"RUB" YOUR BUCK THE RIGHT WAY

by Dr. James C. Kroll

In recent times, considerable attention has been given to hunting scrapes and scrape patterns, and rightly so — this is one of the top methods for scoring on big bucks. However, there also is plenty of savvy to be gained from studying and hunting over certain antler rubs, this expert believes. Here's how he does it.

The rut is a remarkable time for whitetail bucks, especially the big ones. After all, the average buck has spent the summer leisurely enjoying the abundant browse and weeds, plus the company of other bucks. The tough times of winter are over, there are no hunters to worry about, and a doe is nothing more than another deer with which to compete for food.

The onset of fall, however, brings on an entirely different set of situations. The boys are not so friendly any more, the does are beginning to look pretty good, and humans are beginning to show great interest in the out-of-doors. As the rut begins, the truly big bucks are faced with many contradictions. Somehow they must manage to hold their own against potential rivals, accomplish their breeding responsibilities, and avoid being shot by hunters in the process. It is the rut that is the trophy buck's Achilles' heel. Understanding the rut and all of its components will greatly improve your chances of harvesting a trophy-class buck.

I know of very few hunters who are unaware of the rut and its consequences in hunting. But, do you really know the various stages of the rut and how to exploit each?

The rut actually begins during early fall, when bucks begin to prepare for the breeding season ahead. If you pay very close attention to your deer, you will note that it is the bucks which first shed their red summer coats for their heavier, gray, cool-season pelage. During September and October, there will be many bucks running around in gray color, while the does still are red. Why? It really is quite simple. The bucks have to change their coats early on because they have more pressing matters which require energy and protein. The does will shed later, at a more leisurely pace.

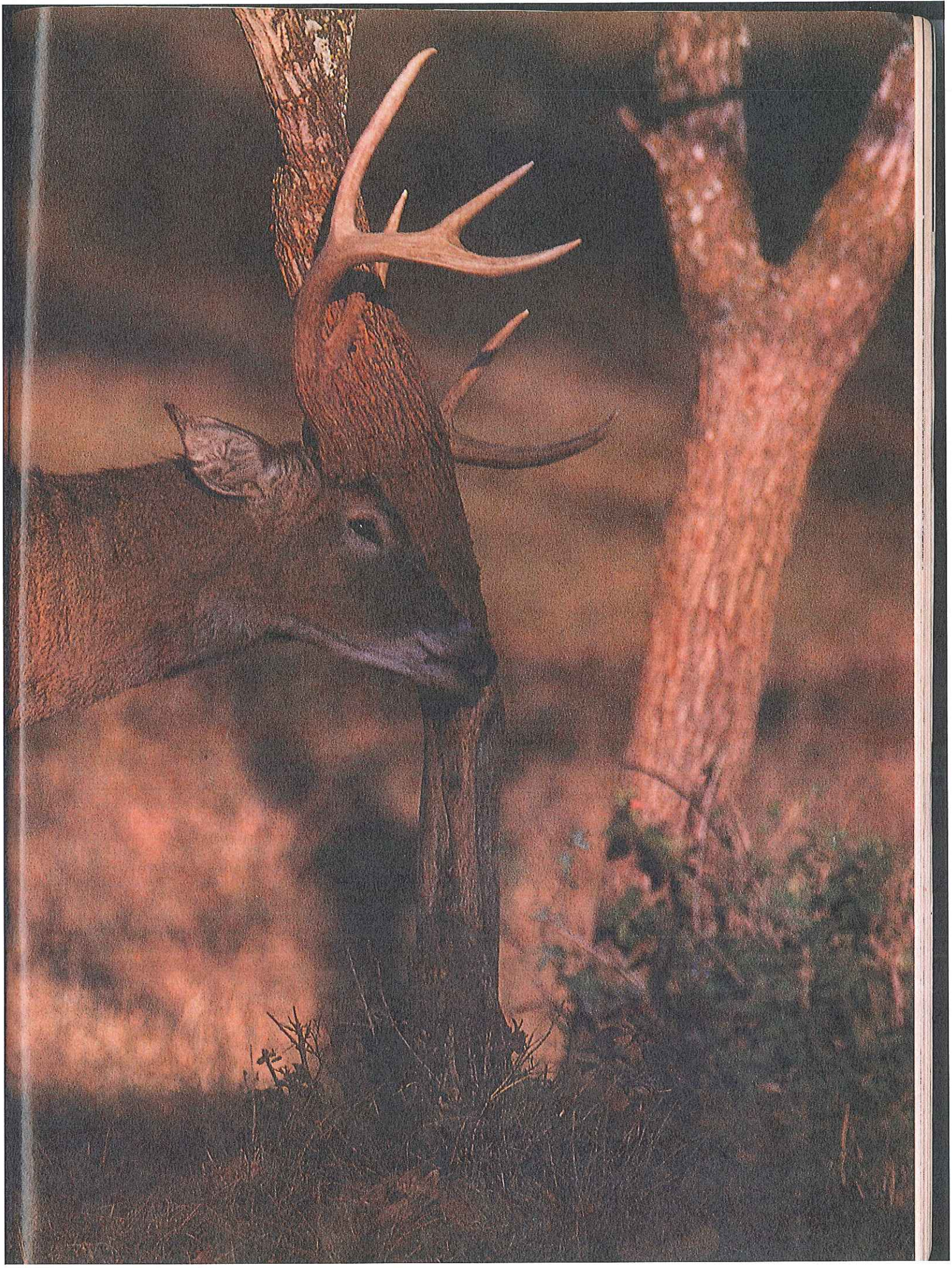
Let's examine what a mature buck needs in order to be successful during the upcoming breeding season. First, he needs a reasonable set of antlers — the bigger and more impressive the better. Antlers serve a multitude of functions, from a platform with which to engage the "enemy," to an evaporative surface for his territorial scents and love perfumes. But, antlers are not everything. In reality, all he needs for combat is a reasonable set of antlers with which to engage his opponent. Once engaged, he needs the muscles and body size to push the challenger around. For this reason, the buck must go into training very early in the fall. Training takes place in and around his favorite home space, an area researchers call a *core area*. Thus, developing the ability to recognize such core areas is critical to the successful trophy hunter.

My research has shown that core areas usually are quite small, often 50 acres or less. A core area must have two major attributes. First, and probably of more importance, it must provide adequate screening so that the animal is not readily seen by an intruder. Second, it must provide all of the life requisites, such as food and water. During late summer and early fall, the buck must be able

Continued on next page



Photo by Jack Harper



ATTENTION:
Gunhunters and Bowhunters SAVE $$$!
Sportsmans Unlimited pre-season SALE is now in progress.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ★

AMACKER TREE STANDS DT-I-Rifle Stand $59.95; DT-II-Bow/Gun Stand $79.95; DT-III-Magnum Hunter $95.95; All prices include freight.



Model TL-100 Timb-R-Lock. A affordable Chain-On stand that weighs only 7 lbs. A spacious platform of 19" x 26" gives you the extra room you need. Framed with steel and covered with wire mesh. Safety belt included. **SALE PRICE $59.00 Freight Paid.**



Model 600 ATV Loading Ramp. This light weight loading ramp is designed to take the strain off your back and your pocket. Weighs only 35 lbs. and folds in center for easy storage. Its spacious 66" x 36" size gives you the option of loading 3 or 4 wheel ATV's, small garden tractors, or lawnmowers. **SALE PRICE $89.00 FREIGHT PAID.**



RUSH check or money order to:

Sportsmans Unlimited

Rt. 3, Box 41-65S Dept. NAW116
Tallulah, La. 71282
LA Residents Add 4% Sales Tax
VISA/MC call 1-800-262-2537
In La. call 318-574-0730
Free catalog with order or send $2.00 to address above.

to gain as much weight and store as much fat as possible. The coming rut is a time when there will be little time to replenish fat stores. Therefore, high-energy and high-fat foods are essential within the core area. Those of you who are bowhunters, or even serious gun hunters, should learn to recognize the preferred food items within your own particular hunting region. In the South, for example, fruits of the American beautyberry are essential deer food during late August and early September. Fruit production of this plant is highly reliable, and a buck can fatten on it very quickly without traveling far. Other food items include cultivated grains, such as corn and milo (grain sorghum).

The first phase of the rut is called the *pre-rut period.* Big bucks will do three things during this phase. First, they spend little time moving about. Economy of energy is critical. This is the time that is hardest on the whitetail manager; you see very few bucks, and you begin to wonder whether or not your hunters will be pleased with the coming season. Many states and provinces begin their bow seasons at this time. If you are a bowhunter, you can greatly improve your chances by learning to recognize core areas and by studying your deer year-round. Once you find such an area, your chances of seeing the buck are high, because he certainly is not going to move very far unless disturbed.

Second, a big buck needs to develop his athletic abilities. In so doing, he gives himself away. There is only one way for a buck to devleop the muscles needed in combat: sparring with mock opponents. These mock opponents can be anything resilient enough to stand pushing and rubbing with his antlers. This is the time when the first rubs begin to show up. I have spent a considerable amount of time studying where these early pre-rut rubs occur, along with the types of places and vegetation preferred by big bucks, and I have found chances are great that if you find old rubs from previous years, you will find new ones during the current pre-rut period.

I have seen areas in which virtually all of the vegetation had been killed by a single buck. In fact, there was one instance in which a big buck lived in a thicket adjacent to a large nursery operation. In one year alone, the buck did over $60,000 in damages to nursery stock! The deer later was killed by a bowhunter, and it scored high in the record book. If you develop for yourself a map of your various hunting territories, each year recording the locations of both old and new rubs, you can pattern your bucks pretty well.

I also have found that specific tree types are preferred by bucks. I have collected a considerable amount of data on such trees, and can characterize them as follows. Bucks prefer two basic types of trees. First, there are the mock-combat trees. These are small (one to four inches in diameter) trees that have enough spring to them to simulate a pushing match with another buck. Evergreens such as cedars and pines often fit this bill beautifully. As a matter of fact, if there are small-diameter cedars in an area, you can bet that some of them will be rubbed. Other species I regularly encounter as rubs in my region are hollies, such as yaupon, along with willows, sassafras, and elms.

The second type of tree used as a rub — and, I might add, the most important type to locate — is the signpost marker. Such rubs are the real indicators that a dominant buck is in an area. We are talking really *big* trees here; I have seen signposts marked on trees as large as 12 inches in diameter. Favorite species for such signposts are those that will provide high visibility after the bark is rubbed off. In other words, trees with white or light-colored wood are preferred. Again, cedars and pines make excellent markers. I know of one such marker, a cedar, that has been used for over five years now on one of my management areas, and it is almost worn through. You can see the tine marks along the trunk and lower branches, some as high as four feet above the ground!

My research has shown that signposts most often occur in one of two situations. First, over the years a young buck continually will bed in the same area unless otherwise disturbed. Slowly, over the years, most of the small saplings become "rubbed out"; that is, they are killed from excessive rubbing. Also, each year the buck grows, and he rubs bigger and bigger trees. By the time the buck is three or four years old, he has found one particular tree within his summer core area that he really likes. Most of this type of signpost marking occurs very near his bedding area. Because most summer bedding areas are in very dense vegetation, I try to look for them in the early morning or late afternoon. At such times, the light is more parallel to the ground, and it more easily penetrates the dense vegetation. It is at these times that the signposts stick out, with their white, rubbed surfaces. If you find one of these early signposts, you have an excellent opportunity to harvest that buck; however, you have to work out his various escape routes from the bedding area. Hunt the trails leading to the signpost bedding area, *not* right on top of the signpost.

The second type of signpost is one that is worked as the dominant buck moves from one doe social group to the next. This type of signpost is more difficult to find. Again, it is best to locate old signposts on a topographic map of your area, then visit them regularly in order to determine whether or not the buck is courting in the area. Once you find such a signpost you need to move quickly, as he may be in the area for only a short time. Obviously, unless you are spending a great deal of time in the woods, you will have no way of knowing whether or not the signpost you find is fresh or "yesterday's news."

This idea of bucks moving around and establishing various rutting territories is a relatively new one. For years we biologists have hammered the hunting public with the notion that a deer will die within a mile of where it was born. Sometimes this is true, but most commonly it is not, as far as bucks are concerned. The problem was that early on we did not study mature rutting bucks. Does are easier to trap, and the published data are weighed heavily in favor of does. Also, much

Continued on page 62



Cedar or Pine Scented
Patents Applied For

YOUR GUN STINKS!

Deer and other game fear the pungent odors of lubricants, solvents and gun powder a hunter carries with him into the woods. We solved half your problem by giving you **Crouse's Masking Gun Lubricant™**, America's fastest growing line of gun lubricants. This space-age lubricant offers superior rust protection for the off season. It resists thickening below -30°F, retains it's lubricating properties above 450°F and won't gum in any weather.

NOW A BORE CLEANER BREAKTHROUGH!

Now we solve your entire problem with **Crouse's Masking Bore Cleaner™**. The action of your gun stinks to begin with, but cleaning the bore with a bore cleaner is adding an additional warning odor. **Crouse's Masking Bore Cleaner™** is mildly scented with pine or cedar, the scent is extracted from natural vegetation and the Hi-Tech cleaning base is free of the usual petroleum distillate stench. **Crouse's Masking Bore Cleaner™** will not harm your gun stock and in fact can be used to clean it. Your gun stock picks up odors also and **Crouse's Masking Bore Cleaner™** can be wiped over the stock to eliminate these alarming odors. **Crouse's Masking Bore Cleaner™** is compatible with **Crouse's Masking Gun Lubricant™**, and using both will BLEND YOUR GUN BACK INTO NATURE. (Save your old stinking lubricants and cleaners and spread them around your garden to keep the deer away.) If not available, you may send $4.95 per 1¼ oz. bottle of **Crouse's Masking Gun Lubricant™** and $6.95 per 1¼ oz. bottle of **Crouse's Masking Bore Cleaner™**. State pine or cedar scented, and include $1.00 postage and handling. *Country Cover Co., Dept. WT, P.O. Box 160, Storrs, CT 06268. Satisfaction guaranteed.*

THE RIGHT WAY

Continued from page 46

of the early deer-movement information came from the Edwards Plateau of Texas, an area so densely populated with deer that no buck has to travel very far to find the favor of a doe.

Nowadays, however, the story is shaping up somewhat differently. Several researchers, including me, have learned that a rutting whitetail buck is a vagrant animal. There is no predicting where he might turn up. For example, a good friend of mine, Clyde Neeley of Eunice, Louisiana, recently killed a double-drop-tined buck better than 20 miles from where it had been seen during a census! It appears that bucks have established routes they take in visiting various doe groups. Each drainage system has associated with it a group of closely related does. These doe groups have a distinct social structure. Bucks, on the other hand, are adapted to moving about, to spread the genes, so to speak. This keeps the genetic diversity of the deer population high.

Along with rubbing comes the better-known scraping behavior. Although most hunters are familiar with the concept of scrapes, there is some confusion and many myths surrounding them. Just because you find a scrape, still steaming with scent, does not necessarily mean you will kill a trophy buck there. There definitely are some gray areas when it comes to hunting scrapes.

First, not all bucks make scrapes. This has been proved by several researchers. I have seen dominant bucks that never have made a scrape in their lives, while bucks of lesser social stature may make many scrapes. One thing we *do* know about scrapes is that they serve several functions, all of which relate to scent communication. Bucks communicate in three ways: (1) scent; (2) sight; and (3) sound. Rubs and signposts, plus various behavioral postures ("body language"), dominate sight communication. Scent communication, on the other hand, is a bit more complicated. The bodies of whitetail bucks are covered with many glands, from the face all the way to the feet. Facial glands are used year-round to mark "territories." Bucks often rub their faces, especially their foreheads, on rubbing trees and signposts to further identify who is in the neighborhood. Scrapes serve to tell other bucks that a rutting male is in the area, and also, to make does aware of the buck's presence.

In making a scrape, the buck selects an overhanging limb and rubs his face on the branch. He then bites off one or more of the tips, and he may even rub the tree itself with his antlers. Scents from his face and antlers thereby are deposited on the vegetation. Next, the buck paws out a shallow depression in the earth and urinates in it. Scrapes may be visited just once, or many, many times.

Now, this may be old hat to some of you, but let's have a closer look at scrapes in order to develop a useful hunting strategy.

Realize that bucks do not just make scrapes in just any old place. My reserach has shown that they have definite preferences for scrape location. For example, the vast majority of



Big rutting sign doesn't always mean a big buck, but assume it does unless you can prove otherwise. A signpost rub such as this may be worked many times by a local dominant buck, making it a huntable spot. *Photo by Richard P. Smith.*

:SS OR ESS?!

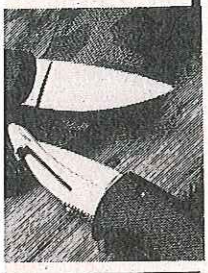
neat is no acci-
e field dressing
e ground. Each
at is ruined by
ives paunching
his operation.

MAKES RENCE!!

NMASTERS®
'ENTED R.P.P.
OINT PROTEC-
place over the
gutting of game
l easily — cut-
yer and leaving

MASTERS® are
every need. An
VIDEO shows
in action. Con-
r or CALMONT
51, Pennington,

is just a



R

AGE

ed in the past,
camouflage.



7-7534
LDS, PA 17569

scrapes I have examined occurred on slopes, as opposed to hilltops or bottoms. Because deer are creek-bottom animals, this is completely logical. They use creeks and drainages as travel corridors. What better place to announce your presence than along a highway? Scrapes and rubs are nothing more than billboards! Now, ask yourself, "Where are the best places to have billboards?" Would you want one in very dense bushes? Of course not; you would want the highest visibility possible, in order for it to be seen by more individulals. That is exactly the way it is with rutting whitetails. *The vast majority of the several thousand scrapes I have examined occurred in areas with low understory density.* Areas along streams are perfect for scraping. The dense hardwood canopy shades out the heavy brush, allowing good visibility. Soils also are important in scrape-site selection. Most of the scrapes in my study areas have been constructed in sandy or sandy-loam soils.

You have to develop an ability to read scrapes, but this is more of an art than a science. I have seen many an excited hunter sit on a scrape for days without ever seeing the animal that made it. Unfortunately, there are many types of scrapes. Early in the pre-rut period, bucks begin making false scrapes, if for no other reason than to practice. Such scrapes may be constructed and never revisited.

Several bucks I have been studying during the last few years have led me to some interesting ideas about scrape development. There is one buck in particular that best typifies "normal" scraping behavior. He is a nice four-year-old buck that lives on my farm along a stream bottom. The buck always beds in the same general area during the summer. Early in the fall, numerous rubs appear in the same spot as in previous years. He has destroyed almost all of the saplings in his summer core area. As the pre-rut comes to an end, this buck begins making scrapes within a few hundred yards of his core area. They are always in the same places. One is along a trail that leads uphill from the bedding area, while another occurs along the slope of the creek bottom.

As the buck moves into full rutting behavior, the early scrapes are ignored entirely, but the buck still beds in the same refuge. Each day, however, I find scrapes farther and farther away, always along the creek drainage. By December, the buck regularly is servicing scrapes up and down a two-mile-long trail. Some of these scrapes are given more attention than others. But, sometime late in the month, the buck completely leaves the drainage. He has been seen numerous times several miles away, but he has not yet been killed. My radio-telemetry studies confirm this behavior pattern in other bucks as well.

A scrape line is like a fisherman's trotline. The buck strings out his line and "baits his hooks," hoping to catch a doe. If one or more scrapes starts to produce results, he spends the majority of his time in that area. But, when activity there slows down, the buck either returns to old scrapes to "re-bait" them, or extends his scrape line. In this way, he manages to encounter several unrelated doe groups. These revisits to old scrapes, or construction of new scrapes, generally are interpreted by hunters to mean that "the bucks are rutting again." It is a good observation, but the wrong interpretation. Bucks always are rutting once the rut begins — they just are not always in your area.

In order to score on a big buck, you must put all of this information together into a workable hunting strategy. The strategy you select depends on whether you are hunting the pre-rut or rut period. Both rubs and scrapes most commonly occur along slopes of streams, with little vegetation to obscure visibility. With a little practice, and by studying some good aerial photos and topo maps, you should have no trouble picking out the high-probability areas. Next, you need to put together a composite rutting picture. There are sure signs to a rutting buck truly being active in your area. First, there will be freshly worked scrapes. These are easy to recognize, because they are pawed out daily and often smell like a pig pen. The presence of hoofprints and fresh droppings is a sure giveaway.

But, the presence of a scrape alone is no assurance that there is a good buck in the area. Look for signposts. They are the single most important clue to finding trophy bucks. A freshly worked scrape line should have a signpost somewhere along its length. *This is precisely the place to hunt.* You literally have found the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

But, you must be careful when hunting a signpost. It's presence usually means the buck is bedding very near. Too much disturbance or the wrong move can cost you a great deal of work and a trophy buck. For example, I had a fine 20-inch-plus buck located last season. He had a huge signpost on an old cedar and an incredible string of baited scrapes leading past it. I asked one of my assistants to set up a tripod stand for me along the trail, and he did so. Arriving before daylight, I climbed into the stand seat and waited for dawn.

Just about the time I had enough light to make out objects, I discovered to my horrow that the stand had been set up right on top of the signpost. Slowly turning my head, I noticed a thick clump of young pines about 20 yards from the stand. The pine thicket was no more than 50 feet in diameter. Our mistake was made obvious when the buck suddenly jumped to his feet and dashed over a small hill before I even could raise my rifle. I gave up on that buck until this coming year — but this time, my stand will be in the right place!

Hunting the rut is much more complicated than most hunters imagine. There is more to it than just finding a scrape and waiting for your buck to come by. You have to do a great deal of pre-season scouting, record keeping, and logical thinking. Try not to fall victim to one set way of figuring out a buck. Use both rubs and scrapes to pattern your deer. It is not easy, and it does take time, but it does pay off.



ALBER

• MOOSE • DEER

IDEAL SPOTS LEFT FO
CALL NOW

TROPHY PRAIRIE W
Some November '86
or book NOW fo

For More Information Pl
Graham Munro & Ter
Licensed Outfi

ALBERTA WI
GUIDE SE

12439 96th
Edmonton Alberta, Car
(403) 988-8332 (40

Deer Hun

Let us Custom Tan Your Deerhid

Send your hides to Mid-Western Sport Togs for custom tanning...then let us expertly tailor your skins into elegant jackets, gloves, purses, moccasins and accessories.

GENUINE DEERSKIN *Mid-W*

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

MAIL C
Dept.

NORTH AMERICAN WHITETAIL/NOVEMBER 1986