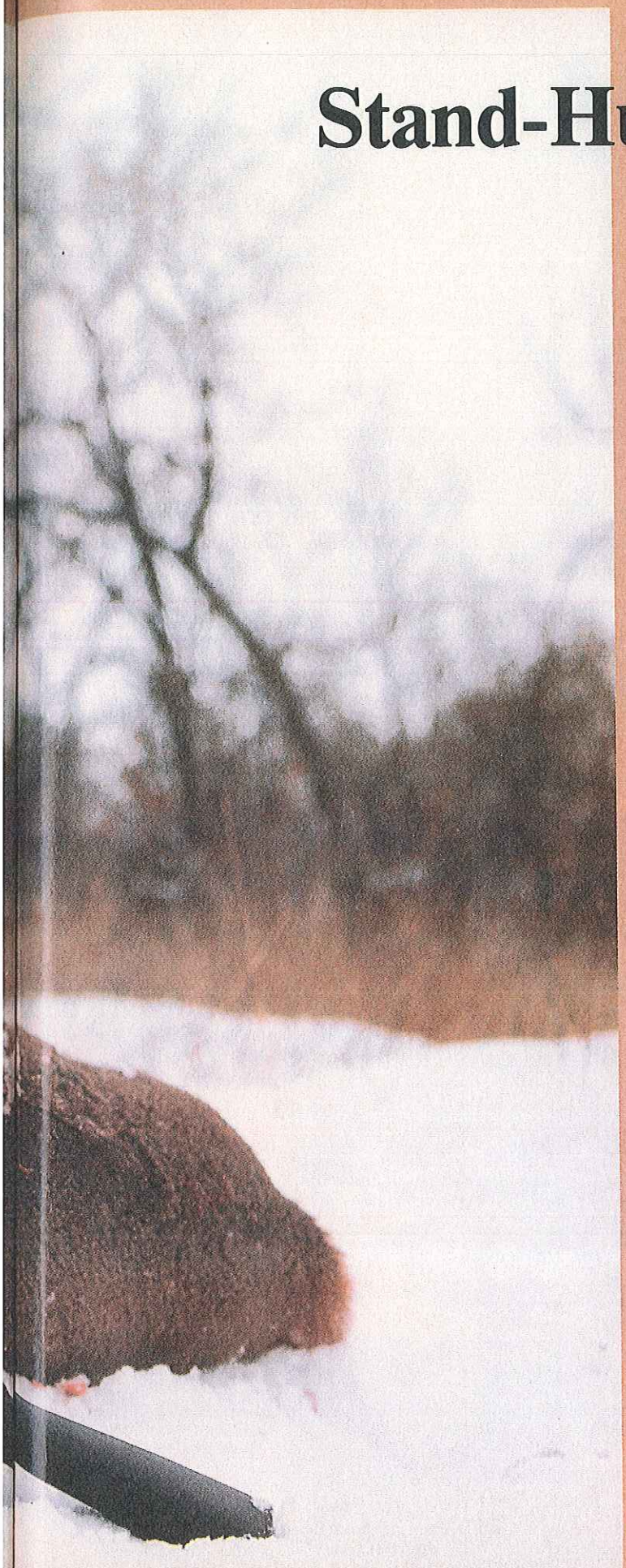




PART 3
Stand-Hunting The Rut

by Dr. James C. Kroll

Once the breeding period ends, dominant bucks retreat to hide-outs that many hunters consider impossible to hunt effectively. It's as if all of the bucks have disappeared from the face of the earth! Well, don't give up just yet, says this noted whitetail biologist and hunter. There still are some tricks to use.

In the first two installments of this series, I discussed strategies and techniques for using stands and blinds to your advantage during the pre-breeding and breeding periods. These are times when the whitetail buck can be hunted with a certain degree of confidence. However, these periods are child's play compared to hunting the post-breeding period. This is a time that sends many an experienced hunter home in frustration and turns the professional guide's hair white! But, believe it or not, you *can* turn the odds in your favor, provided you understand the basics of post-rut behavior and apply this knowledge to the proper use and placement of your stand.

POST-BREEDING BEHAVIOR PATTERN

In order to develop an effective stand-hunting strategy for post-breeding bucks, let's examine first what is going on just prior to this phase of the rut. Most hunters pattern bucks during the pre-breeding period. This is a time of stable buck-movement patterns. Bucks pretty much are occupying the same ranges covered during the late summer. Travel corridors are repeatedly used to move from bedding to feeding areas, and bucks are more than happy to show you exactly where they travel! They cannot help but stop along the way to rub their antlers against young saplings. These fresh rubs stand out like "sore thumbs." Some simple mapping work during the pre-breeding can pay off big during the early part of the gun season, especially if the breeding period has not yet commenced. In areas where the rut comes prior to opening day, however, the predictable pattern can be exploited only by bowhunters.

Once the breeding period begins, the whitetail buck begins to move in a more random pattern. He may be in one place today and several miles away tomorrow. As noted in Part Two last month, the trick to stand-hunting the breeding period is locating travel corridors and breeding areas. Does are pretty much sedentary, so the best tactic is to locate doe groups and wait for the lure of estrus to take its effect. Although bucks are traveling in a more-or-less random manner, you still have the odds in your favor. The bucks *are* out there, desperately searching for receptive does. Even the most seasoned veterans occasionally make mistakes under such conditions.

Once the breeding period is over, however, there is absolutely *nothing* random about a buck's movements. Every move is carefully analyzed, probabilities and percentages are meticulously considered. The post-breeding buck is a percentage player. The slightest probability of danger is reason enough to make a mature buck reconsider any action. But, alas, even the survivalist buck is susceptible to the most dangerous weapon you have in your tool box of tricks: the human brain. Contrary to popular belief, you *can* out-think a trophy buck. In order to help you do so, let's "get inside" the mind of one of these monsters.

The fact that the buck survived not only to this point in the season, as well as two or more ... *Continued*

Field dressing a trophy buck is a pleasant chore at any time, but most places it's especially rewarding in late season. You'll earn whatever you shoot in the post-breeding period. Photo by David Morris.

previous seasons, suggests that he has happened upon a strategy with high survival potential. Thoughts of demure little does or dominance over other bucks have given way to the need to survive. That survival depends on two things. First, he must avoid contact with hunters and other predators. And secondly, because his energy reserves are badly depleted, he must attempt to acquire enough high-energy food to make it through the rest of the winter. Therefore, he is torn between two conflicting desires. On the one hand, he *must* feed; yet, he must do so without being detected. Faced with a similar situation, the doe simply would restrict her movements, because she usually has plenty of reserve energy stored up. Bucks often do not have this luxury.

The best place to start our analysis is during the previous fall. If you have been doing your homework, you no doubt will have carefully noted the abundance of such energy-rich fall foods such as acorns, grapes and residual farm crops (corn, alfalfa, etc.). In a good acorn year, bucks are able to store up sufficient energy to make it most of the way through the winter. Therefore, an excellent acorn crop in the fall probably will mean that, should you fail to score during the rut, your chances of out-witting a trophy buck during the post-breeding period are diminished greatly. A poor acorn crop, on the other hand, means that the odds could be in your favor.

Another clue to the potential difficulty in hunting the post-breeding period lies in the nature of the rut itself. Again, carefully-taken notes will be of considerable help. Was the rut well-defined, or did it occur as a "trickle" rut? I coined this term a number of years ago to denote herds in which the does are in such poor condition that they cannot all come into breeding condition at a distinct point in time. This usually results in over-populated regions, and, unfortunately, is occurring at an increasing rate as whitetails saturate their ranges around North America. A doe will satisfy her own physiological needs *before* coming into estrus. Because the breeding period is prolonged in such cases, it is very hard on the bucks. This is especially true when food is limited. Bucks have to over-spend their reserves just to make it through the breeding period. The post-breeding period thus finds bucks with little reserve energy to keep them going until spring green-up.



During the post-breeding period, dominant bucks must have two elements: a hiding place and food to restore energy used during the rut. Areas with acorns still on the ground can become prime now, especially if in or near thick cover. Photo by Steve Maslowski.

Bucks and does generally occupy widely differing habitats. Does prefer the more open areas, such as fields and mature forests, while bucks tend to favor areas with dense, protective understory. Such areas may be young forests, swampy regions or less accessible portions of the range. Bucks scout for these sanctuaries and always keep one or more within easy acccess. *The ideal sanctuary is one that not only offers thick cover, but also provides the late-winter foods needed by bucks.*

Perhaps one of the best examples I have encountered are the dense thickets of yaupon and post oak found in much of the south-central portion of the country. The evergreen

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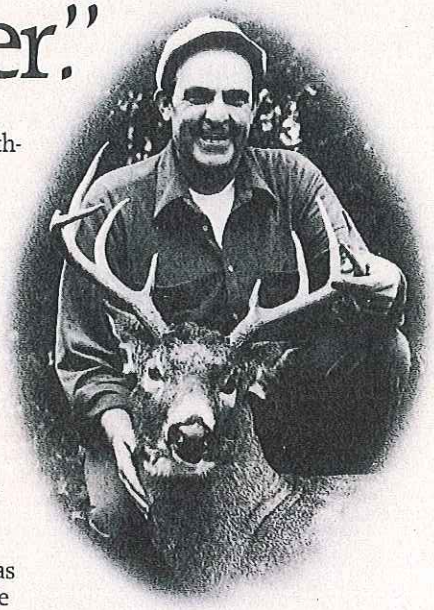
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nature of yaupon makes it a perfect late-winter food, especially given the fact that this plant also provides excellent nutrition. The post oak always can be counted on to produce a few acorns, and when occurring in combination with yaupon, provides the perfect sanctuary. The swamps and bogs of the North also provide nutritious late-season foods for weary bucks. These sanctuaries are almost impossible to hunt, but notice that I said *almost.* I have a few tricks in my tool box for these situations, and will discuss them below.

STAND-HUNTING STRATEGY

Once your analysis is complete, it is time to develop a workable stand-hunting strategy. If you determine that the bucks are in poor condition, and if there are no areas which satisfy both cover and food requirements, it is time to return to the travel corridor concept.

Sometime during the post-breeding period, bucks will probably return to their pre-breeding home ranges. This is true even for the vagrant bucks discussed in earlier articles. They also will return to the travel corridors utilized prior to the rut. The trick is to determine *which* travel corridors are being used. This is yet another time when preseason scouting will pay off. First, I carefully map the travel corridors used in the late summer and early fall. They usually occur along drainages or through natural protective cover, such as wooded strips between agricultural fields. Because the post-breeding period is no time to be tromping around the woods in search of late-season food sources, this preseason routine eliminates, or at least reduces, disturbance.

Pay attention to potential late-fall and early-winter food sources. For example, if you determine that there is a light acorn crop, you can be sure that by the end of the season acorns virtually will be unavailable. On the other hand, an exceptionally heavy acorn crop will guarantee that bucks will be searching out acorns later on in the year. It also will be beneficial to examine oaks by species groups. Red and white oaks have different fruiting habits. Consequently, a given year may have a heavy white-oak acorn crop, yet a poor red-oak crop. Knowing which species of trees are producing will make your scouting more efficient.

If there is not a good acorn crop, or if you hunt in an area where oaks are absent, try to locate other potentially good late-season foods. These foods should be high in energy. If they also happen to be high in protein, even better. The type of food to look for depends on the geographic location. For example, in agricultural areas where corn or alfalfa is commonly grown, residual crops or waste grain in the field will draw late-season bucks like a magnet. Even in the arid Southwest, species such as prickly pear cactus offer high-energy food to bucks. South Texas hunters traditionally hunt "pear flats" during poor years. In the Southeast, species such as rattan, honeysuckle and yaupon are highly attractive to late-season bucks. I often fertilize natural plots of these plants in the summer for just that

purpose. Where legal, feeders can be used to attract bucks if the hunter wishes to do so. Feeds such as corn or a pelleted ration are excellent in feeding programs.

Once you have the travel corridors and locations of winter foods patterned, it is time to devise a stand-hunting strategy for this situation. As mentioned in the October issue, one of the greatest mistakes made by stand-hunters is stand placement. Whether it be scrape hunting or travel corridors, hunters often place their stands right on top of the most attractive feature. The best idea is to intercept the buck as he travels from his sanctuary to the food source, or vice versa. If you "camp" on top of the food source, he probably will detect your presence long before you see him. His attention already is focused on your location. For example, I often watch bucks coming to feeders and food plots. Mature bucks behave pretty much in the same manner. They walk briskly almost all the way to their destination, but stop short to survey the situation. I have seen bucks stand off from a food plot or feeder for 45 minutes to one hour before approaching. I will guarantee you that the average hunter *will* make a mistake during that time!

Successful late-season hunters set up their stands along the travel corridors leading to the food source. The trick is to determine which trails are being used and which food sources consumed.

Obviously, in areas with snow on the ground, fresh tracks and droppings will indicate recent use. However, many areas have little or no snow cover, even late in the season. In such places, one of the easiest ways to determine which trails are being used is to examine the vegetation along the trail. If there are fresh signs of browsing, you can be assured that deer are using the trail. Deer tend to browse "recreationally" as they move along their trails. Whether or not the deer sign was made by a buck is more difficult to determine. However, I find that bucks tend to move in different areas from does. This means that the presence of many sizes of tracks suggests that doe groups are using the trail. Light use by a single deer usually denotes a buck is traveling the corridor. Experienced hunters often can determine a buck's tracks by his gait or the roundness of the front hooves. This is not foolproof, but it can be useful.

An understanding of human odor is critical in stand-hunting. Remember that the buck has survived for years by detecting hunters before he himself is detected. Being aware of the movements of your own odor will mean the difference. *There is no substitute for being downwind of deer.* I have never seen a buck smell a hunter who was downwind.

Hunter odor occurs in bands running parallel to the ground surface. The band that has the highest probability of detection occurs at the two- to four-foot height. This is the height at which a deer normally carries its head. Human odor traveling in the wind or deposited on the vegetation certainly will be detected in this band. The second band of high detection probability runs from the ground up to two feet high above it. Deer occasionally lower their heads to sniff the ground for scent of predators and other deer.

Subsequent bands occupying the four- to six-foot and higher levels have lower probabilities of detection, depending on the distance from the hunter to the deer. I recently conducted some detailed experiments on human-odor dynamics under varying conditions with various stand heights. Stands higher than 12 feet proved very useful in deterring the odor trail from reaching the two- to four-foot band for the greatest distance.



The "buddy system" can work well when hunting big bucks during the post-breeding period. A slow, methodical drive through the buck's pinpointed sanctuary may push him to a waiting stander — but the deer probably won't give you a second chance. Photo by Dirone Norton.

Although there are several good products on the market that work to cover your odors, I prefer the products that attempt to neutralize human odors, rather than cover them up. I have found that several of the odor neutralizers provide very satisfactory results. Recently, I have come to use rubber waders sprayed with Hide-Out for scouting the woods. This may look ridiculous to other hunters, but it does work. I also have found that use of baking soda for bathing and washing my clothes serves to reduce the residual odor.

When to hunt is almost as important as where. The general activity pattern of deer in the late fall and early winter tends more and more to move toward midday. Bucks that are low on energy reserves are reluctant to travel about on extremely cold nights, for fear of losing energy. Therefore, the best times to hunt the post-breeding period are from about 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., but this will depend on the weather conditions for a particular day. A windy, cold day will see little deer activity, while a clear, sunny day will guarantee protracted deer movements. I often tell hunters that the best time to hunt the late season is when they themselves feel like getting out into the woods.

If there is an abundant supply of late-season foods, or if food and cover occur in the same locations, all bets are off! This is absolutely the worst situation in which to hunt trophy bucks. All a buck has to do is get up from his bed, look around for the nearest choice bite, feed and then lie back down. This is when some of the more unorthodox techniques I have written about come into play. A buck will not leave his sanctuary under these conditions, except in response to one stimulus: fear. There are no receptive does to draw him out. The sound of rattling, supposedly a fight between two other bucks, will receive little interest. But, let him think that his sanctuary has been or is being violated, and he *will* quickly consider a major move.

I have had excellent success with such techniques as silent drives, slingshots and rock throwing. But, these techniques demand that you understand where the buck will likely attempt his escape, and they also call for the use of very portable, quiet stands. Refer back to the October issue, where I discussed the characteristics of good stands. The "perfect" stand must be portable, weigh less than 35 pounds and be capable of being erected in five minutes or less. However, the last criterion is changed for post-breeding hunting. A stand must be capable of being assembled and erected in three minutes or less during this time of year. There are not many stands that can meet these strict requirements.

With both silent drives and disturbance techniques, such as rocking cover with a slingshot, the buck should be totally unaware of the *shooter's* presence. He must be made to focus his attention on the source of the disturbance. I try to slip into the area by a path that avoids the sanctuary, and then erect the stand as quickly and quietly as possible. It has been my experience that the buck will attempt to flee into the wind, and often downhill. This gives me a clue as to which trail on which to wait. Other, more subtle clues can be obtained by monitoring tracks for a couple of days. Using my rubber outfit, I carefully step on each of several tracks in the buck's trail. I usually do this about sunrise. Returning in late afternoon, I note which trails show new tracks. Bucks tend to use familiar trails for escape routes.

Whatever the conditions in which you stand-hunt the post-breeding period, you will have only one chance at the buck. Should you miss him, he will adopt a completely new survival strategy, and you will not have the time to work out his pattern again before the season ends. The key thus is to perfect your abilities at shooting quickly and accurately. Practice shooting from the types of stands or blinds you will be using during the season. If necessary, modify your stands to provide a rest from which to shoot. I never have purchased a stand that I did not modify in some way to improve my chances at a trophy buck.

Stands and blinds are just additional tools in the trophy hunter's box of tricks. In themselves, they only are as good as the sportsman who uses them. During the coming year, evaluate your own personal situation and capabilities, and adopt the equipment best suited to your needs.