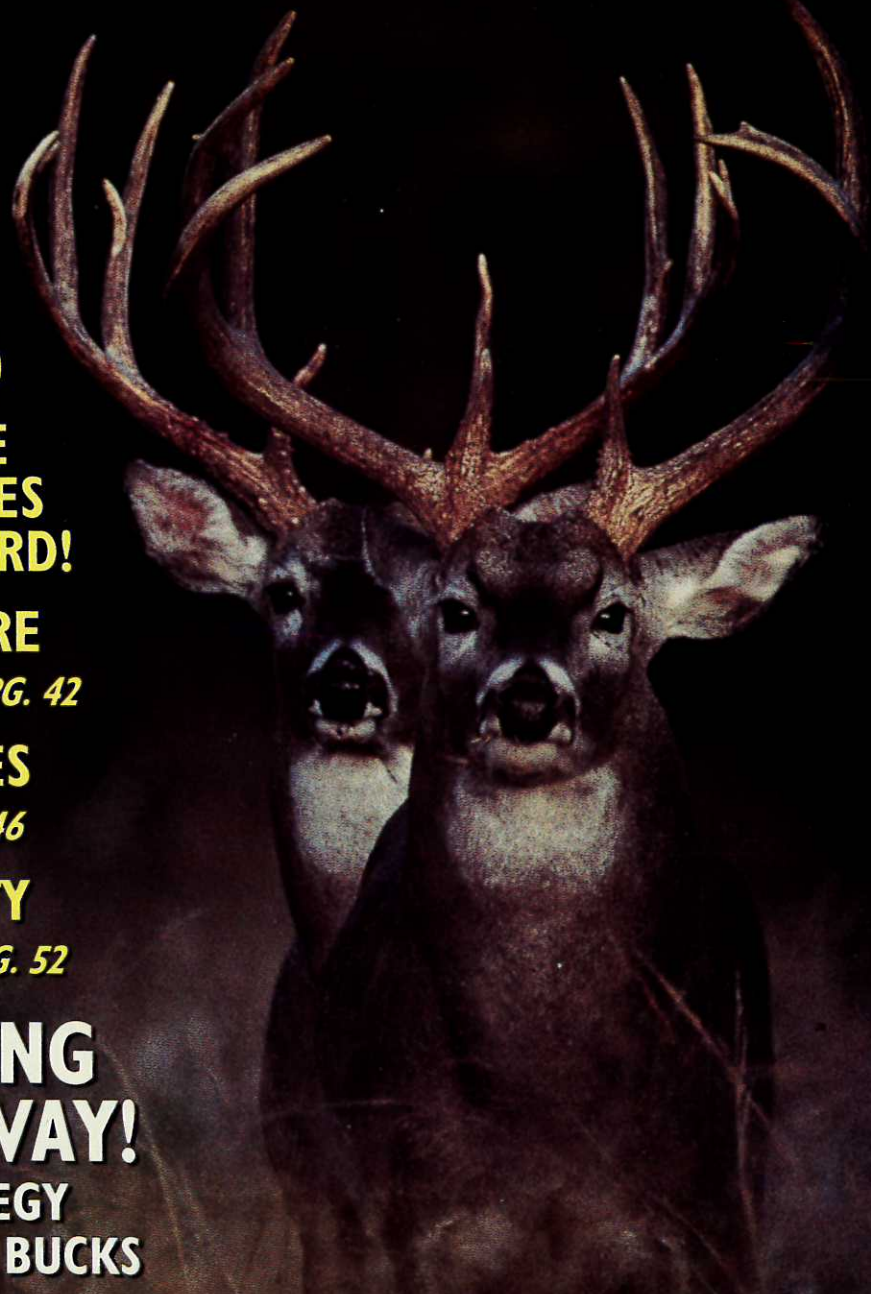
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BUILDING YOUR OWN
'DEER FACTORY'

Getting Started In Deer Management

You say you're ready to begin a management program on your land, but you aren't sure how to go about it? Read this, and you'll know!

by David Morris

So, you want to start a management program on your property. You certainly like the idea of having more and bigger bucks. But you're not quite sure exactly where to begin or even which questions to ask.

Well, you're not alone. Practically everyone feels that way starting out. But the answers are out there, and we at ***WHITETAIL*** are committed to helping you find them.

After all, when we decided to start our own management program at Fort Perry Plantation, the magazine's deer-research facility in Georgia, we were in just the same position you're in now. Finally, after struggling for answers on how to proceed, we came up with a step-by-step process for what amounts to building a "deer factory" on your land!

STEPS IN THE MANAGEMENT PROCESS

The concept will work for anyone. It starts with the need to (1) *establish management objectives* to guide you through the process. This, in turn, both requires and goes hand in hand with (2) *an evaluation of available resources and the desires of the persons involved.*

From there, the need to (3) *make preliminary plans to accomplish your strategy* becomes obvious. However, that can't happen until you (4) *acquire reasonably accurate information about the key parameter of your deer herd*, which requires some type of (5) *censusing*.

The next step is to use your census results to (6) *work up a population model*, which is nothing more than a set of numbers reflecting how many male and female deer of various ages are on your land now and will be in the future. With this, you can make surprisingly accurate predictions about the impact of any management decision before you actually put it into practice.

Once you have your population model, you can (7) *make specific goals and come up with strategies for meeting them.* At this point, you'll be able to (8) *put together the end product of management: a harvest plan* that tells you which deer need to be removed from the herd in order to accomplish your specific goals.

This all might sound intimidating, but it really isn't. As you progress, the unknowns and gray areas will slowly fade away. Assumptions you've made about your herd and land gradually will be strengthened by testing and the discovery of more facts. And in time, you'll see the returns: a healthier herd, more and bigger bucks, greater enjoyment of hunting and the satisfaction of knowing you've made a difference!

As the chart on Page 42 shows, there are three basic categories of factors affecting deer management: the *herd*; the *habitat*; and the *people* involved. Every variable with which you need to be concerned fits into one of these groupings.

As we get farther along in our coverage of managing deer on private lands, we'll discuss all of the factors listed in this chart, showing how they'll impact your efforts to develop and maintain a healthy herd. (Indeed, on Page 52 of this issue, Dr. James C. Kroll will begin providing his advice on how to analyze and improve habitat.) Here, though, we're going to focus on the critical first steps in the management process: evaluating resources and the desires of the people involved.

REALISTIC OBJECTIVES

One of the biggest frustrations in game management stems from setting unrealistic objectives and goals. This, in turn, usually stems from a failure to properly evaluate what you want to accomplish and what you have available to you for making it happen.

Management objectives are highly subjective. Basically, just about any objective of the people involved is the *right* objective — provided it's achievable. If not, frustration and failure are sure to follow.

What's achievable largely depends on your resources, particularly land and money. The more and bigger bucks you want, the greater the demands on your resources. A good management strategy combines the wishes of the people with a realistic evaluation of the potential, given the available resources.

Of course, there are two ways to go about this. First, you could determine your objectives and then go after the resources (for example, a certain amount of land) needed to accomplish them. Much more common, though, is for your existing resources to shape your objectives.

Fortunately, even with modest

Producing more and bigger bucks on your property begins with taking a look at your management objectives and determining the resources you have. No two situations are exactly alike, but the fundamentals of the process are the same everywhere. Photo by Mike Biggs.

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land and financial resources, rather lofty expectations still can be reached. But they must be realistic.

Again, there's no rule that says we all must have the same management objectives for our land. Still, having said that, there might well be a common baseline yardstick by which we can measure management objectives and strategies: a "natural" herd. (For an explanation of just what this is and why it's important, refer to editor Gordon Whittington's feature on Page 42.)

EVALUATING RESOURCES

Determining the management potential of your situation is a fairly objective process, because that potential is determined by physical factors. Some of these are under your control, and some aren't.

The Habitat

Chief among your resources is the deer habitat you want to manage. For our purposes, we can define habitat as "the environmental setting in which an animal normally lives." Providing deer with a good place to live is one of the obvious keys to producing a healthy herd, and analyzing your habitat is the subject of Dr. Kroll's feature that begins on Page 52 of this issue.

All else being equal, the size of your property will determine the scope of your program and the number of bucks you can harvest without threatening herd health. Also, the more limited your acreage, the greater the impact — positive or negative — neighbors can have on your program.

In general, the larger the "protected zone," the greater control you have over the herd.

If they share your philosophy of managing for a healthy herd, you'll all have better hunting collectively than any of you could have individually. If, on the other hand, they *don't* share your views on management, your program is unlikely to yield as great a return. This makes fostering a spirit of cooperation a priority for most private-land managers, especially those with limited acreage.

In general, the larger the "protected zone," the greater control you have over the herd. And remember, we're talking about the managed area, not just how much land *you* actually have under direct control. With good neighbors, your program can be highly successful even if you control only part of the managed area.

For example, my 80-acre "ranch" in Montana sits in the middle of a lightly hunted national forest, and my two 15-acre clover meadows are the hub of local deer activity. And I know of a case in which a 10-acre tract lies next to a large unhunted utility holding. You should see the huge bucks that have been shot on that tiny tract over the years!

When you have the best (or only) food sources around, deer are going to be easier to hold tightly on your land. Conversely, when neighboring lands also offer well-set tables, deer will be "all over the map."

Some might take exception to the idea of using food sources to extend a management program onto neighboring lands. Well, you and your neighbors share deer anyway, like it or not. In the case of good neighbors, this works to your advantage — in the case of bad, to your



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detriment. Either way, if you improve the nutrition on your property, the deer you share are going to be healthier.

Of course, one of the beauties of food-source management is that you get to decide on the placement of food sources, thus exercising some control over the managed area (and the deer) and the extent to which you influence neighboring properties. (Dr. Kroll will discuss this concept in great detail in future issues.)

Interestingly, heavy hunting pressure on neighboring lands actually can work to your advantage, in an odd sort of way. When high pressure is exerted next to a place with much lower pressure, the pressure actually can become a barrier to deer traffic, almost as real and effective as a physical barrier.

Nearly all of us have seen this happen around the edges of state parks or other unhunted refuges. You sometimes can watch deer do their thing in perfect contentment just across the line. They know where the boundaries are, and they even seem to know when hunting season opens! The same principle holds true on well-managed private lands next door to heavily hunted properties, though the effect usually isn't quite as pronounced.

The nature of the habitat also determines a tract's potential to produce deer. Certainly, the types and amount of cover, the availability of water, and the quality and amount of forage are all considerations. And because agriculture is a plus for a management program, whether or not the land is conducive to efficient farming is a concern. This is largely a function of soil types and climate.

The Existing Herd

While you're still in the strategy-forming stage, it's a bit early to expect to know the precise condition of your deer herd. We'll start getting into that next month. In the beginning, a preliminary assessment will give you a fair idea about the general nature of the herd you're starting with.

One of the first things you need to know is information about the land's recent deer-harvest history — that is, how much pressure has been exerted on the herd. On limited acreage, you also need to assess your neighbors' hunting pressure to get the complete picture; after all, they're to some degree "fishing out of the same pond" you are. This is just one more benefit of getting to know your neighbors and working with them.

This recent harvest history will tell you much about the number and age of bucks likely to be around. The higher the pressure, of course, the poorer the buck age structure, the less-balanced the buck:doe ratio and the lower the expected size of bucks.

While recent harvest history will speak to the size of bucks now present, it might not say much about size *potential*, if overcrowding or overharvest of bucks has been a chronic problem. If that's the case, look beyond your borders to see what better-managed places in the area are producing, or look back in time to the "good old days" to find out what size bucks you might be able to grow.

In your preliminary assessment of the herd, you need to get a handle on roughly how many deer the tract is now supporting and what the habitat's productive capacity is. Coming up with a firm deer count obviously will be difficult, if not impossible, but a few drive-throughs and a little legwork should give you



an idea as to whether or not the property is overcrowded with deer. Also, there's now the option of censusing deer by using infrared-triggered cameras or counters, as Dr. Kroll discussed in the August, September and October '97 issues.

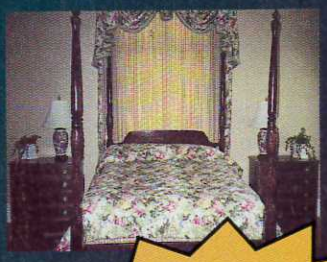
Check damage to primary browse species. (If you don't know what those are for your area, find out from whatever sources you have available to you, including agency biologists.) Severe damage to the choicest plants means there are too many deer for the available food supply. Also, if deer are highly visible at food sources for a good part of the day, you should suspect overcrowding.

Again, the tract's recent harvest history will help tell the story about herd density. Assuming you can at least approximate the age of bucks taken, their size will offer good clues as to where the herd stands relative to the habitat's productive capacity. A baseline population density for the general area often can be obtained from your wildlife agency, but accept it only as a relative number.

The goal here is to gain a general understanding of the beginning status of your herd. However, don't



Part of assessing your resources is determining how many deer you have on your property. If major damage is being done to prime forage plants, you might well be above the productive capacity of the habitat. Fortunately, in most cases, that capacity can be raised. Photo by Bill Lerner.



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let harvest history or the generally accepted limitations of your area necessarily set the upper limit on what you can do. An intensive food-source management program, in conjunction with sound herd management, can push the envelope to a whole new level!

Financial Resources

Even when land bases are comparable, not everyone has the same resources. A food-source program can be rather expensive, especially during startup. While direct feeding seldom takes as much front-end money as food plots, it's normally more expensive over the long haul.

Just gearing up for agriculture can tax the bank account. If fields don't already exist, they'll have to be carved out. If you don't already have farm equipment and can't pay a local farmer to do your agricultural work (the cheapest option), an equipment purchase might be in the offing, as might hiring someone to run the equipment.

Then there's the land preparation, seed planting, etc. Censusing, setting up stands, building roads, managing native habitat — it all can add up. Still, when you consider what you already have invested in the land, it would be a shame to try to save a dime and end up losing the whole enchilada.

Look for ways to minimize the need for money to carry out your program. Time, labor, equipment on hand and even knowledge are all important resources. Evaluate your situation with an eye toward being as efficient as possible and taking advantage of what's available.

Hunting Regulations

Your wildlife agency can play a big role in the success of your management program. For instance, low bag limits and short gun seasons make management tougher, especially when you're trying to harvest surplus does. You might have to bring in so many hunters and apply such intense pressure to control doe numbers that one of your main goals — to grow and harvest big bucks — is lost in the process.

Fortunately, the general public now is making more demands than ever on wildlife agencies to keep deer numbers in check. With recent increases in whitetail populations, many areas now have reached what's referred to as the "cultural carrying capacity." This is the upper limit of deer density that's acceptable to the general public, who are worried about deer-auto collisions and deer damage to crops, residential plantings and the overall habitat.

As a result of these concerns, in many places hunting regulations have begun to reflect the public's demands for a smaller deer herd, resulting in some loosening of harvest restrictions. This trend seems likely to continue, and it could help deer managers in many areas.

CONCLUSION

Once you have a grip on what you want to accomplish and know your land and resources are up to the job, it's time to head afield and start gathering herd data. These later will be used in putting together a population model and making final decisions about your harvest plan.

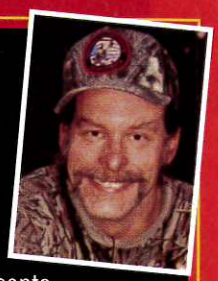
Of course, before you can do that, you must know just what data are needed. That will be the topic of discussion in our next feature in this series, in the August issue. Then, in September, we'll look at the best ways to acquire that information.

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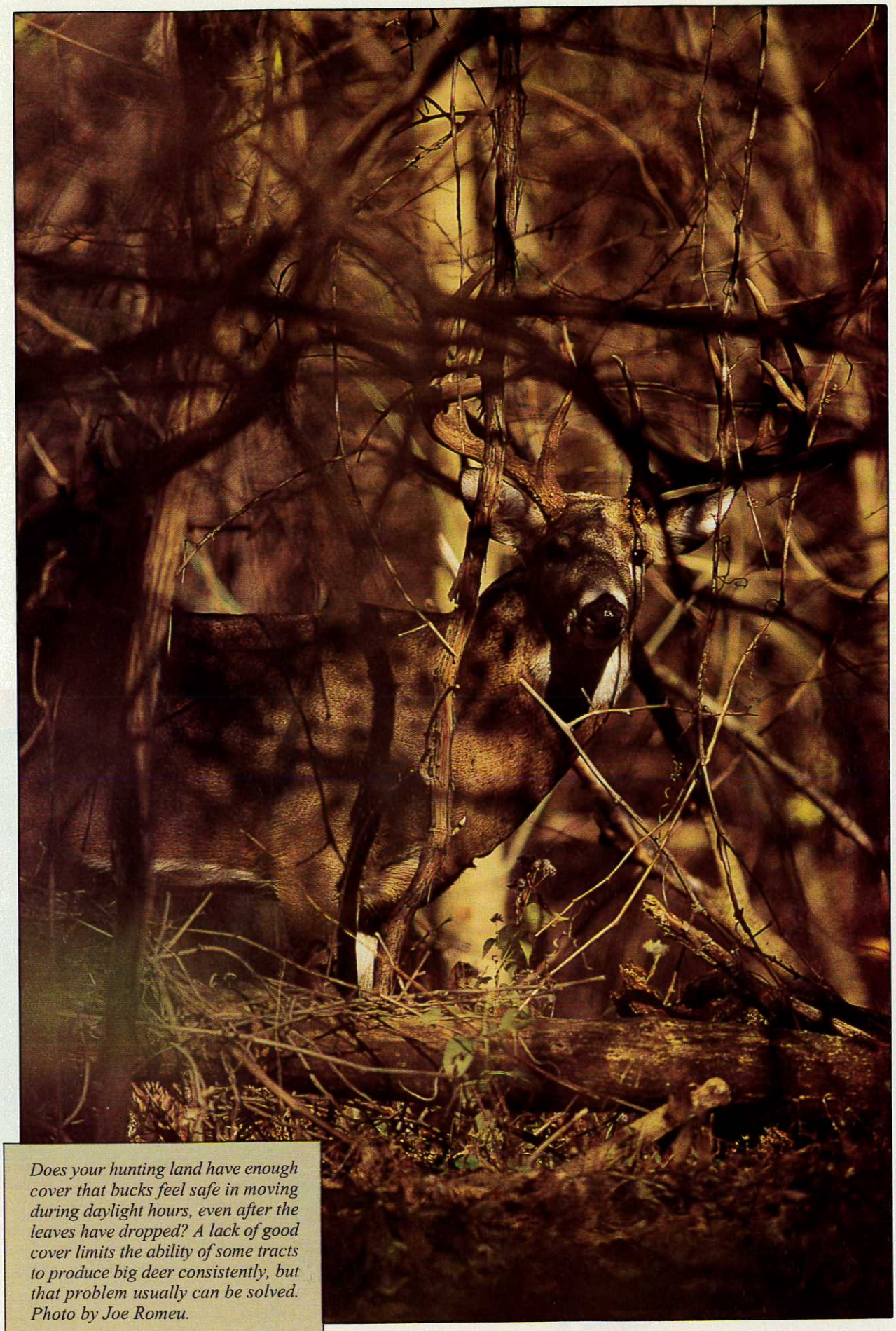
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Does your hunting land have enough cover that bucks feel safe in moving during daylight hours, even after the leaves have dropped? A lack of good cover limits the ability of some tracts to produce big deer consistently, but that problem usually can be solved. Photo by Joe Romeu.

BUILDING YOUR OWN
'DEER FACTORY'

Is Your Property Good Deer Habitat?

Turning your land into a real "deer factory" means providing the herd with the right blend of food, cover, water and space. Here's how to figure out if your habitat needs improving.

by Dr. James C. Kroll

Several years ago, I was honored to be included as a speaker on the National Rifle Association's Great American Hunters Tour, visiting 29 U.S. cities in a grueling 30 days. That month probably did as much as anything else in my career to impact my thinking on the future of deer hunting and management.

On the tour, I had a chance to speak every night with hunters from a wide variety of backgrounds. But as I listened to their experiences, I noticed a recurring theme: that these folks felt nothing could be done to improve the quality of hunting in their areas.

Among the most common laments was one expressed to me by a Vermont resident. "I'd like to let young bucks walk," he said, "but every time I do, some guy across the fence kills him five minutes later!"

Well, things aren't as hopeless as they might seem. No matter where you hunt or what amount of land you have, there's something you can do to grow more and bigger deer on your property and keep them there a good part of the time. In this and many more special ***WHITETAIL*** management features to come, we hope to convince you that you *can* take control of your deer-hunting destiny, and we'll show you exactly how to do it.

HOME RANGES

Unfortunately, many hunters think of deer as mystical creatures roaming randomly over the land. In truth, they don't do this any more than you do. Like people, they have basic needs and want to satisfy them in the safest, most efficient manner.

I've spent nearly 30 years studying how whitetails utilize land. Starting in the early 1970s, I used radio-telemetry (radio-collared deer) and, later, infrared cameras and counters to monitor movement. At around the same time, other deer biologists were doing much the same thing in other parts of North America.

The single most uniform finding of our studies was that *whitetails tend to have elliptical home ranges*. The average length of the ellipse varies from region to region but generally is about 1 mile for does and 3 miles for bucks. (There are many exceptions, but on average these figures are pretty accurate.)

Upon hearing this, it's easy to become discouraged — especially if you own and hunt an 80-acre parcel. If deer routinely travel a mile or more between parts of their home range, what's to keep that young buck you pass up from being tagged by a neighbor with lower standards than yours?

But before you get too depressed, let's look at how whitetails really utilize their home range. Habitat preferences and psychological needs regulate how they use the landscape. So, some areas within a deer's home range typically receive little use, because they don't supply any of the animal's needs and/or represent dangerous territory. Conversely, a deer's "core area," or "sanctuary," commonly includes the safest portion of its range that also supplies all of the animal's daily needs.

Your tract might not include such a place, thus seriously reducing your chances of either controlling deer movements or harvesting mature bucks regularly. But as we'll see, you can do something about that.

A DEER'S BASIC NEEDS

Over the years, I've helped private landowners produce at least 30 Boone and Crockett-class bucks, and these successes have come about because I've focused the bulk of my efforts on improving habitat quality.

Deer have four basic habitat needs: *cover*; *food;* *water*; and *space*. As a manager, you can directly influence the first three, in turn having a significant effect on where deer spend most of their time. This system of influencing the way deer utilize their space by arranging food, cover and water is one I call "landscaping" for whitetails.

Consider how you view *your* world. The workplace where you spend much of your time probably is arranged to support your daily routine. The house and yard you come home to probably are laid out to meet your basic needs as well. You leave the comfort of either setting only to satisfy a need not provided by these surroundings. Well, a whitetail is no different.

Let's look at the species' four basic needs in more detail:

Food

Deer need a diet that's heavy on protein in spring and summer, heavy on carbohydrates in fall and winter. Unfortunately, many habitats are

(Continued)

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lacking in the quality and/or quantity of available forage at some time during the year. Thus, a balanced year-round nutrition source is the heart of any management program.

Cover

The concept of "cover" must be clearly understood by anyone who manages land for deer. Exactly what *is* cover, and how do whitetails use it?

Cover is any physical feature of the habitat that provides deer with protection. This usually takes the form of vegetation, but topography — the "lay of the land" — also can play a role.



Screening cover can take many forms. It can range from thick evergreens to hardwood thickets to grass fields. Photo by Leonard Lee Rue, III.

There are two basic types of protection: (1) *screening* cover, which helps deer avoid detection by hunters or other predators; and (2) *thermal* cover, which shelters deer from adverse weather conditions.

There can be considerable overlap between the two categories, with some cover elements serving both purposes, but in many cases these needs must be addressed separately. Let's look at each more closely.

Screening cover is what you'd find in a "sanctuary," a pocket of cover where deer go to hide from danger. This could be a young pine forest in Mississippi, a cedar glade in Maine or a field of tall grass in Kansas — different components, but the same function.

Such cover is horizontally dense; in other words, you can't see very far through it from eye level. However, if you fly over an area of screening

cover, it often appears surprisingly open from the air.

Vegetation serving as thermal cover also can be horizontally dense, but not always. It depends on the weather conditions with which deer in a given area must cope.

For example, in areas with hotter climates, thermal cover generally consists of a dense canopy with an open understory. The function of this cover is to screen deer from the hot sun but still allow a cooling flow of air beneath the forest canopy.

In areas with colder climates, thermal cover might well have that same dense canopy, but with a horizontally dense understory as well. While wind can provide a welcome cooling effect in the summer, it also can rob a deer of much-needed body heat in the winter; thus, horizontally thick cover offers more protection.

Water

Water is more important to deer than most hunters think. A deer normally will drink about a half-gallon of it per day. (This is in addition to the water they ingest through their food.) Water aids in digestion and helps a deer maintain the proper body temperature, both of which are critical to good health.

Space

One of my discoveries about whitetail behavior involved the sheer amount of space a deer requires. I conducted a lengthy series of experiments, using radio-collars, to analyze the effects of habitat quality on deer movement. The results were quite interesting.

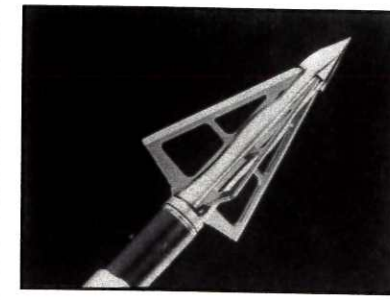
As I provided a deer's basic habitat requirements in a progressively smaller and smaller area, the average home-range size of the study animals decreased. Eventually, I got them to spend most of their time within an 80-acre area.

This led to my current belief that 80 acres is roughly the minimum area needed to meet a deer's needs. Note, however, that this is true only outside the rut. The home range of bucks — and, to some degree, does — increases during the rut. Bucks are genetically programmed to roam great distances in search of does, to avoid inbreeding, while does also will travel to find bucks if need be.

ANALYZING HABITAT

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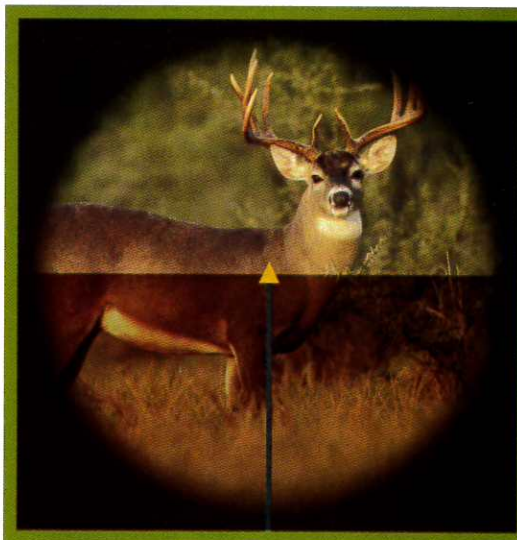


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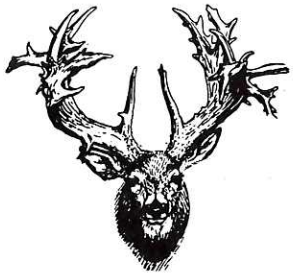


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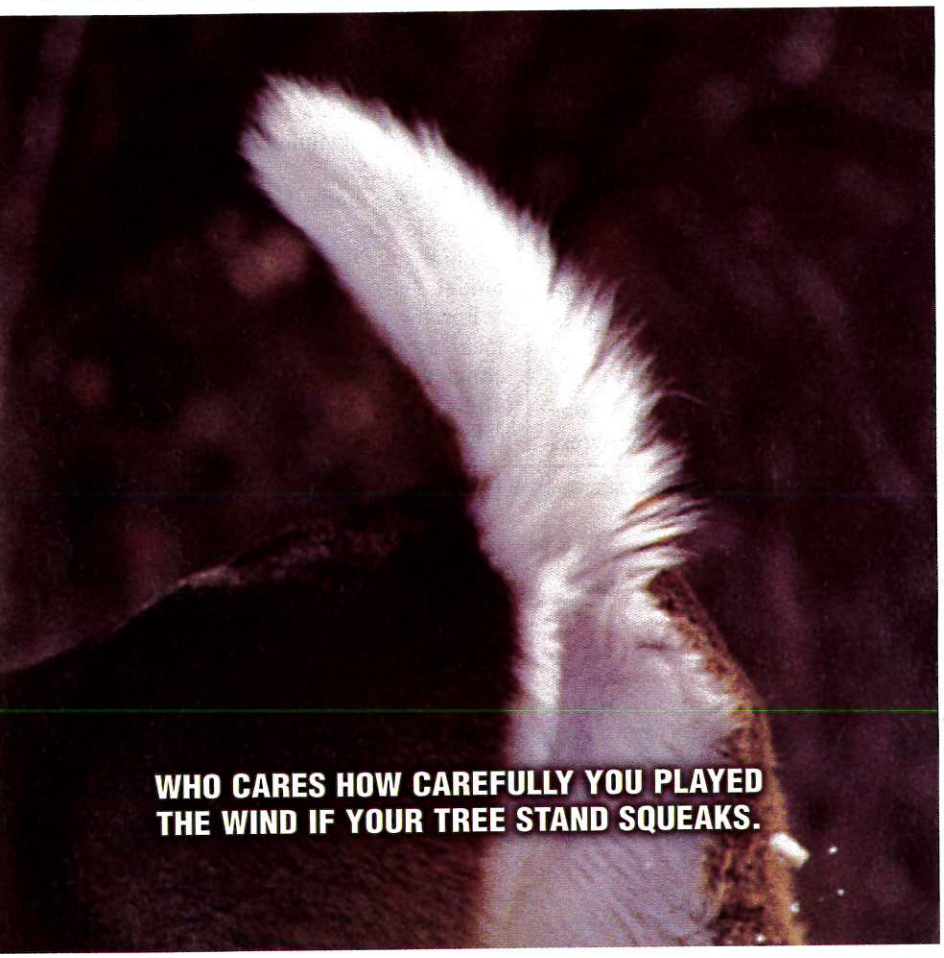
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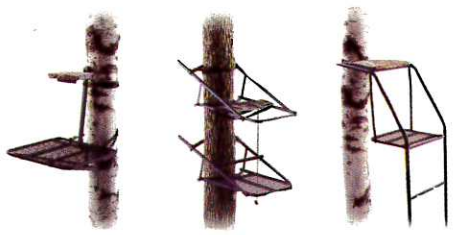
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a mindset that seems to hold back most hunters' and landowners' management efforts.

You might have been led to believe it takes huge amounts of land to manage deer. However, my research shows that those who control any amount of deer habitat can do *something* to help the herd. Fact is, even the guy with 10,000 acres has deer entering and leaving his land every day. Without building a high fence, you'll never be in total control of the population, so let's not worry about that. Instead, let's deal with what we *can* control: the quality of the habitat we're providing.

I suggest you think of your property as being made up of more or less square management units of 80 acres each. Of course, most tracts aren't square, so you might have to adjust these units a bit to fit your situation. If you control less than 80 acres, just think of your tract as a certain percentage of a basic 80-acre management unit.

Now, examine each of these units to see whether or not all of a deer's habitat needs are met within them. Then, look at how those features relate to each other. For instance, you might have both food and cover within an 80-acre block, but separated by a wide strip of coverless terrain. A buck doesn't like having to be exposed while traveling between a feeding area and bedding cover, so if you force him to do so, he probably will opt to make the trip under cover of darkness.

Food

It's no accident that we refer to your property as a "deer factory." Just as a factory's output is controlled by the raw materials supplied and the efficiency of the workers, the deer herd on your land is determined by the available resources.

The average deer woods will produce roughly 250 pounds of potential deer food per acre per year. If a deer eats 10 pounds of food per day, an acre of woods will support a single deer for no more than 25 days per year — and that's a best-case scenario. Thus, without some effort on your part, it will take 10 to 15 acres to support one deer for a full year in most areas. (That's even assuming acorns and fruits are going to help get the animal through the non-growing season.)

A well-planned 1-acre food plot, on the other hand, will produce as much as *5 tons* of forage per year! And that crop will be 80 to 90 percent digestible, whereas most native forages are only 30 to 60 percent digestible.

In other words, a single acre of *year-round* food plot can easily support at least two deer. (I currently manage some areas that support as many as *five* deer per planted acre, so figuring two deer per acre per year is actually a bit conservative. Nonetheless, it does allow for variations in forage production from year to year.)

So how much planted area should you have per 80-acre management unit? That depends entirely on how many deer you plan on supporting. Although deer probably will leave your property many times over the course of a year, the doe groups will be far more sedentary than the bucks. So the idea is to get the does to spend the vast majority of their time on your property. The more doe groups you have, the better your chances of keeping — as well as luring — bucks there during the rut.

The average woods will produce roughly 250 pounds of potential deer food per acre per year.

This makes it critical that you analyze how many forage-producing areas you have. As long as you don't reduce cover below the 30 percent level, I see no reason why the remaining 70 percent can't be in forage. Of course, this can get expensive, as on average, an acre of food plot costs about $100 per year to maintain.

(Next month, I'll begin a series on forage-management strategies you can use. In the meantime, just keep in mind that nutrition can be supplied by native plants or food plots, along with supplemental feeds in some situations.)

In analyzing each management unit for native forage, remember that a deer is only about 2 to 3 feet tall. This means almost all of its nutritional needs must be supplied within four or five feet of the ground. (In season, some fruits obviously fall from taller plants.)

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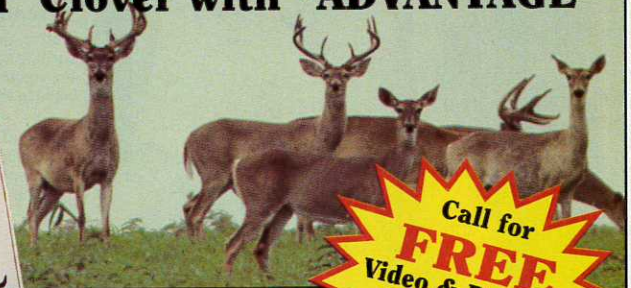
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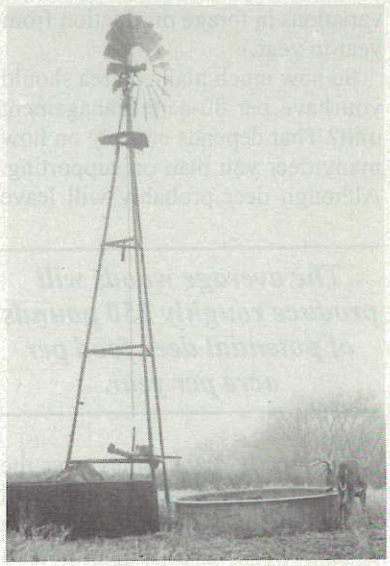
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Walk around your property and examine the relative abundance of deer foods. Good native forage range should be difficult to walk through. Depending, of course, on the region, such shrubs/vines as greenbrier, blackberry and honeysuckle should be abundant in the understory.

Cover

My many years of research have shown me that whitetails need for only about 30 percent of their home range to be in cover. But again, there are two functions of cover: to help



Water is important to deer, whether it comes from a natural source or an artificial one. Deer normally drink about a half-gallon per day. Photo by Judd Cooney.

deer hide from predators and to shield them from the elements. Sometimes both purposes can be served by a single type of cover, while in other cases, two will be required.

Just how big should these coverts be? Good question. Adequate deer cover can be provided by as little as a few square yards of the right habitat. However, in general it's better to have an acre or more of cover in a patch, because deer really don't like to be crowded into too small an area.

Once you've located potential deer cover, classify it as to its value. Will it supply screening cover, thermal cover or both? As noted, you want habitat elements to connect with each other in a meaningful way.

Apply a little common sense. Ask yourself, "If *I* were a deer on this land, how would I get from point A to point B without being seen?" This

is where my original concept of travel corridors fits in. A travel corridor most often occurs along a stream channel, but it also can include any area of dense vegetation connecting two habitat features.

Water

Is there a steady supply of surface water on your land? If so, how does it tie into the other habitat features of the property? And if not, where must deer go to get a drink — not just in wet times, but dry as well?

Putting It All Together

After you've assessed the types and quantity of deer food on your land and checked the water supply, apply logic to the situation. How do these features relate to your cover areas? Do good daytime travel corridors tie them all together?

As a manager, I find it helpful to divide deer properties into three classifications, based on acreage: 160 acres (a quarter-section) or less; between 160 and 640 acres (a square mile); and more than 640 acres. Each category brings unique challenges and opportunities.

The fewer acres there are in a tract, the more its deer herd is influenced by what happens on adjoining lands. So if you have limited acreage with which to work, you really should get to know your neighbors. Over coffee, you just might discover you share the same management interests and concerns!

A realization that deer move back and forth between tracts has resulted in what's known as "cooperative" management. I predict this trend will increase dramatically over the next few years — particularly among deer managers whose lands obviously share a common herd.

Of course, even if your tract is bigger than 160 acres, you still need to keep in mind what your neighbors are doing with their properties. But within your own borders, you also can start relating individual 80-acre management units to each other, to get a feel for how deer really are using your land.

* * *

In the August issue, I'll show you a simple way to devise a habitat-management plan for your property. It's a concept I refer to as "landscaping" for whitetails: manipulating the habitat features to make the place an even more productive "deer factory." See you next month!

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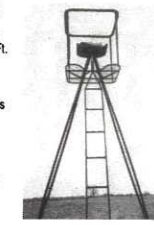
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EXPERT TRICKS FOR HARD-HUNTED BUCKS

How can one guy arrow a number of mature bucks in a state where heavy hunting pressure is the rule? Listen in as a Pennsylvania trophy master explains.

by Ron "Bushey" Boucher

In 1986, Ralph Stoltenberg Jr. of Butler, Pennsylvania, shot a huge deer that turned out to be the new state record for bow and arrow. The deer scored 174 2/8 typical, a score good enough to keep him No. 1 in the state's record book for a decade. But while many giant bucks are shot by "lucky" hunters, this one wasn't. When I visited with Ralph recently and saw how many other great Pennsylvania bucks he's shot, I quickly came to the conclusion that he is probably one of the best bowhunters in Pennsylvania — or anywhere else, for that matter.

For many years, I have been reading stories about great hunters from all over the country. Most of these hunters are quiet, honest and hard-working. They don't seek a lot of recognition; they just have a surpassing love of hunting. While there are millions of people who love to hunt, the passion in some is simply greater than can be explained. I am convinced that there is a gene in these people that science has yet to identify. Ralph is one of these people who have it.

In 1957, when Ralph was 12 years old, his dad took him deer hunting in Elk County on the first day of the season. He shot his first deer that afternoon. What a great way to start a hunting career that later led to all types of game with bow and gun, including bears, turkeys, elk, moose, deer and more. One of the things that impressed me when I visited Ralph at his home in Butler was his unpretentious manner. What he has accomplished is nothing short of incredible, yet he spoke about his hunting accomplishments as if they were no big deal. But they are. His specialty is bowhunting trophy bucks in a state where heavy hunting pressure keeps all but a few bucks from reaching their genetic potential. But don't tell that to Ralph. He has a knack for scouting, finding and taking Pope and Young-class animals year after year. From looking at the deer he has taken, you would think he had lived all his life in Illinois or Iowa.

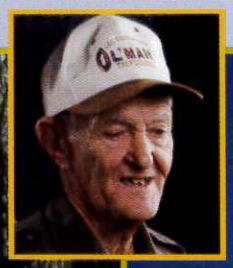
When I asked Ralph how he took all of these huge bucks, he gave me a look that simply said: by a lot of hard work! You can tell he loves to be in the woods. Every year, this self-employed homebuilder does not work for four solid months; during that time, he is either scouting, hiking or hunting. Years ago, he used to work for other builders, but it just got to be too impossible a situation for him and his bosses when hunting season came around. He decided he would go into business for himself and make his own hours! Ralph is always looking for new areas as deep in the woods as he can get. He is constantly coming up with different places to hunt, because he has to. "Just when I find some good areas, people find where I'm hunting and they move in," he told me. He said he gave up tree stands long ago, and now he hunts off tree limbs. He does that so it is harder for other hunters to find where he hunts, and it allows him to be more mobile.

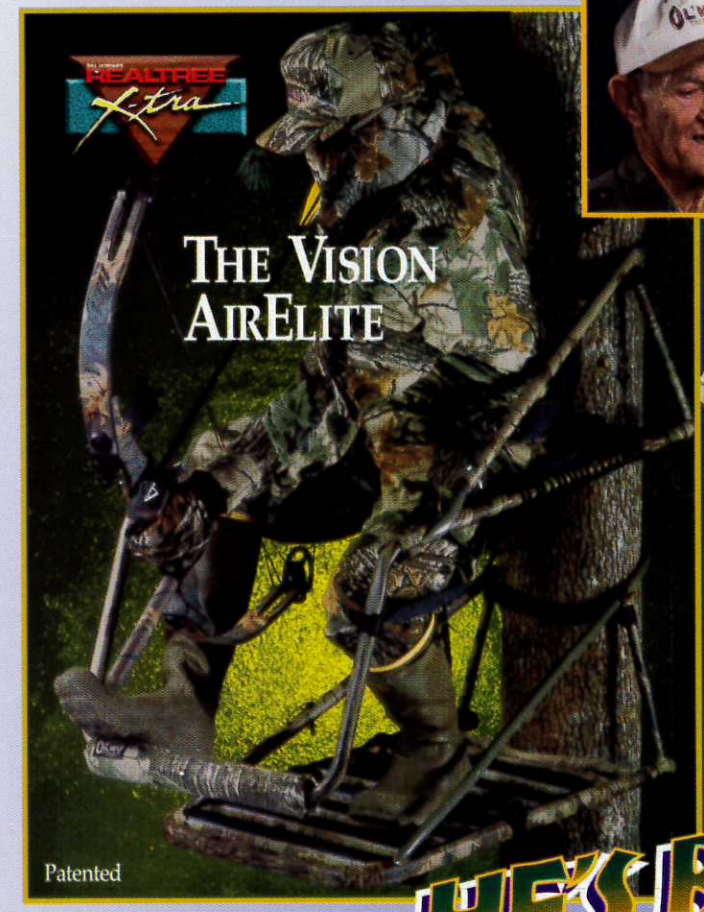
When I was trying to pick a spot in Ralph's yard to take photos of his deer, I had a hard time, because he had so many cars and trucks scattered all over. There were about a dozen or so. I asked him, "What gives with all the wrecks?" He said they were needed because he had to keep switching vehicles, so other hunters wouldn't be able to follow him or find out which areas he was hunting in. Ralph will even have his wife follow him around, stop and drop off one vehicle, then take off in the other to hunt another area. I guess you could call it some form of "dummy-car decoying." At first I thought he was joking around with me, but he was dead serious.

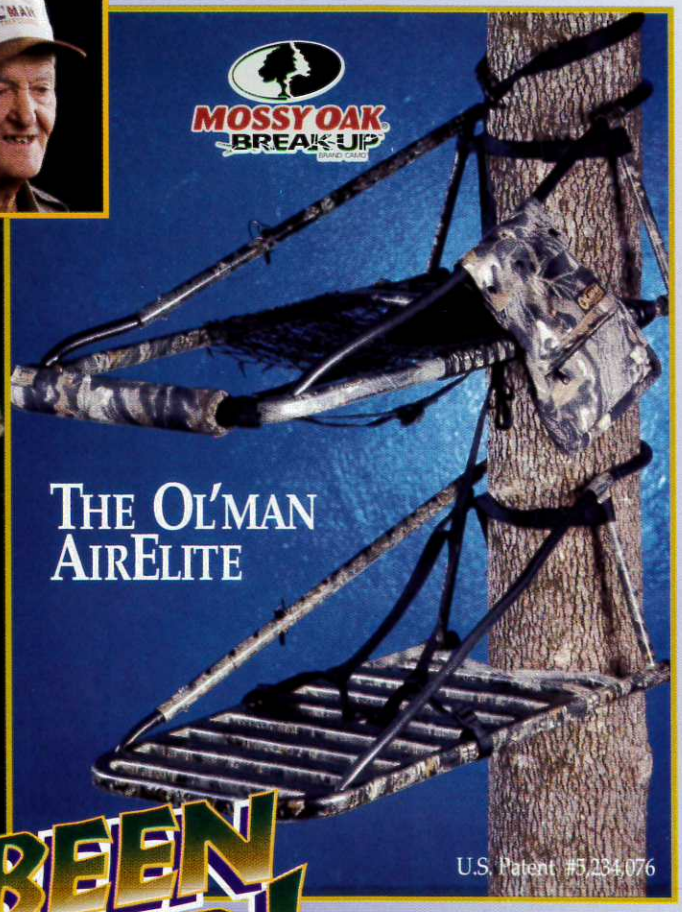
As you might expect, Ralph is in the woods as much as possible 12 months of the year. So, I asked him to tell me about his scouting secrets. "My best month for scouting is July," he said. "The racks are pretty well developed by then, and I find the deer are less alert in the summertime. Hardly anyone is in the woods then, and the deer are calmer and more relaxed, part of nature's way. By the first of August, scouting is somewhat over with. It's harder to find them at the end of the growing

Ralph Stoltenberg Jr. has downed many fine whitetails over the years, though few have been entered into the record books. The huge 5x5 he's holding is the former Pennsylvania bow record in the typical category, at 174 2/8 Pope and Young points. Photo by Ron "Bushey" Boucher.

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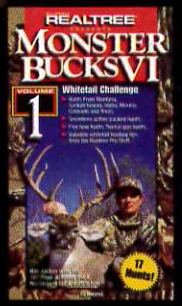
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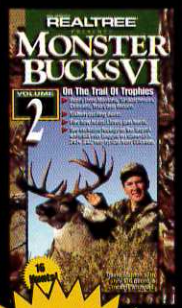
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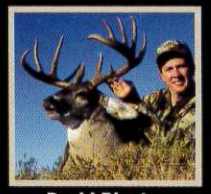
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