of view, and they are typically not as bright. For the average whitetail deer hunter, 8X42 is an ideal choice in both magnification and brightness.

Look for models that offer “fully multi-coated” lenses. This means that all air-to-glass surfaces have received multiple layers of anti-reflection coatings, which reduce light loss and glare due to reflection. Extra Low Dispersion Glass, or commonly referred to as ED Glass, is typically found on higher end models, and it is well-worth the extra dollars if you spend much time in the woods. This type of glass provides exceptional color correction and sharp images in low light conditions.

Spotting Scopes

Although a spotting scope is not necessary for most whitetail hunting situations, it is an excellent tool for glassing large fields from a distance while scouting, and they're very handy when hunting for whitetails in open country out west. Most spotting scopes have 50mm to 80mm objective lenses, which gather plenty of light, and magnifications from 15X to 60X optical power. For magnification performance, anything in the 15X to 30X is perfect for whitetails. This will give you plenty of power, as well as a wide field of view. A fully multi-coated lens is a must, and it should be equipped with ED Glass and offer high definition qualities. Quality is key when picking a good spotting scope, so expect to shell out some money to get one that is worthwhile.

Rangefinders

Whether you're slinging arrows from 20 yards or bullets from 200, a laser rangefinder is a game-changing tool for deer hunting. In a nutshell, these devices use an invisible infrared laser beam to reflect off a target, and a computer chip in the unit calculates the time it took for the laser to reflect back to the unit to calculate the distance. This pinpoint accuracy has done worlds to minimize misses and wounding shots on game. And, modern rangefinders are surprisingly affordable and rugged.

One of the newest advancements in rangefinders that's a must-have for bowhunters is angle-compensating technology. These units have a built-in inclinometer that gives you true horizontal yardage for sharply angled shots.

Some modern rangefinders offer scanning modes, which allow you to pan across the landscape while the button is held and acquire different distance readings. Other read-out modes allow you to filter out brush and clutter than can spoil the reading to your target, and even built-in ballistic modes that help rifle shooters determine holdover amounts for their particular firearm.

Trail Cameras

– *By Tony Hansen*

If anything has had more of an impact on the way we hunt over the past decade than the trail camera, I'd love to see it. Trail cameras are, quite simply, remote-activated cameras that we place in the field to capture images of critters when we're not there. To say they are cool would be an understatement. They are epic cool. If you've never used a trail camera (or even if you have and would like to learn a thing or two) here's the down and dirty on putting them to work. [Watch the Whitetail Properties video.](#)

Choosing a Trail Camera



Trail cameras have revolutionized deer scouting. (Photo by Michelle Brantley.)

Choosing a trail camera isn't as easy as it once was because there are dozens of brands and models available. To make matters more confusing, each unit offers varying feature sets.

So let's make some sense of the options.

For starters, you'll need to decide whether you want a camera that uses a traditional flash or some version of LED lighting. For most applications, you'll want a flash that simply illuminates the deer at night to provide good, clear images after dark. LED units excel here. Most LED units will feature multiple LED bulbs that produce light that's hard for game or humans to see. The Bushnell TrophyCam HD is an excellent example. However, some units such as the Bushnell Trophy Cam HD MAX also employ red or "black" infrared lights. These allow the camera to provide illumination for the photo without giving off a highly-visible light that may be seen by deer and is definitely visible to other humans who might want to make off with your camera.

That said, standard "white light" flashes have their place. They excel at stopping motion and preventing image blur. So if you intend to set your camera up over a scrape, a white light flash is a good choice. Bucks at scrapes are usually fairly active and moving. A standard LED camera will produce blurry images. A white flash unit will not. Moultrie offers very good flash units in its Game Spy lineup.

Each unit will also have an advertised range for the flash. This tells you how far away a deer can be from the unit and still be illuminated by the flash. The longer the range, the better.

If anything has had more of an impact on the way we hunt over the past decade than the trail camera, I'd love to see it.

Once you've selected the type of flash you'd like to use, the next choice to make involves the features you'd like the camera to have. Most units will be capable of taking both photos and video. Some units include audio with the video, others do not.

Many units will also allow you to choose the resolution of the photos. I generally opt for the highest resolution possible. The Bushnell TrophyCam, for example, allows you to choose from 3, 5 or 8 megapixel images. By choosing the highest resolution, you'll be able to zoom in on photos to look at subtle details (such as antler characteristics) that will be lost with lower-resolution settings. The tradeoff? You'll fit fewer images on an SD card than with lower-resolution settings.

Trigger speeds are also advertised for each camera. This refers to the amount of time it takes for the camera to take a photo after it's detected motion. Again, faster is better.

Putting it to Good Use

Today's cameras are easy to set up and deploy. Most will feature an LCD panel on the inside of the camera where you can set up variables such as the date, time, number of photos to be snapped with each activation and whether you want the camera to operate in photo or video mode.

The more difficult aspect of trail camera use is deciding exactly where to put it and how many to use. There are no set rules for either. The best place to put a camera is the place where you think it will provide you with the information you're looking for.

If your goal is to simply take an inventory of the number and quality of deer in the area, using a camera over a mineral station or feeder is an excellent choice.

If you really want to get a look at the bucks in your area as the rut is closing in, it's hard to beat putting a camera over an active scrap. In fact, I've had moderate success creating my own mock scrapes using nothing more than a sharp stick, an overhanging branch and a little pee (deer or human, seems not to matter).

For checking out food plot use, a trail camera can be ideal. But cameras that can be set to "field scan" mode are even better. The Bushnell TrophyCam HD, for example, can be set to take one photo at a specified interval (from 1-60 minutes). You then use included software to compress those images into a time-lapse sequence that will show how many deer are using the plot and where they came from. This is especially useful on plots or fields where passing deer may be too far away from the camera to trigger a photo.

Trail Camera Tips

Over the years of trailcam use, I've probably made just about every mistake there is to make. Here are a few tips I've picked up along the way:

- Don't hang them too high. Remember, deer aren't as tall as most humans. Try to aim the camera at your waist from a distance of about seven yards. This should get most deer. If you have the camera set over a mineral site, aim the camera on a downward angle by wedging a stick behind the camera.
- Clear out weeds and branches. There's nothing more frustrating than checking an SD card with 1,200 photos on it only to discover that 1,195 of those are of blowing weeds and limbs. Clear out tall grass, weeds or small

limbs that could trigger the camera. If the wind blows and whatever is in front of the camera moves, it's going to snap a photo.

- Don't buy cheap batteries. Trail cameras need good, steady power. Cheap batteries don't deliver that. You'll be money ahead by buying good batteries the first time around. Lithium batteries will likely last an entire season even under heavy camera use.
- Make sure the camera is on. Seriously. I'm ashamed to admit the number of times that I've went to check a camera and realized that I'd forgotten to turn it on, or take it out of "test" mode, when hanging it.
- Use a big SD card. The price of SD cards, which most cameras use to store photos, has declined of late. The best value going is probably 2GB cards. And that's a good thing because a card of that size will hold about 1,500 8MP images depending on the compression rate of each camera. If you think you need more images, you can buy a larger card or reduce the resolution of the images taken by the camera.

Compound Bows

If trail cameras have had the greatest impact on how we hunt over the past decade, the transformation of the modern compound bow probably ranks a close second if you're a bowhunter. Today's compound bows are far more efficient, accurate and full of features than those of just a few years ago.

Here's how to find one that works for you.

One Cam, Two Cam or Both?

Most compounds function in a similar fashion. The bow is held by a handle located in the middle of the riser. At each end of the riser is a limb. At the end of each limb is a pulley system. The bow is drawn by pulling the string back and activating those pulleys. Through a system of mechanical advantage, the limbs are flexed and loaded to store energy. When the string is released, the pulley system reverses direction, the limbs unload and the arrow is sent on its way.



Modern compound bows are deadly hunting tools. (Photo by Russell Graves.)

There are differences, however, in the pulley systems used. You've got four basic choices: A dual-cam system, single-cam system, binary cam system and a hybrid cam system.

The dual-cam setup is pretty straight forward. Two cams, one on each limb, that work together to pull the limbs toward each other. Cams are oval in shape.

A Binary cam system is most similar to a dual-cam setup. Rather than attaching the cables to the cam axles, however, the cables are attached to the opposite cam. This allows the cams to rotate in sync.

A single-cam setup uses a single, oversized cam on the bottom limb with a round wheel on the top. The single cam uses a single power cable that attaches to the top limb and compresses both limbs.

A hybrid setup functions in similar fashion to a single-cam but uses an eccentric (non-round) idler wheel that works with the cam via a control cable. Rather than having one, long continuous bowstring (as single-cams do), it uses two shorter strings attached to the idler wheel. The bottom cam and buss cable compress the limbs.

Which system is best? Honestly, that's a point of personal preference.

Dual-cam setups are generally used on bows that deliver ultra-fast speeds. But they require some maintenance and attention to ensure the cams are in sync.

Hybrid cam setups deliver plenty of speed and are, generally speaking, less likely to go out of sync. Hoyt's Cam and 1/2 system, for example, is a hybrid cam system that delivers excellent speeds and is fairly easy to maintain and sync.

Binary cam systems ensure cams stay in sync. Elite Archery employs a binary cam system, and you'll also find that system on G5 and Quest Bowhunting models.

Single-cams offer minimal issues of timing and cam sync, but are generally a bit slower. That said, Bear Archery's Empire is a single-cam system with advertised IBO speeds of 330 fps. That's hardly slow.

Bottom line is this: Choose a system that offers the draw cycle you're most comfortable with. The cam system has minimal impact on the feel of the draw. That's more heavily defined by the shape of the cams and modules employed by the system.

How much poundage should you shoot? Check out Travis T-Bone Turner's tips for [low-poundage bowhunting setups](#)

Long or Short?



Good hunting bows are accurate. Portability and handiness in the stand are secondary considerations. (Photo by John Hafner.)

Bows have gotten progressively smaller, with any bow measuring over 36 inches axle-to-axle being considered "long." Shorter bows are easier to maneuver in a treestand and ground blind. They're easier to tote around and they weigh less. But are they less accurate? The answer to that question depends largely on the design of the bow.

Longer risers should to equate to more accuracy. This is where limbs that are parallel or past parallel come into play. By building bows with shorter limbs that are parallel or past parallel at rest, bow designers are able to create bows with longer risers but still maintain shorter axle-to-axle lengths.

Thus a 30-inch bow with a 26-inch riser should feel as stable and accurate as a 34-inch bow with a 24-inch riser. But again, the only way to know which bow suits you best is to shoot it. But keep riser length in mind when making your choice.

Accessorize

No matter which bow you choose, you'll need to add some accessories. A rest and sight are essential, and there is no shortage of options.

- **Rests.** Most of today's bowhunters use either a drop-away rest or full containment-style rest. Drop-away rests, like a QAD Hunter, provide outstanding accuracy and a little extra speed due to the fact that they fall out of the way of the arrow shaft upon release. But they do have moving parts that can fail. Capture rests, with the most popular being the Trophy Ridge Whisker Biscuit, are virtually bullet-proof. They use heavy bristles (that can be replaced) to hold the arrow in place. The drawback is constant contact with the arrow shaft. The effect on accuracy is minimal, but this style of rest will cost you a little speed.
- **Sights.** There are plenty of sight options as well. Fixed multiple pin sights, which allow you to use a different pin for different yardages, are the standard for deer hunting. Three pins, set for 20, 30 and 40 yards, is plenty for most situations. But some hunters opt for five or even seven-pin sights. Moveable single-pin sights, which are incrementally adjustable for yardage, are rapidly gaining in popularity as well, especially since newer compound bows are flat shooting out to 30-plus yards.
- **Stabilizer.** This accessory can help quiet even quiet bows and will help reduce vibration. It adds a little weight to the front end of your bow, so many hunters shoot better after adding one.
- **Quiver.** Quivers keep your arrows handy and broadheads protected. Whether you shoot your bow with the quiver on or off is another decision based on personal preference.

Arrows

Once you've got the bow geared up, you're going to need some arrows to shoot. And it doesn't make much sense to have arrows without broadheads.

Arrow selection has gotten infinitely simpler in recent years. There was a time when you had to choose between carbon or aluminum, and it was a bit of a toss-up because carbon shaft technology was still in its infancy. Not anymore. Now, your best choice in virtually all situations is carbon. And there is no shortage of excellent shafts to choose from: Easton, Carbon Express, BloodSport, Beman, etc.

Broadheads

[Broadhead technology](#) has also made big strides forward. Should you use a fixed-blade or mechanical? Well, on a whitetail, it doesn't matter much. Choose the broadhead that you like and, more importantly, that shoots true out of your bow. Practice with your broadheads, and make sure the blades are razor sharp. Some fine-tuning to your rest and sight may be in order to obtain peak broadhead accuracy.

Release

Yes, you can certainly shoot your bow with just your fingers. But with bows getting shorter and shorter, the string angle at full draw makes it very difficult to shoot without a release. And fingers will never compare to the consistent accuracy of a good release. Most bowhunters opt for an index finger-triggered release. But back tension "T-handle" styles are steadily gaining popularity as well.

Check out these reviews of some top compound bows:

Crossbows

– *By Will Brantley*

Crossbow technology is nothing new. In fact, it seems the weapons have been a source of controversy since about the 3rd Century B.C. Today's deer hunters are still arguing over them, although, compared to the debates of a decade ago, crossbows are gaining more acceptance in today's deer woods. Many states are liberalizing crossbow use beyond firearms seasons, and a few allow them during regular archery seasons.

Crossbow technology is nothing new. In fact, it seems the weapons have been a source of controversy since about the 3rd Century B.C. Today's deer hunters are still arguing over them, although, compared to the debates of a decade ago, crossbows are gaining more acceptance in today's deer woods.



In general, modern crossbows are extremely accurate and blazing fast. (Photo by John Hafner.)

Modern crossbows are highly effective hunting tools that are much easier for the beginner to master in a short amount of time than a compound bow. A good crossbow will provide more arrow velocity and energy than a compound, and many of them provide superior accuracy as well.

Numerous manufacturers sell crossbows that run the gamut of prices, although they are typically more expensive than the average compound. If you're shopping for a crossbow and want to know how to pick one from another, check out these guidelines:

- **The Limbs:** Most modern hunting crossbows have compound limbs with cams and cables, just like a compound bow. But Excalibur and a few other brands continue to produce and sell recurved-limb crossbows that shoot very well. In general, compound crossbows have lighter draw weights than recurves, and are faster on average. Expect speeds to run in the 330 to 350 fps range for a compound crossbow with a draw weight of

150 to 165 pounds. They're also generally quieter. Recurves are usually much lighter and simpler. And they're still plenty fast enough to get the job done. The Excalibur Matrix 380 Xtra, for example, a 2013 model, pushes bolts at 350 fps-plus. Recurves lack the efficiency advantages of a compound's cams, so they rely on extremely heavy draw weights to produce their speed. The Matrix 380 has a 260-pound draw weight.

- **The Power Stroke:** More so than even the draw weight, the power stroke, which is basically the crossbow's draw length, determines the energy and speed output. Building a bow with a long powerstroke gets you speed, but it also gets you a long, cumbersome piece of equipment. More and more compound crossbows are gaining that long powerstroke via the radical-looking reverse-draw system. Check out the Scorpyd line of crossbows to see this technology in action.
- **Sights and Scopes:** Most modern crossbows are equipped with a scope (crossbows are often sold as packages, with a scope, straight from the factory). This in and of itself makes the crossbow learning curve much shorter. Most good crossbow scopes have graduated reticles that allow the shooter to sight in at various yardages.
- **Arrows and Broadheads:** Crossbow arrows are referred to both as "arrows" and "bolts." Neither is technically incorrect. What you really need to know is that they're much shorter than the average arrow for a compound bow, and of a much heavier spine and weight to support the extreme power generated by a crossbow's heavy draw weights. Crossbow bolts with points attached typically weight 425 grains plus. Because of their extreme high velocities, large broadheads are prone to erratic flight from crossbows. Compact, but heavy, fixed-blade heads and wide-cutting mechanical broadheads are most popular with crossbow hunters. Many companies even sell crossbow-specific broadheads, which are typically mechanical designs with more rugged opening systems and wider cutting diameters.
- **Cocking Devices:** The biggest downfall to crossbow accuracy is in the cocking. It's easy for the string to get slightly misaligned, which will send that bolt flying who knows where. Virtually all crossbows are sold with a rope-cocking device, which is basically a series of two hooks, two pulleys, a rope, and two handles. If you have the upper body strength to use them, these are the simplest, fastest way to go. But if you lack that upper body strength (and I've seen grown men who do), a crank-cocking device, such as TenPoint's Accudraw system, mounts onto the stock and makes cocking an effortless – albeit loud and slow –process.

Deer Rifles



The bolt-action is the most popular rifle choice among today's deer hunters. (Photo by Russell Graves.)

For the past century, at least, gun writers have made substantial portions of their income by talking about “deer rifles.” They’ve argued the merits of calibers. Of actions. Of optics. Of bullets. Of brush guns versus bean field guns. It’s all fun stuff to read if you’re a gun guy. If you’re just a deer hunter searching for a rifle, it can be confusing. Here’s what you really need to know.

Action. There are great deer rifles available in every action style. Lever action. Pump-action. Bolt-action. Semi-automatic. Single shot. The bolt action is overwhelmingly the most popular choice for today’s deer hunter. And there’s a reason why bench-rest competitors and other long-range target shooters favor bolt-action rifles. They’re solid, simple and reliable.

If you hunt in inclement weather or just aren’t one to baby your guns, buy yourself a bolt-action with a synthetic stock and stainless steel barrel and action. Of course, if you’re buying synthetic, we recommend picking a rifle decked out in your favorite Realtree camouflage pattern. If you’re more the nostalgic type, go for a hardwood stock and shiny blued steel barrel. Try to buy a rifle with a good factory trigger (many of today’s guns are adjustable), but if you can’t, consider having a gunsmith install an aftermarket trigger. It will do worlds to improve your shooting.

Need a place to shoot? Check out this feature on [building your own shooting range](#).



The .308 is a classic deer hunting caliber. (Photo by Michelle Brantley.)

Caliber. Brace yourself: Caliber doesn't matter. Much. Buy and hunt with the caliber you want, so long as it's legal in your area. Most whitetails are killed inside of 100 yards. And at that distance, any modern centerfire rifle firing a .24 diameter or larger bullet and topped with even a cheap Wal-Mart scope will kill a buck with amazing efficiency.

If you don't consider yourself a "gun person" and just need a good rifle to serve your hunting needs for years to come, then it's best to stick with tested, established calibers. Finding ammunition – and a variety of it at that – on store shelves is easiest when you go that route. Common calibers tend to be less expensive, too.

Which caliber should you pick? Well, the .30-30 Winchester, famously chambered in the Winchester 94 and Marlin 336 lever actions, ushered in the era of smokeless powder and modern deer cartridges. I've seen it written time and again that this caliber has killed more deer than the others combined. I'm not sure I believe that.

While it's certainly done its share (and continues to be a perfectly acceptable round), the .30-30 was surpassed by the .30-06 Springfield more than a century ago. That round, and its necked-down sister, the .270 Winchester, are unquestionably two of the most common and effective deer rounds in existence. In a good rifle, they provide deer killing power at ranges farther than you're probably capable of shooting.

Caliber doesn't matter. Much. Buy and hunt with the caliber you want, so long as it's legal in your area. Most whitetails are killed inside of 100 yards. And at that distance, any modern centerfire rifle firing a .24 diameter or larger bullet and topped with even a cheap Wal-Mart scope will kill a buck with amazing efficiency.

Other calibers work just as well. But in the essence of space and simplicity, if you're shopping for a one-and-done deer rifle, get a .30-06 or a .270.

Scope. A budget deer rifle can still provide a lifetime of outstanding performance. But your scope is very much a get-what-you-pay-for piece of equipment. The advice outlined by Brian Strickland about binoculars in the optics section above goes doubly true for scopes. You don't have to take out a second mortgage, but understand that it's common for a good rifle scope to cost as much as the rifle you're pairing it with.

Better scopes stand up better to recoil and abuse, which means they'll still be "dead on" at the moment of truth. And they have better glass, which means you can actually see that buck well enough at the cusp of legal shooting light. Fixed-power scopes work fine, but most deer hunters prefer a variable-power scope. The 3x9x42 is a great all-around choice.

Slug Guns

– *By Tony Hansen*



Rifled barrels, saboted slugs and quality optics have made shotguns into excellent deer killers out to 200 yards. (Photo by Tony Hansen.)

Hailing from the Midwest, I admit to being a bit particular about guns for deer hunting.

I want a gun that goes boom and leaves little doubt that it's been fired. And a shotgun does that quite nicely. Many of areas of the country—parts of Michigan, all of Ohio, Iowa and Illinois for example—are shotgun-only during deer season. Used to be that shotguns were deemed to be little more than 50-yard weapons that lobbed lead balls in a somewhat-accurate manner. Not anymore.

Today's slug guns for deer hunting can be highly accurate. You just have to know what to look for.

Remington, Winchester, Mossberg, Browning—you name it. If a company manufactures shotguns, you can bet they've been used to target whitetails at some point. And while just about every shotgun will fire shells capable of killing a deer, does that mean you should use that shotgun for deer hunting? Probably not. So here's what to look for in a slug gun.

Rifled is Good

Shotguns, by design, were intended to be used with loads comprised of small shot. They work wonderfully for killing ducks, geese, rabbits, upland birds and other small critters that are on the move up close. But they weren't specifically designed for hurling a single hunk of lead downrange with tremendous accuracy. After all, that's why we have rifles.

But if you live or hunt in a shotgun-only area and hope to fill a tag or two, you're going to need an accurate shotgun. An accurate shotgun is one that will stabilize the slug during flight. This is done with rifling. And with shotguns, you have two options: a rifled choke tube or a replacement, fully rifled barrel.

Although a rifled choke tube will improve accuracy over a straight smoothbore barrel, a fully-rifled barrel will provide far better performance and is really worth the investment if you're serious about using your shotgun as a deer gun.

Gun Design Matters

The Remington 870 and Mossberg 500 are two of the most cherished of all shotguns in deer country, and for good reason. They are both workhorse pump guns. You can get all manner of choke tubes for each—including rifled tubes—and you can swap out for a fully-rifled barrel without breaking the bank. Many a whitetail has fallen to the 870 and 500.

But the 870 and 500—and virtually every other pump or semi-auto shotgun available do have their limitations. And that's where guns designed specifically for slugs really shine. The H&R Ultra-Slugger, for example, is a single-shot gun made for slinging slugs. It has an obnoxiously heavy barrel that's fully rifled. But you can top it with a quality scope, load it with sabot slugs and legitimately use it to kill whitetails from 200 yards.

Scope or Nope?

It doesn't make great sense to top a short-range gun with a long-range optic. If you intend to use your shotgun in

tight quarters and shot distances will be limited to, say, 60 yards or so then open sights provide a lot of advantages. They're quicker in acquiring your target, and you don't have to worry about them being filled with snow, fog or moisture. But if you're looking to reach and touch a buck with your slug gun, a good scope is a necessity.

Shotguns kick—hard. All of that vibration and recoil plays hell with optics. So you'll want to choose a scope that's designed specifically for shotgun use. These models will not only be built to withstand heavy recoil, but they also offer longer eye relief. Which means you're less likely to get smacked in the face by the scope after pulling the trigger. Nikon, for example, offers a shotgun scope that's built specifically for slug guns and features a bullet drop-compensating reticle that'll help take much of the guesswork out of long-range shots.

The Loads

Shotgun slugs have come a long way since the days of the "lead pumpkin ball."

Now you can get loads that feature sabot bullets. The sabot helps guide the slug down the barrel while the rifling stabilizes the load. Once it leaves the barrel, the sabot falls away and the spinning bullet travels more accurately downrange.

There are all manner of bullet options available ranging from jacketed hollow-point slugs to ballistic tips. Winchester, Remington, Brenneke and Weatherby all offer excellent options.

If you're shooting a smooth-barreled shotgun, choosing a rifled slug can help. Rather than relying on the barrel to spin and stabilize the bullet, rifled slugs contain rifling molded into the slug itself. They aren't nearly as accurate as slugs fired from rifled barrels but they are better than standard smooth slugs.

Muzzleloaders

— *By Will Brantley*



Muzzleloaders work basically the same way today that they have for hundreds of years. (Photo by John Hafner.)

Gun powder's effect on modern civilization cannot be overstated. Although the muzzleloading firearm and black powder have centuries since been replaced on the battlefield, they both still play important roles in the modern deer hunting world.

Just as the whitetail's comeback played a big part in the resurgence of bowhunting, it also rekindled an interest in hunting with primitive firearms. Many states were quick to offer special primitive weapons seasons that allowed hunters extra time in the woods so long as they were carrying guns that were loaded one step at a time, from the muzzle first.

Although some states still require genuinely primitive equipment during these special seasons (Pennsylvania has a flintlock season, during which hunters are required to use flintlock rifles and open sights, same as Daniel Boone used), most allow hunters to use modern in-line muzzleloaders.

These guns are often equipped with synthetic stocks, stainless steel barrels and top-quality optics. Many of them are capable of outstanding accuracy at ranges of 200 yards and even a bit beyond. They still function in the same

manner that muzzleloaders have always functioned, however: the user must put powder and then a bullet in the barrel, and then seat it with a ramrod. The breech is then charged with some sort of primer (fine black powder in the case of a flintlock; a 209 shotgun primer for most in-lines), and the shot is fired after a hard strike of a hammer. These guns are a ball to shoot, and very effective hunting tools.

Here's a little more of what you need to know:

In-Line or Sidelock. As mentioned, a few states still require the most basic of guns with open sights and flintlock ignition. And quite a few traditionalists still prefer these guns or sidelock percussion guns that are loaded via the same general procedure but fired by way of a percussion cap, a process that was perfected just before the Civil War.

Most deer hunters prefer all the advantages and convenience they can get. As such, in-line muzzleloaders – of which there are many – are far and away the most popular. Black powder and its substitutes are extremely sensitive to moisture. Flintlocks and traditional percussion rifles leave the powder charge more exposed to the elements, and so are notorious for misfires.

In-lines have sealed breeches that protect the powder charge from the elements for more reliable ignition. And they're so named because the primer is directly "in line" with the hammer and powder charge, further enhancing reliability. Many modern in-line rifles are break-action, just like a single-barrel shotgun. This makes them easier and safer to load, and world's easier to clean. Virtually all of them are drilled and tapped for scope mounts, and many include rings and bases straight from the factory. There are a few caliber choices, but .50 is by far the most popular and the one you should buy, although .45-caliber and .54-caliber guns are seen at times as well. Sub .40-caliber guns are a blast, pun intended, for small game hunting, but are too underpowered for reliable deer killing.

Loose Powder or Pellets? Just as hunters of yesteryear carried powder horns, today's muzzleloader hunters must keep their propellant organized in some way. Although standard black powder is still available (and still works quite well), many hunters prefer more modern substitutes, like Pyrodex or Triple 7. These propellants are available in loose form (each powder charge must be measured before loading) or in handy, pre-measured pellets. Most in-line guns are capable of shooting 150 grains of powder, but that maximum load doesn't always produce the best accuracy. It's important to experiment with your particular rifle to find out what it likes best.



Special muzzleloader seasons allow hunters extra time in the woods. (Photo by Will Brantley.)

Bullets. Patched round balls remain the standard for traditional shooters. And they work quite well on deer out to 50 yards or so. But the sphere-shaped projectile is ballistically inferior to other bullet shapes. Lead conical bullets and modern plastic-belted bullets such as the CVA Powerbelt match the diameter of the rifle bore. Saboted bullets are smaller than the rifle bore for more velocity, but are loaded inside a plastic sabot that grips the barrel's rifling. Such bullets are typically the best for long-range accuracy, but their use requires more frequent cleaning of your gun's barrel due to fouling from the plastic jacket.

Gear to Own:

Every muzzleloader hunter needs a certain assortment of gear both for hunting and cleaning. That gear is carried with what is classically called a "possibles bag." Any gear bag, Ziploc included, will work in a pinch. Here's a rundown of what you need:

- Synthetic ramrod.
- Cleaning jag and plenty of cleaning patches.
- Powder measure for loose powder.
- Speed loaders for follow-up shots.
- Bore butter or similar gun grease.
- Nipple wrench (for percussion sidelocks) or breech plug wrench for in-lines.
- Black powder solvent.
- Extra primers (209 shotgun primers for most in-lines).
- Bullet starter.
- Priming tool.

Cleaning a muzzleloader is absolutely mandatory, too, as the various propellants are typically highly corrosive. You might get by with shooting your gun on a Saturday and cleaning it on Sunday. Wait much longer than that, though, and you're inviting rust. And rust ruins guns. Detailed cleaning instructions should be included with your gun, but if not, consult with the manufacturer.

Want to learn how to [make your muzzleloader shoot farther?](#)

5Setup Fundamentals— *By Will Brantley*



With your homework done, it's time to make the perfect setup to get a shot. (Photo by John Hafner.)

Now you're getting close. You've found spot to hunt. You've done some serious scouting. You've picked out a good area that deer are using. You've bought all the right gear, and are well-practiced with it. Now it's time to actually set up in hopes of a shot. Crunch time, man. The time when many hunters, especially beginning hunters, let all that hard work fall apart and spook deer away. But remembering these three tips will put you ahead, whether you're hunting from a treestand or ground blind.

Check and Re-Check the Wind. The human brain is incapable of processing the power of a deer's nose, and the degree to which a deer depends on it. You can get away with making a little noise and sometimes, letting a deer see you. But if it smells you, the gig is up. Carefully consider the predominant wind direction in your area before hanging a stand or setting a ground blind. You want to be downwind of where you think the deer will come from. And if you're hunting the edge of a food source field, you don't want your scent blowing out into that, either. Such a spot may require setting up in a crosswind that blows your scent into a "dead area" that's neither where you expect the deer to be coming from or going to. Check the forecast wind direction on the day you plan to hunt, and if it's wrong for the spot you want to be, sit somewhere else. Sitting in your best hunting spot with a bad wind

destroys your chances of success, both on that day and for future hunts.

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Hide and Sit Still. A deer doesn't have the keen eyesight of, say, a wild turkey, which is capable of seeing colors in a similar fashion to humans. But they can see plenty well enough, and they are incredibly adept at spotting movement. Sitting still, even in the wide open, can be enough to keep a deer from seeing you. But shooting requires movement, especially with a bow. That's why stand sets should be placed with good cover at your back to break up your outline. Even then, only move when a deer's vision is obscured or at least when it's not looking in your direction.

Be Comfortable and Stay Ready. Persistent hunters kill more deer. They keep after it, day after day, picking their best-chance spot for the given set of conditions. They understand that most of their deer season will be spent staring at trees and empty fields. Many days, they won't even see a deer. But they do not let their guard down. Their stands are comfortable, and that allows them to sit still. And everything is in order so that they can grab their bow or gun and make the shot at a moment's notice. They can stand up without getting their safety belt in a bind. Dried mud won't flake off their boots and alert a buck at the moment of truth, because their boots are clean. They don't leave their gun behind when nature calls. You never know when a deer will show up, or how long it will stand there once it does. A hunter who's ready will always be more successful.

6Aggressive Strategies: Deer Calling and Decoys— *By Brian Strickland*



Decoys are highly effective at certain times of the season. (Photo by Russell Graves.)

Not all deer hunting is passive. Using calls such as grunts, bleats, snorts and rattling horns can be an effective and exciting way to hunt. Whitetails are much more vocal than many believe, and they're curious by nature. But the key to getting a buck to respond is to keep it as natural as possible. Here's a look at the sounds you need to know.

Grunt Call. The grunt call is by far the most useful call you can own, regardless of the phase of the season you are hunting. Single-note contact grunts are useful at stopping a buck that's passing by, regardless of the time of the season. More aggressive trailing and tending grunts – sounds that bucks make when on the trail or actually chasing a hot doe – can be used during the rut to actually call bucks in to your location.

There are three types of grunts: the contact grunt, the trailing grunt and the tending grunt. The contact grunt is a single grunt that is primarily used when making initial contact with a passing deer. It announces your presence in the woods. If a passing buck hears it, he will usually at least stop and look your direction virtually every time. If he doesn't stop, send another grunt his way a little louder to get his attention. This is an effective call throughout the season, and it's ideal for the rifle hunter who needs to stop a buck for a shot.

The snort-wheeze is another common call bucks make, but it is an aggressive call that is generally made only during the rut. Unlike the grunt, which is a burp sound, the snort-wheeze is produced with two quick expulsions of air then a drawn-out expulsion of air made through the buck's tightened nostrils. This is a call bucks make when challenging one another for dominance, and it can be very effective to use on a big deer that's unresponsive to a grunt tube. Sending a snort-wheeze his direction will definitely get his attention; and if he comes, he will be looking to rumble. Nevertheless, like all call sequences, it should be used sparingly and sound realistic. [Click here to learn how to make a snort-wheeze.](#)

Does are also very vocal. The two main doe calls are the bleat and estrous bleat. The doe bleat is a drawn out sheep-like call that can last two to three seconds. It is typically made in sequences of two or three, and is just a simple communication call that lets other deer know they are there. For hunters, it is effective at attracting does, fawns and bucks, and during all phases of the rut can be used to draw in a buck looking for love.

The **estrous bleat** is an adult doe call she makes when she is in estrus. It lets bucks know that she is ready to breed, and it can be a good option when a buck is hanging up and not showing interest in other sounds. It can also work well close to a doe bedding area where bucks would cruise during the rut. Unlike the doe bleat that is drawn out, the estrus bleat is three to four short sheep-like sounds that are made close together.

Rattling Antlers Crashing a set of antlers together to replicate a buck fight is far and away the most thrilling way to call in bucks, but it can also be the most disappointing. Many hunters have the misconception that all you need to do is bang some bone together and virtually all bucks within earshot will come looking for a fight, but more times than not the response will be empty. But when it works, hold on to your seat. Rattling can attract bucks throughout the season; however, attention to detail must be noted. In the early season it is best to just tickle the antlers together, imitating the sound of two bucks playfully sparing. Bucks typically won't come in looking for a fight, but their curious nature can bring them in to see what's going on. Keep these rattling sequences relatively short and non-aggressive.

As bucks become more active in late October and into November, it's time to heat things up and get more

aggressive. This is when you really bang and grind the horns together and throw in a couple good buck grunts to add a dose of realism. In the process, rake branches if you are in a tree, or paw at the ground if you are set up on the ground. Remember, two big bucks in a fight make a bunch of noise. These sequences should last from 30 seconds to a minute. The peak of the rut is the best time to do this, but the pre- and post-rut phases can be productive. Cooler morning hours tend to produce the best outcomes, but when it's the rut anything can happen. Blind rattling can produce responses, but it seems to work best when you see a buck off in the distance looking for does.

Decoying Deer

Whitetail deer are very social as well as territorial animals, and once the calendar flips to the fall hunting season, decoying can be a very effective way to lure in a mature buck. Decoying whitetails isn't difficult but it's not fool-proof either. Sometimes the buck you're after will avoid your fake like the plague. When it works, it is one of the sweetest experiences in the whitetail woods and is an exciting way to end your season.

7Where to Shoot a Deer



Make a good shot, and the blood trail will be easy to follow. (Photo by Michelle Brantley.)

So you've figured out where to hunt, how to scout that location, chosen your bow and/or gun and are ready to roll. Soon you'll likely need to make the most critical decision in deer hunting: Where to place your shot.

Shot placement can mean the difference between a filled tag and a very bad experience. Fortunately, there is no magic or mystery involved. The anatomy of a deer is fairly straight forward and placing your bullet or broadhead in the chest cavity will get the job done. To learn exactly where to shoot a deer with a bow—and what to do after you make the hit—[check out this interactive guide](#).

Gun hunters do have more options (provided they're shooting a big enough gun). But in essence, the objective is the same. You want to put your bullet or slug behind the shoulder of a broadside deer to hit the heart and lung area. This is the largest vital target available, and is unquestionably lethal. However, because of a bullet's ability to impart hydrostatic shock and reliably break bone, a gun hunter has more leeway on various quartering shot angles.

Above all else, it's important to understand where a deer's vital organs sit in its chest cavity. Ask yourself, can your weapon and your shooting abilities deliver a projectile to those vitals from the angle you're looking with absolute certainty? If the answer is, "I'm not sure," you need to wait for a better shot. If the answer is, "Yes, and I'm rock-solid," then you know what to do. Pull the trigger and fill your tag.

TIME TO GET OUT THERE



A first deer, regardless of what it is, is a trophy. (Photo by Tony Hansen.)

If you follow the advice in this guide, you'll be well on your way to killing a deer. Maybe several deer. Maybe even a big buck. We're confident of that. Just be sure to read up on the regulations for the state and area you're hunting, and then have fun. Few things will spur that primal adrenaline rush more than putting the pieces together

and finally leveling your sights on a big-game animal that's so worthy of our respect and admiration.

Take care of your trophy – and remember that the word “trophy” applies just as much to a fat doe for the freezer as it does a monster buck. If you've never cleaned a deer, don't despair. Have an experienced buddy show you the ropes, or get a recommendation on a good meat processor in your area. Enjoy those steaks and burgers on the grill, or jerky and summer sausage while you're watching the game. That experience is a huge part of deer hunting as well.

If you learned something from this guide, do us a favor and share it with a friend. And if you think we missed something, let us know by e-mailing us at rteitorial@gmail.com.

Be safe out there. **And good luck!**

Table of Contents

1. [Where to Deer Hunt](#): You've got to hunt where they live. Here's our advice for finding great hunting ground on public and private land.
2. [When to Deer Hunt](#): Is today the day to skip work? Key tips for hunting all phases of deer season.
3. [Deer Scouting](#): There's a lot more to it than studying tracks and poop.
4. [Gear for Deer Hunting](#): Your shopping guide for this fall.
5. [Setup Fundamentals](#): You've done your scouting. You've gotten your gear. Here's how to set up and make the shot.
6. [Aggressive Deer Hunting Strategies](#): How to use calls and decoys to pull a buck into range.
7. [Shot Placement: on Deer](#): It's time to pull the trigger. Where should you aim?