

# Dr. Deer's PRESCRIPTION

## It's Just Like War

By Dr. James C. Kröll

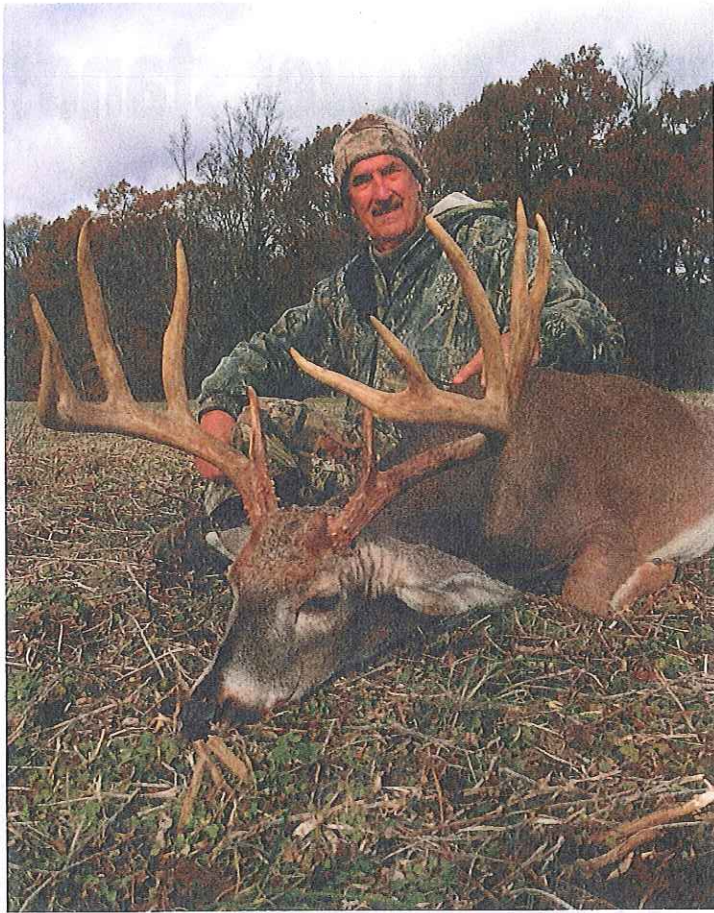
**K**eith Warren is a special person and I am proud to call him Friend! Not only is he a model for those of us in the public eye, but his always upbeat personality lifts my spirits on the rare occasions we get to hunt together. I promise you, Keith will get excited about having mustard on his bologna sandwich! Recently, Keith joined me for a hunt on my private property, where Ben Koerth and I have managed habitats and deer for going on 40 years. Keith took a tremen-

dous 6x7 typical, mature buck from a pop-up blind covered with pine saplings. This was a real contrast to the frustrations I felt this season trying to successfully complete TV hunts around the country.

Folks who come up and tell me how nice it must be to hunt in so many places where "the outfitter has one tied up for me" amuse me. I always smile and say, "It is!" Truth is, however, those of us in this business often have to travel to places with



Keith Warren (right), the author, and his grandson, Lane, proudly display Keith's 6x7 typical, the product of years of work at the Institute and "homework" prior to the hunt.



**Larry Porter is successful because he does his homework and stays current on deer activity. Here Larry shows off a monster buck taken from one of his Tennessee properties.**

little, if any advance information, have to figure out exactly what the deer are doing, and then successfully take a mature buck in 3-5 days. If the average hunter does not take a buck, he is simply disappointed. If I fail to take a buck for TV, there are a lot of folks who are very unhappy with me; the pressure is indescribable.

So, on that happy day when Keith and I shared a pop-up blind in a savanna pine stand in eastern Texas, it was a nice change of events. Ben and I know our herd and constantly monitor what is going on, so by the time Keith arrived, we had a pretty good idea of what stage of the rut we were in, when the deer were moving and where. Sharing a beverage later that night over the antlers of Keith's buck, we both agreed that serious hunting is a lot like war. Over the centuries, how many wars have been lost because one side had poor or incorrect information? The Battle of Gettysburg is a prime example. If Stonewall Jackson had not been killed by one of his own soldiers, the outcome may have been different. With this introduction, I'll discuss how you can increase your success next season, and whether you're an outfitter or an average hunter. Since the beginning of humanity, the quality of information you have about the deer you hunt determines victory or defeat.

### Good outfitters and bad

I had a professor at Baylor who was one of the most cynical people I have known. His favorite saying about students was, "I firmly believe everyone has value, even if it is to serve as a bad example!" So, a good place to start is to compare and contrast

good and bad outfitters. Believe me I have met my share in the last 4½ decades. For the purposes of this column, no names or exact hunting seasons involved for bad examples will be used, as I do not want to hurt anyone's feelings.

Outfitter A operated a well-known hunting service and boasted significant success for a number of years. He invited me to come film a show on his ranch, and believing what he said and the material on his website, it seemed like a high-probability hunt. I have been fortunate to enjoy a very high success rate for TV hunts, not because I am special in any way, but rather I have lived with these fine creatures for almost half a century and I always do my homework before accepting an invitation. In this case, the hype got the better of me and I agreed to come film a show.

When I arrived at the ranch, the outfitter was not to be seen, in spite of the fact we had agreed on a time to meet. A cook in the camp showed up and said he thought the fellow was somewhere on the ranch. I thought to myself, "He's probably out checking cameras or feeders." About an hour and a half later, the fellow shows up with one of the guides. Stepping from the truck, I note the beer can in each man's hand, so I know what has been at play. "Glad you are here," he said. "Come on in and get some food." As I made myself a sandwich, I casually asked about what the deer were doing at that point, and how and where we would hunt? He responded that the deer were "underground" right then, obviously forgetting he told me the day before the rut was on. I then asked if he had seen any good bucks?

Pulling out an old laptop, he slipped a memory card into the machine and pulled up some trailcam photos. "Here's a nice buck we have been seeing this season," he noted, "I think you will have no problem killing him." I smiled and glanced at the bottom of the photo; you know—where the date is printed on the photograph?" It read September 28, not very encouraging since it was the middle of December!

The next morning, the guide (whom I had met until that moment) arrived late to take me and the cameraman to a blind. I actually hate hunting blinds (have nothing against them, however), but if that was the plan I was prepared to stick with it. We arrived at the blind as the horizon was becoming very red, a lot later than I like. Crawling up into the two man blind—expected to hold two grown men, a tripod and large camera—we discovered a wealth of trash consisting of spent cartridges, cigarettes, gum wrappers, and even an empty beer can. The last thing I asked the guide was about the time the feeder would go off. I also do not like hunting over bait, although again I have absolutely nothing against it. He said it was set for 7:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.

Well, the sun came up and the feeder did not go off. A few does came into the feeder area to search for morsels of corn missed by the raccoons during the night. As each approached, they looked immediately at the blind as if expecting someone to be sitting there. The day ended with frustration and the realization, if I were to salvage this hunt, I would have to take things into my own hands. I could go on and on, but by now you get the picture. We left the ranch without a buck and had wasted valuable time that could not be recovered. My professor would be proud to proclaim that this operation certainly had value.

Now let's go to another hunt, one I had with Larry Porter (Ken Ten Hunting) in Kentucky during the 2014 season. My

cameraman and I arrived at Betty's Place Café in Dawson Springs, KY, at noon to find Larry waiting. I had not met the man before, but the 24 emails and numerous calls dating back to July clearly proved he was the real deal! Included in the emails were weekly updates on bucks inhabiting the properties where he hunted, along with information about what the deer were doing. The last email, complete with photos of a great 170-class buck inhabiting the farm we would hunt, arrived while I was in transit.

Over lunch, Larry pulled out aerial photographs, maps and trailcam photos to lay out the "battle plan" for the first two day's hunts. He had set each of his properties (most only a

discovered the book, and we are selling them in significant numbers. One lady called my secretary about getting a copy for her husband for Christmas. "My husband has to have a copy of that 'Patterning' book," she proclaimed. Then she asked my secretary what exactly 'patterning' was.

In the book, Gordon and I first define patterning, then walk the reader through the steps in patterning the deer herd you hunt. The best way to define patterning is to tell you what it is not. Patterning is NOT determining which buck will walk by what oak tree at what time. It IS about learning as much as you can about the land you hunt, the deer that live on it, and what will probably happen when certain events take place. The best



**Trail cameras are most effective when used throughout the year to monitor what your deer are doing and where they are doing it. In order to be effective in developing hunting strategies, information has to literally be up-to-the-minute because a buck on your property last month may be miles away today.**



few hundred acres) up with sanctuaries to hold the deer in safekeeping. The strategy was to hunt the perimeter of these sanctuaries, where he had positioned well-planted food plots along travel corridors. As with the bad example, the deer were not moving during daylight, but Larry knew exactly where the mature bucks would move as the rut progressed. In short, we had a great game plan. Two days later, I took a huge eight-pointer at last light as he arrived at a food plot to work scrapes in a staging area. We had a wonderful, educational show for TV and a great time. This all said, how does all this apply to you?

### **Good intelligence: the name of the game**

Back in the 1990s, Gordon Whittington and I published a book entitled, *The Art & Science of Patterning Whitetails*. As with many things I have done in my career, we were way ahead of our time. The concept of patterning deer was not even in the lexicon of deer hunters, so the book had limited success during the first decade of its existence. Only recently have hunters

way to accomplish this is to develop a system that provides sound information about your "enemy" and the land he inhabits. Here are some examples to consider.

### **Trail cameras: the most important tool**

It is defensible to say that the modern trail camera was developed here at the Institute for White-tailed Deer Management & Research. To this day, it was one of our proudest achievements, but we never got credit, nor ever made a dime from these devices. Yet, the trail camera is probably the most effective tool in patterning your deer, provided you use them appropriately. The question often arises as to whether or not trail cameras constitute "fair chase." It is my opinion they do not. Just because you know a buck is there does not mean you ever will see him during daylight. But trail cameras tell you what your deer are doing and where they are at any point in time. The average hunter, however, uses a single trail camera, often bought at a bargain price, to locate specific bucks during the hunting season—to

late to do any real good. It's like Gen. Lee learning the Union Army was there as they come over the opposing hill. It is far better to know where the bucks have been and the probability one will show up where you hunt.

Many trail camera models are nothing more than cheap junk, manufactured in China with counterfeit parts. Harsh words, but true. So, we recommend you acquire the best you can afford. I am NOT going to recommend one here, as the quality changes over time; but there are excellent websites out there that provide the latest reviews of brands and models. As far as I am concerned, you cannot have too many cameras. It amazes me how a hunter will spend a \$1,000 on a bow, then buy a bargain \$80 camera at a big box store! We keep cameras operating 365 days a year on any property we hunt or manage. They give you an unbiased picture of what is going on at any point in time. During and just before the season, we tend to be very careful about "harvesting" memory cards from them, and have determined the best time is during mid-day.

We distribute cameras watching over bait (where legal), as well as along trails, feeders and food plots. We keep digital file folders of pictures and even analyze data as to time and demographics for each location. Each camera location is marked with GPS so we can accurately place it on an aerial photograph. And, each night before a hunt, we review the latest intelligence to make decisions about where to hunt the next morning. Yet, this is not everything we do.

### **Know the deer, know the land**

Last season, all I heard were complaints about the huge acorn crop around the country. "You can almost slip and fall on the thousands of acorns lying across the landscape," one fellow proclaimed. Well, that was true, but why was he caught by surprise? We keep a regular check on the coming acorn crop each year. It is a simple matter of walking through the woods and examining the limbs of oaks with binoculars. Knowing ahead of time about a pending heavy acorn crop will help you develop alternative hunting strategies. Do you really think bucks are going to show up at feeders under such conditions? It is better to

find the places where preferred foods are available and develop strategies to hunt the approaches to these, than to waste time hoping a buck will come to your feeder. But how do you define the approaches?

Deer move across the land in military fashion, using topography to cover their comings and goings. They also are more than happy to "tell" you where they like to travel by leaving rubs on trees. If you map rub lines, you have a well-defined movement model for your hunting territory. Also, if you keep a map over time as the rut progresses, you can develop a model of when


bucks travel and why.

When tied with mobile trail camera location data, you can develop a strategy for every contingency for hunting your land. It becomes an "if-then" model for patterning your deer. IF there is a good acorn or mesquite bean crop, THEN my deer will do this. IF there is a full moon on opening weekend, THEN my deer will do that.

Finally, you need to understand the rut dynamics of your herd. Keep records on when scrapes first show up each season. When scrapes first appear in large numbers, tells you when the combat period is about to begin—the best time to rattle. When scrapes start to fade in use, tells you when the bucks are chasing does (what most call "the rut"). Even later in the year, when you first see does with fawns will allow you to back-date 14 days, then back 200 days to estimate

when peak breeding occurs. That will alert you to the time most hunters call "the lock down," the time when bucks are chasing does across the landscape in groups, then the winner spending about two days alone with the doe. That is not a good time to be hunting; better to wait two days and be ready for the time when bucks are out "looking for dates."

### **The battle plan**

Everything previously mentioned, and much more, go into developing a sound, flexible battle plan to successfully defeat your enemy. The plan has to be adaptable, as you garner additional information about your herd. That's what Larry Porter does each year for several properties, and that is why Larry is a good, rather than bad example. Hopefully, you have learned something that will be useful next season; but remember, next season begins right now! 

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