BUILDING YOUR OWN
'DEER FACTORY'

Improving The Cover On Your Hunting Land

If there isn't enough of the right cover where you hunt, deer aren't likely to spend much time there in daylight once opening day arrives. Here's what to do about it.

by Dr. James C. Kroll

At a recent landowners' meeting hosted by the Arkansas Agricultural Extension Service, I came face to face with a problem you might well have encountered in trying to improve the deer hunting on your own land.

As most of you serious hunters know, we at ***WHITETAIL*** have been making a special effort recently to increase the public's knowledge of deer-management principles and techniques. Along these lines, at that Arkansas meeting I gave a seminar on providing both food and cover as key parts of a management program.

After the meeting, several of the landowners approached me to discuss the topic in greater detail. "Boy, you hit the nail on the head," said one. "I only have a hundred acres, and it's surrounded by guys who wouldn't let a young buck walk if their lives depended on it!"

The man went on to explain that he'd worked to improve the deer forage on his property, but he noted that deer seemed to be just ". . . walking across, rather than staying on, my land."

When managing limited acreage for deer, one of your main goals always is to get the animals to stay on your land, rather than merely be transient guests. Improving the food supply is, as noted throughout this ***WHITETAIL*** series, a major part of that equation; however, it isn't the total answer. For you to reap the hunting benefits of a healthy herd, deer also must feel safe and secure in using your property during daytime. And that means having enough of the right cover is vitally important.

Editor Gordon Whittington found this Kansas buck bedded in an 80-acre block of thick prairie grasses with hardly a tree or bush in sight. Such non-traditional cover often is used by bucks and does alike in open country. Photo by Tom Langford.

WHAT IS COVER?

There are two basic categories of deer cover, with some overlap between them: *thermal cover* and *screening cover*. Well-managed land needs both in order to give deer year-round shelter from the elements and predators.

Thermal cover is vegetation that protects deer from the vagaries of adverse weather conditions, including cold, heat and heavy precipitation. This cover can take many forms, depending on the type of weather whitetails are facing at any given time.

In order to shield deer from the cold, cover must be dense enough laterally to retard wind flow. The famous cedar swamps of the Midwest and Northeast are perfect examples of this type of cover, as are the juniper and cedar thickets of south-central Oklahoma and the Texas Hill Country.

But thermal cover isn't needed just in winter; in the South and Southwest, it's perhaps even more critical during the *hottest* times of year. Thermal cover in these areas is needed to retard sunlight penetration — in other words, to provide cooling shade.

Unlike winter cover, good summer thermal cover promotes air flow. For example, a densely canopied pine stand with a thin understory offers excellent summer cover; there's shade to ward off the sun and good air flow beneath to provide a cooling breeze. As a result, such cover blocks often are preferred summer bedding areas.

The purpose of screening cover is to provide protection not from cold or heat, but from the watchful eyes of predators, including man. As a result, screening cover takes many forms, and many landowners and hunters don't always recognize it when they see it. A simple stand of tall prairie grasses can provide all the screening cover deer need to feel safe in open terrain.

This fact was beautifully illustrated a couple of years ago in Kansas, when editor Gordon Whittington downed a nice buck that was bedded in an 80-acre block of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) ground. Small tree lines and timber blocks surrounded the CRP, but the buck had decided to bed far out in the grass instead, positioning himself so that he could watch a nearby county road from his hide-out.

As Gordon was slip-hunting through the area, he luckily noticed the deer's snow-white rack sticking up in the yellow grass. Because the buck was facing in the opposite direction and a crosswind was blowing 20 mph, he

neither saw nor heard the hunter approaching. Gordon eventually slipped to within 20 yards of the deer before shooting him in his bed.

Whether in the form of tall prairie grasses, blowdowns, brushy thickets or evergreen stands, horizontally dense vegetation near ground level can afford deer the cover they need to feel safe on your land. Screening cover even can take the form of subtle changes in topography or other land features that permit bedding or movement without detection by predators.

ENOUGH COVER?

Each piece of deer land is different, with a unique blend of features that affect its ability to shelter and feed the herd. Determining if your own hunting land is lacking in various types of cover requires an objective analysis.

As an example, let's look at the case of that frustrated landowner mentioned above. Once I started to talk with him about his property in the farm country of eastern Arkansas, he offered up a wealth of information about it.

The man had planted beautiful food plots of cereal grains and clovers in fall and cowpeas in summer, making huge strides toward maximizing the herd's year-round nutrition. But while deer fed on the property every night, they seldom even gave him a peek in daylight, much less a shot.

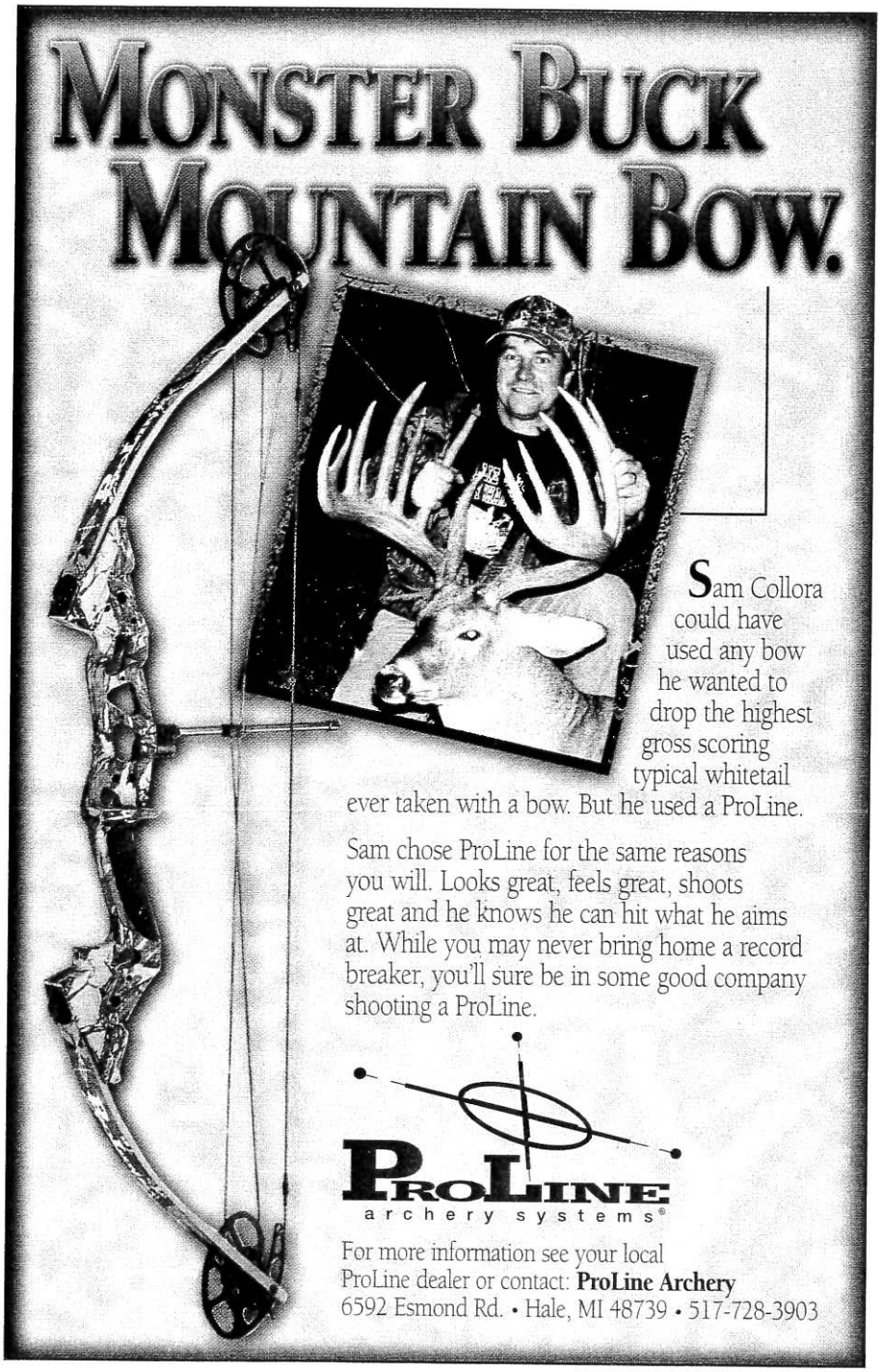
In walking this landowner through an analysis of his problem, I learned that he had only two habitat types: food plots and mature oak stands. This was significant, because while oaks certainly can provide deer with acorns for winter energy, they don't offer much food at other times. In addition, once they drop their leaves, they provide scant cover. During hunting season, deer had little reason to spend time on this man's land, except to feed on the food plots at night.

With a bit of effort, the landowner and I worked out a plan to alleviate this problem over the short and long haul. It will take some time and effort, but if he follows this plan (outlined below), he can favorably alter the activity and movement patterns of deer in his area.

To conduct a similar analysis of your own hunting land, start by acquiring — you guessed it — an aerial photograph. Your county office of the Farm Service Agency (formerly known as the Soil Conservation Service) is the first place to go for such photos. You also can check with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Aerial Photography Field Office (2222 West 2300 South, P.O. Box 30010, Salt Lake City, UT 84130-0010; 801/975-3503). Also, a set of U.S. Geological Survey topographical maps of the area will be helpful.

The next step is to critically analyze both your property and that of your neighbors. I like to place a sheet of tracing paper or velum (available from a graphic arts supplier) over the photo and trace around each significant habitat type. It might take some time to figure out what's what, but first look at areas you know very well, then train yourself to interpret the parts with which you aren't as familiar.

Label each habitat type according to the type of vegetation and/or its possible role in a deer's life. For example, an 8-year-old pine plantation in the Southeast will feature densely stocked saplings with very little for a deer to eat in the critical zone between the ground and four feet up. Such an



area would, by my system, be labeled both as *young pine stand* and *screening cover*. On the other hand, a fallow field should be designated as such and considered a *summer food source* only (unless you'll be planting a cool-season crop there).

Once you designate the utility of each of your habitat types, as well as those of your neighbors, it's time to think out what deer might be doing in each area. I like to color in the various types, place the resulting map on the wall and then stand back to consider the various relationships.

Ask yourself how a deer would move from one area to another and how it would use the various elements or habitat types. Applying this kind of logic to your land in relation to your neighbors — a "deer's-eye" view, so to speak — will greatly enable you to make sound management decisions.

IMPROVING YOUR COVER

It's one thing to analyze the cover deficiencies of your land, quite another to do something about it. But to see how a cover-improvement strategy might play out in real life, let's return to the case of that Arkansas landowner.

Having enough acres in deer cover isn't the only concern; the cover also needs to be arranged in a way that helps both the herd and the hunters.

As you'll recall, he clearly needs cover, especially for bedding areas, so that deer feel comfortable staying on his land during the day. There are two options for accomplishing this goal.

First, he can have strategically located stands of oaks cut and removed, then either plant these new openings to pines or simply let regrowth eventually fill them in. In this case, I'd opt for the former, as it will produce better long-term results.

If the landowner has more cleared acreage than he needs for food plots, he even can plant some of those areas to conifers. In doing so, the choice of tree species will be important. If, for example, this land had been in Michigan, instead of eastern Arkansas, I'd have recommended that he plant jack pine or white cedar. If the tract were in southeastern Oklahoma, I would have recommended red cedar.

An important question is, How do you keep the young trees you plant from eventually growing so tall that they no longer offer good screening cover near ground level? A tree with few low branches might be great for summer thermal cover, but little else.

On land dominated by hardwoods, the answer is to select a type of shrubby conifer (assuming timber production isn't important to you), such as Scots pine in the South or jack pine in the North. On the other hand, if the property's woods are already largely made up of conifers, I'd recommend another approach: tree harvest and natural regeneration.

In forestry, there are several principles for regenerating an area naturally, as opposed to replanting after clear-cutting. The two best ways are to: (1) cut all but some scattered "seed" trees, which never are removed, and (2) use a system known as *shelterwood*, in which all of the trees in the selected area are removed over five to seven years, allowing seedlings to be established. Either of these methods

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You even can get creative with your cover plantings. For example, I once worked with a landowner whose deer cover was quite limited. On his land were numerous small openings — more than he needed in order to plant enough food plots — so I decided to plant some of the excess openings to cover trees. This was in East Texas, so I recommended that the center of each opening be planted to loblolly pines, with the edges being planted to Virginia pines.

Shortly thereafter, the landowner called me. As it turned out, a state forestry commission representative who'd seen my plan had asked him, "What's Kroll trying to do? Doesn't he know that Virginia pines are susceptible to tip moths?"

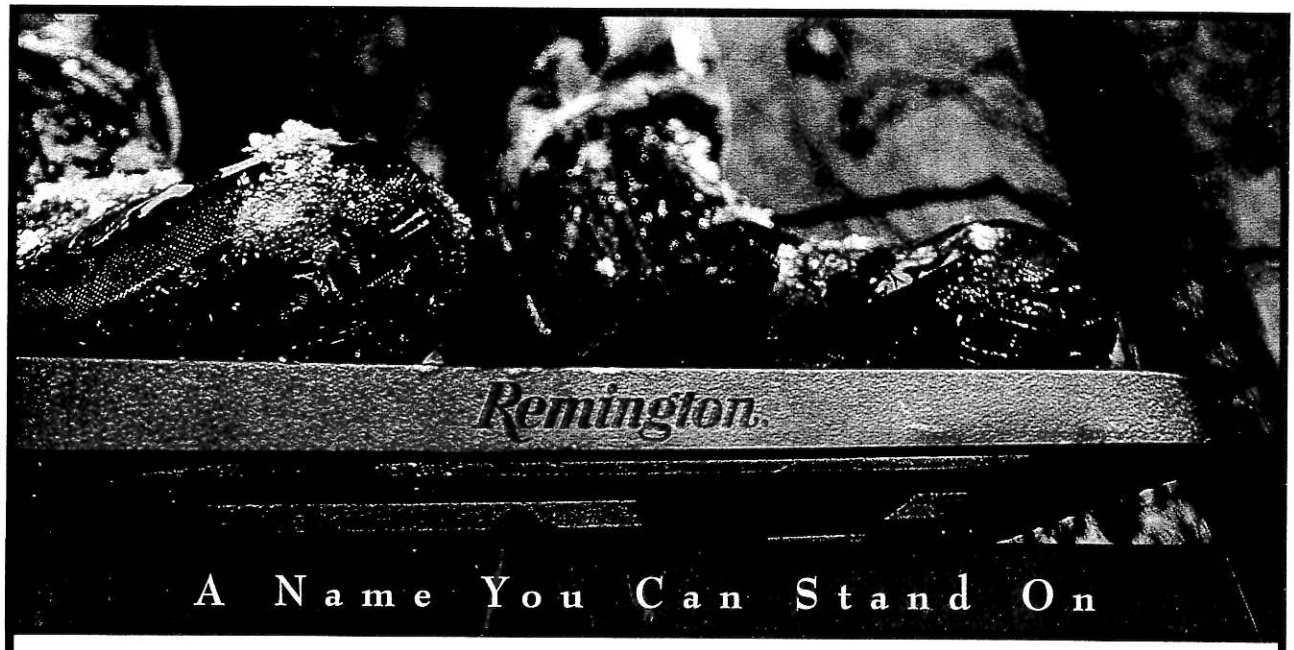
Based on this response from the forester, the landowner had concluded that my recommendation had been faulty. But in truth, I was very much aware of tip moths — indeed, I *wanted* them to damage those Virginia pines!

You see, that forester was trapped in a mentality of just growing trees for timber harvest. He'd never considered the fact that when the growing tips of pines are damaged by moths, the trees stay much more shrublike in form, making them far better for wildlife screening cover. The loblolly pines in the center of each opening eventually would grow too tall to provide much cover, so I needed a plant that would stay relatively short and densely shrubby. The Virginia pine/tip moth relationship, normally a problem, was in this case a positive.

(Some years later I toured that same property, and the effect had turned out to be just what I'd hoped for. I might add that the same forester who'd



Mature bucks naturally tend to favor heavy screening cover for daytime movement, even on lightly pressured lands. By "landscaping" your property in the right way, you can encourage bucks to go where you want! Photo by Tim Black.



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questioned my tree selection was with me then, and it certainly proved to be a "teaching moment" for him!)

WHERE SHOULD COVER BE?

Having enough acres in deer cover isn't the only concern; the cover also needs to be arranged in a way that helps both the herd and the hunters. Laying out the physical features of your land is much the same sort of logical process as landscaping your yard; indeed, so apt is the analogy that I now refer to arranging habitat elements as "landscaping" for deer.

Look again at your aerial photo and think about the various ways in which deer could use both your land and that of your neighbors. Might it be feasible to connect a bedding area to a food source by adding a band of thick cover that would serve as a daytime travel corridor? Can you perhaps find a place near existing cover that would work well as a food plot, facilitating "one-stop shopping" for your deer? The answers to such questions often become obvious to you as you stare at an aerial photo or map of the area.

It's also important to think about "landscaping" your property to help in harvesting deer. Even on a tract with ample cover, too much hunting pressure applied in the wrong ways often pushes deer onto neighboring lands, where they can be vulnerable to indiscriminate harvest. We'll address specific hunting strategies for managed lands in future issues, but for now, just remember that regardless of how much land you have, you need to provide your herd with sanctuaries where they can avoid human pressure.

If you've done a good job of "landscaping" your property and you hunt it carefully, you don't need a lot of acreage to attract deer to your side of the fence once the shooting starts. My own farm in East Texas comprises only 200 acres, but during the hunting season there are perhaps twice as many deer on it as at other times!

WHAT DOES COVER COST?

On average, an acre of trees will cost about $80 to plant. Fortunately, there are various government agencies and private timber companies with cost-sharing programs worth investigating. The best-known of these is, of course, CRP, the USDA program that pays landowners not to plant crops on erodible lands. Although these reserves rapidly lose their forage value, they do conserve soil and can provide needed deer cover.

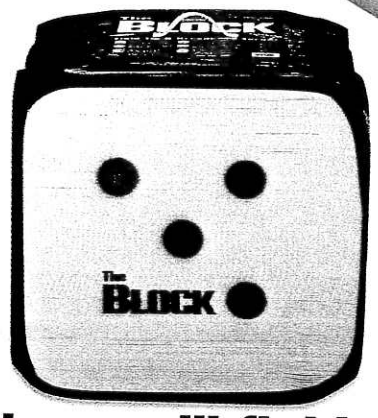
CONCLUSION

Few of us have thousands of acres of land to manage for deer. But the good news is that you don't *need* all that much land in order to have a successful program and outstanding hunting. In recent years some of the top bucks in North America have been shot on tracts of 200 acres or less! The trick is getting deer to spend their time on your land, so you can shield younger bucks from premature harvest and give the entire herd year-round food and cover.

You don't have to make major habitat changes all at once; just do as much as your time and other resources will allow, and stay with it. If you do, perhaps you'll one day get to hear something along the lines of what a recent visitor told me after touring my farm. "You know," he said, "you have the largest 200 acres I've ever seen!"

For a deer manager, that's about as nice a compliment as you can get.

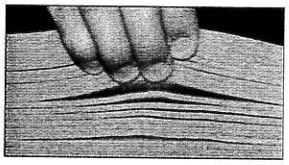
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