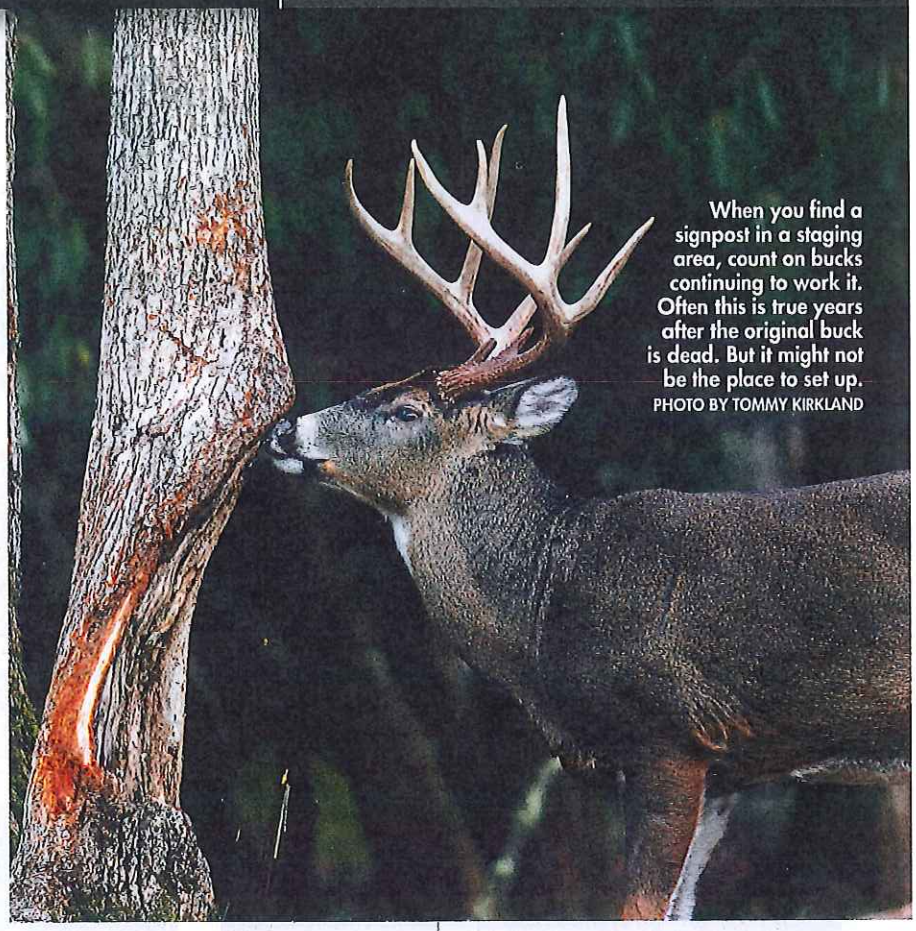
Dr. DEER

BY DR. JAMES C. KROLL

TAKING CENTER STAGE



When you find a signpost in a staging area, count on bucks continuing to work it. Often this is true years after the original buck is dead. But it might not be the place to set up.
PHOTO BY TOMMY KIRKLAND

Almost any time from late summer into November, the covers of hunting magazines will tout their coverage of the rut. Of course, that's understandable; the rut tends to be the single most productive part of deer season for trophy hunting.

I'm going to write about the rut as well. But I want to take a somewhat different slant on it. I'm going to base my approach on what I've learned from not just hunting but also conducting research on whitetails. Perhaps I can give you a fresh way to look at what's going on, and thus improve your own hunts.

A DIFFERENT ANIMAL

Early this year, I was fortunate to video a hunt in Argentina's Patagonia region for *North American Whitetail TV*. My visit represented a return to a place where I'd worked in the late 1960s — and thankfully, it hadn't changed much since. My hunt wasn't for a whitetail, but a trophy red stag, with my friends Emilio Paris (emilioparis.com.ar) and Francisco Minieri.

What do red stags have to do with whitetails? One of my goals in Patagonia was to get video of the red stag's breeding biology, to show how it compares to that of deer here.

Red deer and elk belong to a large group of deer in the genus *Cervus* (Latin for "deer"), which is the type genus for the entire deer family (*Cervidae*). The breeding biology of both species is similar in form and function but unlike that of whitetails.

DEER 'HAPPY HOUR'

With only a few exceptions, species in the deer family are short-day breeders, mating in the fall. The most notable exceptions are species such as axis and rusa deer, which evolved in the tropics; there, day length doesn't change enough through the year to provide a reliable breeding cue.

The deer family arose in the tropics and spread north and south into more temperate regions. North of the equator, deer tend to breed during September to January; south of the equator, they shift to March through May.

Although they have expanded into most of the globe (excluding sub-Saharan Africa, the Arctic and Antarctic continents) each deer species tends to hang onto some of the ancestral behavioral characteristics of an animal that tended to live in very low densities. Mature tropical forests support low numbers of ruminants, as available food is limited under low-light conditions. So the ancestors of modern deer had to come up with a way to find mates. Sounds get lost in the forest, so most long-range deer calls are lower pitched to carry farther; higher-pitched calls are limited to alarming nearby individuals of potential dangers.

The answer was quite simple. Deer would leave messages on the equivalent of "deer social media," in the form of scents. Periodically visiting such "message boards," a male or female could leave a response or simply remain in the area until the sender returned to check his/her message board. That's why I named the large rubs made by whitetail bucks around doe

gathering places "signposts."

These messages permit normally solitary individuals to seasonally gather for "happy hour" and courtship. Modern deer species each developed variations on this theme in their courtship and breeding systems; and, it was two of these I was comparing and contrasting for our TV show.

RED DEER/ELK SYSTEM

It's well known that red stags and bull elk exhibit harem behavior during the breeding season. Stags or bulls tend to herd females into groups, then viciously defend them from other males until each comes into estrus. Challengers tend to be older males of similar age and experience, with a few immature males finding lone females overlooked by mature males. The stags/bulls fight ferociously for breeding rights and enjoy some status within the deer community.

Red deer and elk don't have tarsal glands like those of whitetails. Instead, they tend to urinate all over the lower body, chest and neck. They also rub scent on their antlers from large ground wallows. You can easily smell a dominant stag from several hundred yards downwind!

As the stag tends his hinds (females), he constantly checks each for signs of estrus, whether by her behavior or smell. He makes dozens of attempts to mount the hinds, each time leaving scent deposited from his lower body. I was lucky to obtain footage during my Patagonia hunt documenting the entire scent-marking sequence, including the use of scent by females. After being mounted, each female would carefully rub her head and neck back over her body to spread the stag's unique scent. Although females are quite coy, they actively seek out dominant males. Scent-marking by females has an important function.

I also documented several occasions in which a female left the harem for a brief period, often to feed or drink. Stags attempted to retrieve these wanderers but were reluctant to leave their harem unguarded. These females then were rapidly approached by satellite (subordinate) males trying to create their own harems. In each documented case, a male would approach one of these escapees, smell the scent of the dominant stag and then retreat! Later, females returned to their harem and bedded with the group. The purpose of this activity is to ensure that the most fit male will be nearby when each female achieves estrus. Elk and red deer males have large testicles, allowing them to successfully breed more females than whitetail bucks can.

THE WHITETAIL SYSTEM

Scent-marking in whitetails appears on the surface to be different — but it's more similar than you might think. Whitetail bucks don't have harems they attempt to hold until each female becomes receptive. Rather, they tend to find a single female that's close to being receptive, then defend her until she's ready to breed.



For the elk and its smaller cousin, the red deer, the rut is all about a dominant male's ability to assemble, defend and ultimately breed a "harem." The whitetail operates much differently. PHOTO BY KEN THOMMES

The single most important object in all of this is the "signpost." It's a larger-diameter rub located within an assembly area, which years ago I named the "staging area." I called it that because deer tend to assemble in such areas just before dark to wait for low-light conditions favorable to venturing out into a field or other feeding area. I've been blessed to have harvested many trophy bucks during my hunting career, and to a great extent, the secret to this success was learning to find staging areas.

Such an area can be characterized as a place with an open understory brush or forest adjacent to a feeding area, and generally downwind (per the prevailing wind) from where does feed. The staging area is full of "rubbable" trees: that is, larger-diameter saplings of specific species that possess the right underbark (cambium) to provide both antler stain and high visibility. Cedars, pines and other conifers are great signpost species.

Signposts provide both scent and visual messages and can be seen for some distance. That's likely one reason open understories are selected. Bucks tend to rise late from their beds, then move slowly toward an active staging area, arriving right at dark. (I've tried for many years to determine how a buck decides which staging area he'll visit on a given day, but to no avail. It remains an undiscovered secret!)

When bucks arrive at the staging area, they immediately go to each signpost to find out which other bucks have been there. Scent from a rival will be carefully tested, then answered by

application of scent. A subordinate buck will smell the signpost but not apply his own scent.

Does often will rub their foreheads and faces on signposts, serving two possible functions. First, this could indicate the female is interested and nearing ovulation. Second, as with red deer hinds, she might be adorning herself with a dominant buck's odors. She also will subsequently rub her face and head over her back, transferring the scent.

Now, you might be asking, "How does Dr. Kroll know all this?" Or, "Is this just a theory, or a documented fact?" Well, for years I've located trail cameras on signposts and within staging areas. As a result, I have a collection of many video clips of these described behaviors. My conclusions are more than just an opinion or theory.

Bucks tend to bed in and around the staging area for most of the night, waiting for does to pass through. If the right doe comes along, he pursues her in full courtship mode. If a suitable doe fails to appear, the buck will leave just before or right at daylight and return to one of his sanctuary beds.

A hunter watching such an area might never see the buck in legal light unless a "hot" doe brings him to a vulnerable spot. So I prefer to set up well away from a staging area along a rub line mapped out much earlier, usually during spring or summer.

You can do this by learning to recognize rubs that are one or more years old. My research has shown bucks tend to use the same rub lines, even if the original buck that made them is long dead. The only thing that will change this is destruction of the habitat, whether by human activity such as clearcutting or natural disasters (e.g., tornadoes). It's also possible to find staging areas by following rub lines toward feeding areas.

The trick to hunting a staging area is actually to avoid it. Instead, find the right spot along the rub line (travel corridor) where the wind's in your favor, where your approach won't alert the buck and where you have a good ambush point. I like to construct brush blinds in such spots just before the rut. This can be accomplished in just a few minutes, and it offers the advantage of being able to get quietly into place before daylight.

If possible, I hunt the entire day. The buck tends to go to the staging area just before dark, then returns right about first light in the morning. If you get into position well before daylight, and if you've chosen your location well away from the staging area, you might intercept him on his return. If not, you can stay all day and attempt to catch him coming back to the staging area right at dark.

Of course, he might choose another area, so there's no certainty in any of this. You just have to be patient.

IN CONCLUSION

Understanding more about what's going on during the entire breeding season can substantially improve your success. Of all the things I have learned about whitetails over the years, figuring out and hunting staging areas is among the most interesting. And, it's been a critical part of my rut-hunting success.

Hunt for Big Bucks with
EAGLE LAKES OUTFITTERS
Eagle Lakes OUTFITTERS PIKE COUNTY, ILLINOIS
As seen on North American Whitetail TV and Archer's Choice TV with Ralph and Vickie!
130-Minimum Strictly Enforced • Little Hunting Pressure.
Guided hunts on thousands of acres of forest and private farms managed for more than 14 years to produce trophy whitetails and turkeys. Five- and six-day hunts for archery or firearms, with some combo hunts available. All hunting is from treestands or ground blinds. Eagle Lakes is a full-service outfitter, with first-class accommodations in a beautiful lodge with great food.
Come harvest your trophy in Pike County, Illinois!
Eagle Lakes Outfitters, Inc.
24044 State Highway 96
New Canton, Il. 62356
info@eaglelakesoutfitters.com
PIKE COUNTY ILLINOIS
217.426.2404 www.eaglelakesoutfitters.com
