DIY

PRESENTED BY REALTREE Xtra GREEN

BY GORDON WHITTINGTON, EDITOR IN CHIEF

GUARANTEED TROPHIES

You've dreamt your dreams and bought your tag. Now you're about to step into the woods of some do-it-yourself deer nirvana where success surely awaits.

Congratulations — you're one of the many folks about to hunt whitetails in a new place, with no one but perhaps a friend or two for on-site support. You're entering a different realm. But long before you walk out of your motel or tent for that first day of hunting, look in the mirror. Ask yourself, honestly, what it will take for you to consider the trip a success.

The first response coming to mind might be, "I have to shoot a big buck." That's only natural. Much-improved trophy prospects are the reason many hunters cite for leaving behind well-known deer lands to try new ones. But it's risky to tell yourself the trip will be good *only* if you end it with a stop by the taxidermy studio. Some of the best DIY hunts I've been on resulted in no tags being filled. In some cases, they didn't even result in my *seeing* a big buck. What came from them was trophies of another sort: memories I've been enjoying for years.

A hunt far from home needs to be at least as much about self-discovery as about antlers or backstraps. Indeed, in many cases the far-flung pursuit of whitetails is really just a reason to see what's over the next hill.

We avid whitetailers aren't alone in this. All sorts of pursuits are glorified excuses to see new places, meet new people and smell new air. And frankly, those are among the most controllable elements of a DIY hunt. They're the only parts you really can count on when you and your buddy head out in that overloaded truck.

If you've researched the area well, have timed your trip properly, boast solid hunting skills, and are a decent shot, the probability of taking a solid buck is good — but never all that close to 100 percent. The whitetails where you're heading will have the last word, just as your quarry does in the place you usually hunt. Smart choices only boost your odds that a big animal will fall. As all deer are reluctant to die at anyone's hands, killing a hefty one far from home and in a tight time frame still is a major challenge.

The whitetails where you're heading will have the last word, just as your quarry does in the place you usually hunt.

So I remind myself, well before ever starting down the road, to fully enjoy every inch of it. And I do. I love looking for leads on new places to hunt. I love looking at other guys' bucks and studying aerial photos of the areas that grew them. I basically love exchanging info with other hunters who share my passion for whitetails.

Do you enjoy these aspects of hunting a new area? If not, learn to do so. They're key parts of it. If you do get a big buck, the time and work invested will only add to your satisfaction. And should you return home with an unfilled tag in your pocket, you still can feel good about your effort.

Even that unused tag is a souvenir. I have many such pieces of paper, some now badly faded. And my shelves hold many other reminders of special DIY adventures gone by. For instance, walking down a Kansas railroad track in 2000, I picked up a chunk of natural gypsum. I returned from that DIY bowhunt with only the white rock and an unused deer tag. On the last day I missed a crack at the 160-class buck I was after, and that's still a frustrating mental image. But whenever I look at that sparkling mineral specimen on the shelf, the first thought coming to mind is how much fun I had.

And even when you score, antlers aren't the only trophy. In the corner of our hearth is a crude shooting stick I made in the 1990s. I'd just seen an old buck and a doe a half-mile from me on a friend's Texas ranch. Having left my fancy shooting stick back in camp, I hurriedly cut a mesquite branch and crept toward the deer. Minutes later I steadied my rifle atop this impromptu gun rest and filled my tag.

Whether that buck's rack and the now-dried stick are equal trophies in anyone else's eyes I really can't say. But I know they are in mine.

REALTREE Xtra GREEN

For more information on Realtree Xtra Green and the latest camouflage technology, visit Realtree.com.

SEE OUR ENTIRE FAMILY OF PATTERNS

REALTREE Xtra GREEN

REALTREE.COM

REALTREE.COM/HUNTALLSEASON | #REALTREEXTRAGREEN

Dr. DEER

BY DR. JAMES C. KROLL



The age structure of bucks in the harvest is a key component of a state or local area's data. Useful info of this type is becoming more readily available online.
PHOTO BY TOMMY KIRKLAND

MINING DIY DATA

It's probably no surprise that as a whitetail biologist I use a scientific approach to finding good hunting locations. What you might not realize is that the same type of data available to me also can help you pinpoint a good place for a do-it-yourself hunt.

YOUR GOALS

I get many questions each year from hunters wanting suggestions on hunting areas. The first question I then ask is, "What are you really looking for?" I also ask about the person's hunting experience.

There are two things to consider up front when setting up a DIY hunt. The first relates to whether you're mainly seeking a trophy *buck* or a trophy *experience*. I'd say about 85 percent of hunters I meet are after a bigger buck; the rest are seeking new habitats and hunting traditions. There's nothing wrong with either goal, and often you can combine them. But you do need to figure out your goals before taking the next step.

I've been on a crusade to get hunters to break out of their old molds and pursue the various races of whitetails, irrespective of the average size of their antlers. Most hunters have taken enough deer to move beyond the "I have to fill my limit" stage and are looking for a new challenge. Here, I'll focus primarily on how to find a place where your chances of finding a good buck are higher.

IN A PERFECT WORLD

What I want to find is a place with a growing herd that hasn't yet saturated its range or is bouncing back from an abrupt decrease caused by some catastrophic event (drought, disease, etc.). This "perfect" place also will have excellent buck age structure and a history of producing large numbers of trophy bucks.

Science is all about asking questions, then acquiring data to help you reach conclusions on those questions. So let's talk about what information (data) you need for planning a successful DIY hunt.

Approximately 80 percent of whitetails reside on private land. The remainder occupy a variety of public access areas, including wildlife management areas, national forests and grasslands, state forests and some parks, as well as properties controlled by various non-governmental organizations, such as conservation trusts and The Nature Conservancy. Regardless of whether I plan to hunt public or private, here's the data I need about a candidate location:

* What's the harvest history for bucks and does? (That is, how many are killed annually by hunters?)
* How many hunters usually hunt the property in a season (broken down by weapon type)?
* What's the hunter success rate (percentage of hunters recording at least one deer killed) per weapon type?
* What's the buck age structure in the harvest?
* What's the herd's recruitment rate (percentage of fawns that reach one year of age)?
* How is the land managed, and

what are the characteristics of surrounding properties?

* Aside from legal hunter harvest, what are the mortality factors (predators, disease, hunter losses, poaching and automobile accidents)?

If I ask these questions of private landowners who seriously manage their deer, a few keystrokes on the computer will give me almost all of the answers. Unfortunately, my professional experience has been that most state and federal agencies can provide very little data related to such key questions about whitetail populations. This can complicate the process of finding a DIY hotspot.'

There are a host of other sources of deer information, including organizations such as the Boone & Crockett and Pope & Young clubs. Some deer organizations and magazines such as the one you're reading also produce maps and/or articles pinpointing good areas. On the scientific side, *The Journal of Wildlife Management* contains articles that, while quite technical in nature, can provide useful information.

In 2013, online editor Eric Conn developed a state-rating system for northamericanwhitetail.com. In it, he combined several factors, including the amount of public land in a state, the number of record-book bucks taken in the last 10 years, annual harvest, success rates, etc. From this Eric produced a list of the 20 top states for DIY hunts.

Most of the states listed I'm in total agreement with him on. Some of them represent areas where deer herds have been growing, or which have a long-standing reputation for sound management. But let's take Eric's analysis farther, by talking about sources of scientific data to help you make decisions. It's nice to narrow your search to a particular state, but there's great variation across such a large landscape. We're looking for specific places.

FINDING USEFUL DATA

As a biologist, I've spent much of my career producing trophy whitetails from Mexico to Canada. A considerable part of this has involved collecting relevant data to assess management progress and identify critical needs. Let's begin by discussing the data you need for making good decisions.

First, determining the actual number of deer on the landscape is at best an inexact science. Also, you need to recognize that, more often than not, there's an inverse relationship between deer density and the number of trophy bucks present. Yes, in places such as parts of Texas, private herds and habitats are so intensively managed that the land supports far more big bucks than you'd find on similar acreage elsewhere. But the average whitetail landscape isn't as intensively managed. The bottom line is, if you're the type of person who has to see large numbers of deer on an average day's hunt, you probably aren't consistently successful at shooting big bucks.

There are two sources of public information about deer herds and trends: state game agencies and universities. There are also are two types of articles: technical and popular. Over the last decade, I've become increasingly concerned about the lack of quality scientific information available on whitetails, in spite of this animal being the most popular and economically important game species.

Deer management is local, and deer hunting is *really* local. Here's the type of local information you'll need to home in on specific places to hunt.

We're now seeing deer declines in many states, resulting from several factors such as predation, disease, deterioration of habitat and land fragmentation. Frankly, we're down to the last few "new" places to pursue big bucks. For instance, parts of Oklahoma and Kentucky are among the last great places.

A state or county showing a decline in harvest over the last 5-10 years might not be a good candidate for a quality hunt. So one of the first things I do is conduct online and library searches for publications containing harvest history.

Fortunately, annual deer harvest is one type of data agencies have maintained for many years. There are two simple reasons for this. First, these numbers are relatively easy for a DNR to acquire through mail surveys, check stations and/or "telecheck" systems. Second, most states long have measured management success by "body count," and historically agencies have been eager to estimate the harvest. The term "record harvest" was commonly used in various state publications and press releases over the last four to five decades. Today you don't see this term as often, as harvests have begun to drop in 20 or more states.

The keywords to use in an Internet search for harvest history are:

* "Name of state"
* "white-tailed deer" and
* "harvest history."

Instead of confusing you with reams of data and information about each state in which whitetails live, I'll compare two trophy hotspots: Oklahoma and Iowa. Oklahoma represents an emerging trophy state, while Iowa has a longstanding and well-deserved reputation as one.

Eric listed Oklahoma as the No. 1 state for big bucks, so I conducted a search on the statewide harvest. The deer herd has been in the early growth stage for the last decade, and annual harvest has remained fairly constant, at roughly 100,000.

Searching for "Oklahoma whitetail harvest, bucks" led me to the department's website and useful documents under the tab, "Surveys and Reports." Clicking this tab produced two sections: "Deer harvest totals" and "Oklahoma game harvest survey." The former allowed me to see the numbers of bucks and does taken by weapon type for each county and wildlife management unit.

I learned there are 1.6 million acres of wildlife management areas, and the number of deer taken on each WMA was easily accessible. A total harvest of 5,004 deer was recorded in 2012 (an average of 53 per WMA). In contrast, county data showed a total of 102,844 deer bagged outside WMAs. Forty-three percent of deer shot on WMAs were bucks; elsewhere, it was 39.9 percent. So, hunters seem to have a slightly higher probability of taking a buck on WMAs.

The largest number of public bucks came from Black Kettle WMA. A map on the site shows this far-western area is broken into many small units surrounded by private lands. This WMA is managed by the U.S. Forest Service (National Grasslands). The fact Black Kettle is broken into small

parcels isn't very appealing to me as a hunter, though, so I decided to keep looking.

The next-highest number of bucks taken in 2012 was on huge Three Rivers WMA, containing some 203,215 acres. A total of 199 bucks were harvested. The website has excellent information on this southeastern WMA, including trail camera photos submitted by hunters. There also are photos of harvested bucks.



Look for any data showing the impact of EHD. Mature bucks are especially vulnerable to this viral disease, so records of local outbreaks can dramatically affect your prospects for trophy success over both the short and long term. PHOTO BY RALPH HENSLEY

I used Google Earth to find this WMA, and to me, from that aerial perspective it looked more inviting than did Black Kettle. Three Rivers is a huge tract with excellent soils and habitats to offer the right opportunity to find a big, mature buck. While the pressure is significant, good deer are there for those willing to work.

Now let's look at Iowa, historically one of the top producers of big deer. Its population rose dramatically from 1992-2005, growing by more than 250 percent. But since then, the kill has been down. The apparent population decline is the result of many factors, including stated agency goals of reducing the herd through doe harvest, impact of epizootic hemorrhagic disease (EHD), drought, etc.

Iowa's DNR website presents great information on places to hunt, pointing out there are some 600,000 acres of public hunting. Plus, the new Iowa Habitat and Access Program (IHAP) contains about 7,000 acres spread over 41 sites. There's an interactive map so you can examine the characteristics of each area open to public hunting. This is really useful, as the map provides up-to-date aerials and area boundaries, helpinb you also assess what's going on outside the public areas.

Unfortunately, much of the data on my "research wish list" is unavailable for either state. For example, when I searched "deer herd, deer harvest age structure," I came up with useable data for Oklahoma bucks to 3 1/2 years, but none for Iowa. I got the Oklahoma data from the Quality Deer Management Association publication, 2014 *Whitetail Report*, which presumably includes data supplied by each state. Sixty-six percent of Oklahoma's 2012 buck harvest was in the 3 1/2-plus age class, making it second only to Texas in age structure. Oklahoma also has one of the lowest percentages of yearling bucks in the whitetail harvest.

There were no data presented for Iowa's buck age structure. If such data exist, they aren't easily obtained without a direct request to the DNR.

Iowa and Oklahoma both are great states for big deer. But recent data show more signs of decline in the former than the latter. So while you'd rightly think me a fool if I even hinted Iowa isn't a great place to harvest trophy bucks, the data make me favor Oklahoma as a DIY destination today.

WARNING SIGNS

For true top-end bucks, seek areas with deer herds still expanding after restoration or rebounding from a recent decline. Unfortunately, the list of states with growing herds is short; nearly all have reached habitat saturation or have overshot it to the point of seeing the herd decline.

What's more, states that have had periodic population crashes, followed by cyclic increases, seldom return to their historic peaks. One example is Montana, where EHD and bluetongue (BT) periodically strike. In 2012 the famed Milk River herd is said to have declined again by up to 90 percent. Other states also suffered significant losses to the viral disease in 2012-13, some up to 30 percent. As state agencies seem more interested in diseases than in herd demographics, there's more readily available data on these losses.

Chronic wasting disease's impact on deer has held a lion's share of public interest over the last two decades, though no credible scientific publication has yet documented population decline from the disease. Conversely, EHD/BT has had a demonstrated impact on many herds.

EHD/BT has become and will remain a significant whitetail mortality agent, and its impact on the mature buck segment of the population is profound. Thus, it's smart to research current information on county-by-county distribution of EHD-related mortalities. Online I found useful local information produced by a number of sources for some Midwest states, including Iowa and Illinois.

Depending on the amount of site-specific mortality, it can take a herd 5-7 years to recover from a significant

die-off or decline. So I wouldn't look at a hunt in stricken areas of Montana until at least 2017-19. If the disease returns during the interim, it will further postpone recovery. The same holds true for specific counties within other states reporting significant losses to the disease.

I suggest you keep an eye on news reports for areas you're considering for a DIY hunt, and that you do so right up to the last minute; EHD/BT strikes in late summer to early fall. Last year I was contacted by a hunter who found on arriving at the gate of his Michigan hunt destination that the horrible smell was coming from numerous deer carcasses lying about the property. By then it was too late for him to change hunting plans.

Other causes of decline include drought and habitat deterioration. Drought's effect on deer is significant; extreme dryness increases mortality and hurts antler growth. And habitat deterioration of course brings its own issues, whether due to drought or not.

The University of Nebraska has an excellent drought map for the U.S., and it's updated every Thursday (droughtmonitor.unl.edu). As of this writing, the map shows the western portion of Oklahoma being in a significant drought. Meanwhile, searching for Iowa information shows moderate drought within the central portion of that state. The USDA annually produces predictive maps for drought in every state, offering clues to expected conditions.

Unfortunately, it's not currently possible to find suitable data on the impacts of long-term habitat deterioration. There are numerous publications on how deer impact forests, but not vice versa. During my recent work with the whitetail program in Wisconsin, it became obvious herds in the forest northern region have been declining for some time, probably due first to aging habitats and then to increasing predation and over-harvest of does. One of our data needs for Wisconsin is a reliable methodology to assess deer habitat conditions.

THE DIY EXPERIENCE

The last DIY "trophy" I want to mention is the *experience*. If you're one of those rare hunters who truly care more about the quality of the experience than the size of the antlers, you need to learn to look for information about hunting traditions and unique local strategies.

There are a number of interesting hunting traditions out there, and I've made it a life goal to experience as many as possible. For instance, I've extensively investigated Deep South hunting lifestyles, such as the use of hounds in the Carolinas and swamp buggies in South Florida. Success on such hunts might not be measured in inches of antler but in lasting memories. Following geographically specific blogs and websites can help you identify opportunities of interest.

IN CONCLUSION

I hope I've given you some new things to consider in finding a great DIY location. As deer herds change, the complexity of identifying the best areas does as well. But regardless of the tools available, the successful hunter will be the one who makes sound decisions on the basis of the most reliable current information.

