BUILDING YOUR OWN
'DEER FACTORY'

Reap The Rewards Of A Managed Herd

It makes no sense to grow big bucks on your hunting land, only to turn around and hunt in a way that drives them nocturnal or spooks them off your property. Here's a strategy that will keep you in deer all season!

by David Morris

As we stood glassing alfalfa fields from a hill on Montana's Milk River, one of our party of five pointed to a distant pod of bucks. His voice cracked with excitement as he said, "I want to be sitting on that field at daybreak tomorrow when the season opens."

Among nods of agreement, I knew that what I was about to say would stir some dissention. "Let's lay off the fields until the afternoon," I suggested. "If we try to hunt them in the morning, we'll have to run the deer off to get to the stands. If we wait until midday, the deer will have left the fields, and we can sneak in to the stands without them being aware we're there. The slightest disruption could put the big bucks down. We've got to do this right."

Before the protests could begin, I blurted out an alternate plan. "Let's set up near the river, along the ranch's east and west boundaries, in the morning. That way, we can take advantage of any outside pressure that might push deer onto the ranch. Plus, we'll be able to head off any interlopers who might have seen those bucks."

Looking longingly at the distant deer-dotted fields, all agreed to wait until the next afternoon to get at one of the largest concentrations of deer any of us had ever seen.

The plan worked like a charm. Carefully, methodically, we sneaked into the vacated fields at midday and began our vigil unnoticed. When the shadows began to fall across the fields, deer poured in. After four days, all five hunters had shot (but not necessarily recovered — that's another story) bucks that would have scored over 150 Boone and Crockett points! Low-impact hunting made this incredible opportunity possible.

For most of us, the days of roaming vast, unhunted countryside in search of big bucks are over. To find the solitude we value, we've had to turn to limited acreages of private land that can be protected and managed. On many such tracts, wise management can restore the herd to its natural well-balanced state, in which the animals are free to do what they do naturally.

As we've noted throughout this series, an essential part of a successful management program is a balanced, aggressive deer harvest. The more intensive the program, the greater the harvest demands. But as we know, killing numbers of deer takes hunting pressure, which rapidly erodes natural deer behavior and movement. And the most desirable segment of the herd — mature bucks — are the first to react adversely to this pressure. They simply disappear, becoming all but nocturnal. So the real challenge on tracts of limited acreage is to minimize the adverse effects of pressure.

Keeping deer from knowing they're being hunted dictates a low-pressure hunting strategy. But how do we go about minimizing the negative effects of pressure? The ways are many and varied, depending on the tract and the circumstances. An entire article could be devoted to any number of the topics we'll touch on here, but for now let's thumbnail some of the more important concepts. I trust that you can apply them to the managed land you hunt.

PLAN OUT A STRATEGY

Low-impact hunting requires that you think ahead. You only get one shot at doing it right. Once you've messed up a place, which can happen in a matter of days, only time will reverse the damage, and the time needed for the cure could outlast the season. The point is, always make a plan before charging in and possibly driving deer underground. Be methodical, cautious and creative in your approach.

Remember that pressure on adjacent lands can greatly affect your hunting strategy. On Georgia's Burnt Pine Plantation, where I ran commercial deer hunts for 20 years, we always faced an onslaught of early-season pressure on our boundaries by neighbors who apparently subscribed to the "grass is greener on the other side of the fence" theory.

In an effort to turn the pressure to our advantage, to be sure we got our share of the bucks that otherwise were likely to be shot by neighbors and to defer pressure from our interior, we



To minimize losses of deer to your neighbors, hunt closer to the perimeter of your land in early season, then ease toward the core as the effects of prolonged hunting pressure take a toll on daytime deer movement. Photo by Donald M. Jones.

concentrated our first week or two of hunting each gun season near the perimeters. Our aim was to be much less intrusive than our neighbors, thereby making our property more attractive to pressured deer. (As water flows to the lowest spot, so deer flow to the lowest pressure.) The strategy worked grandly, leaving us with an undisturbed interior to move into later.

Another good overall strategy is one I call "concentric pressure." It involves hunting the nearest and/or most-likely-to-be-disturbed areas first, leaving more distant/remote places for later.

If close-in or thoroughfare areas are going to be disturbed by increased hunting-associated traffic and activity as you and your party spread out to hunt the far corners of the tract, doesn't it make sense to hunt the nearby places first, while they're undisturbed? Then, as pressure and traffic take their toll in those areas, gradually move into virgin territory. Let effective hunting effort pressure an area, not just traffic and ineffective activity.

A similar big-picture strategy I use is what I call "progressively aggressive hunting." In a nutshell, whether you're hunting a particular deer or simply a place, it means hunting in the least obstructive possible manner to start with and gradually getting more aggressive as the need dictates.

Let's say you've patterned a big buck. You know where he's likely bedding and feeding, and you know which travel lanes he's using. Under the progressively aggressive strategy, I'll start out hunting this buck on the "outside edge" of his pattern: that is, his food source. If that doesn't work, I'll move to a trail near the food source. That failing, I'll move to an ambush point even nearer the bedding area. You get the picture.

One of the compromises that pain me with low-impact hunting is that still-hunting must give way to stand-hunting . . . unless there's plenty of land and only a few hunters to cover it. A human sneaking around on foot virtually shouts "I'm up to no good" to deer. Plus, there's the huge added liability of laying down human scent throughout the woods. Deer react swiftly to this program, and not in a

positive way. In just a short time, a few people on foot can completely disrupt normal deer activity. Thus, stand-hunting is the method of choice for low-impact hunting.

BE CAUTIOUS ON FIELDS

Few hunters appreciate just how little disruption it takes to make older bucks stop using open food sources in daylight. Does, fawns and young bucks might hang around after a couple of rounds of aggravation, but not wise old trophies. They view even one overt intrusion with great suspicion. If it's not repeated, they might let it pass as "one of those things," but let it happen again within a short time, and they're history. Mature bucks are astute at identifying patterns, and if they find a pattern threatening, they quickly stop doing whatever it was that exposed them to the potential danger.

The bottom line is that if you want to kill trophy bucks in open feeding areas, you can't give them any reason to suspect you're lying in wait for them. After all, they're already paranoid about being in the open during the day.

AVOID BEDDING AREAS

A big buck's bedding area is his sanctuary. If he's bumped from his private quarters more than once in short order, he shifts to "red alert" status and adopts a defensive posture, making him very hard to see or kill.

Prior to or during open season, don't walk or drive through known bedding areas unnecessarily, especially if doing so represents a break in the normal routine. Many people "scout" their way right out of trophy success by alerting area deer that something is amiss.

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TIME YOUR ACTIVITY TO LOW-MOVEMENT HOURS

If you're going to move around in your hunting area, either on foot or by vehicle, do so during midday, when deer are more likely to be bedded. This especially applies to getting into and leaving stands during the day. Your odds of encountering deer and blowing your cover are far greater when deer are on the move and alert. Plus, making your move during midday allows more time for your scent to dissipate before deer show up in late afternoon.

When approaching (and to a lesser degree, leaving) a destination point for deer (e.g., scrapes or food sources), do all you can to avoid running them off the place of attraction. This is most critical in open feeding areas.

Such intrusion not only has the direct effect of causing deer to associate the spot with danger, but it also tips them off to your stand location far more than you might realize. Often, a spooked deer will run only a short distance and then turn its sensory array back on the source of danger. It's easy enough for a deer to use its eyes and ears to determine where an intruder has halted progress; then the animal can bring its nose to bear by circling downwind at a discreet distance to precisely pinpoint the danger.

To a deer, a stealthy hidden human spells "predator" and is to be avoided, both now and tomorrow. For this reason, I seldom hunt open feeding areas in the morning. If time allows, I prefer instead to sneak quietly into the stand during early afternoon and take my chances at day's end. When shooting time is up, I usually can sneak out in the darkness, having already prepared a suitable exit route, without overly spooking nearby deer. Of course, this demands using wind and cover to the best advantage . . . *always*.

DON'T BREAK THE ROUTINE

Deer are accustomed to the normal routine of a tract. If it's a working farm or ranch, truck and equipment traffic is part of that everyday scene and causes deer little concern. Yet deer are quick to notice and respond to any sudden increase in vehicle traffic and, to an even greater extent, foot traffic. So when the season opens, don't suddenly start driving new parts of the place or seldom-used roads. Try to incorporate hunting access and activity into what deer would take for routine traffic.

For instance, on ***WHITETAIL***'s Fort Perry Plantation in Georgia, trucks and tractors are always on the move. For that reason, we drive a hunter directly to his blinds and ask him to stay there — even if he shoots a deer — until a vehicle returns to pick him up. If deer are bumped from the field or stand area, we want it to be done by "routine" vehicle traffic, not the sudden appearance of people on foot, no matter how stealthy they might be.

Nor do we loiter around a blind any longer than necessary when coming or going. If possible, we even drive to the downed deer, usually at midday or after dark, to minimize foot traffic . . . and human scent.

KEEP STANDS A SECRET . . . FROM DEER

If you want to kill big bucks from stands, particularly permanent stands, you can't give *any* local deer reason to associate the ambush site with danger. In short, you can't let them know you're even in the area. This takes some doing, because deer are well endowed in the sorting-out department. The idea is to get into the stand, sit out your vigil and then leave with minimal disturbance or sign of your presence.

Enclosed blinds conceal movement, eliminate the human form, mask noise and, best of all, retard scent dispersion.

Concern must be given to all three of the deer's major detection senses: sight, hearing and, above all, smell. And scent is not only an immediate and constant problem for stand-sitters, but its lingering presence on the trail also threatens to alert neighborhood deer to a would-be ambush. If deer repeatedly know you're in a stand, or even in an area, you'll kill off the place as a likely memory maker.

Some stand sites can be hunted only a day or two before prying eyes, ears and noses have plucked you from the woodwork, followed soon thereafter by all manner of snorting and stomping. In such cases, the only alternative is to let the stand rest a while before trying your hand there again. From years of experience, I've settled on three days as the minimum time needed for natural deer movement to recover after being picked off by the locals. But I've seen it take a week or more, especially after second and third offenses.

In stand-hunting, as in health, prevention is better than cure. To that end, try to be invisible. Stand selection is the key. The approach must afford an unseen, silent entry that doesn't pass upwind of bedding areas or cross key

trails leading to the hunted site. I place great emphasis on the importance of getting into and out of a stand without detection, especially around open food sources. The stand should provide screening cover for the hunter and *must* be downwind of where deer are coming from and expected to end up.

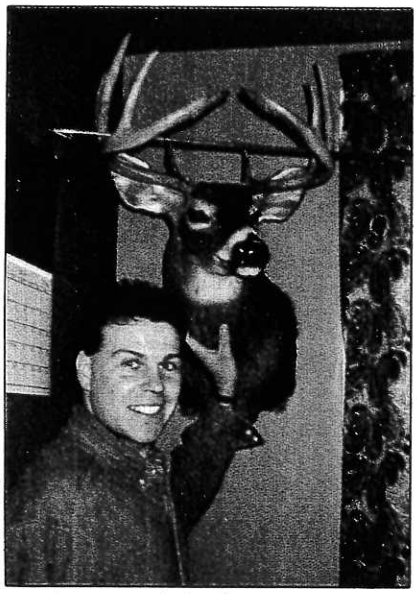
Lucky is the hunter who can find such a stand close to a prime place. Most often, I've found that to meet all of my security requirements I need to put some distance between myself and where the action is.

Sheer distance waters down a deer's formidable sensory arsenal. It gives you much more latitude in your comings and goings and in movement and noise while on stand. Although the scent concern never goes away totally, increased space really helps, especially in allowing for more unscented room downwind of the hunted area and reducing the likelihood of stinking up hot trails near the action.

More than any other single factor, I rely on distance to extend the life of stands, especially ones where deer tend to gather in numbers. The more eyes, ears and noses you must contend with, the greater the likelihood of detection. This need for distance between hunter and hunted has led to my ever-increasing dependence on long-range rifles. My friend Gary Schwarz, owner of El Tecomate Ranch in Texas, centers his low-impact strategy around distance and ultra-long-range rifles, and it has worked well for him.

Gary implements this strategy by setting up tripod stands at the intersection of three or four *senderos* (straight cutlines through the brush). His stands are fully surrounded by brush; the *senderos* don't even start for more than 100 yards from the stands. Then the 30-foot-wide open strips extend through the dense brush for at least 500 yards. Because of the height of the brush, working shot distance starts at about 150 yards. As you might guess, seldom do hunters come back from these stands with tales of being picked off by deer. In fact, often other whitetails on the *senderos* don't even run as one of their *compadres* hits the ground.

Another way to reduce detection is by hunting from enclosed blinds. I know some say you can't kill big bucks



Pressure can help you. Archer Craig Burkley learned that in 1993, when he mapped out other hunters' stands in his area and then set up elsewhere to nail this 146-point Pennsylvania brute.

from permanent stands, but it ain't necessarily so . . . if the deer don't associate them with danger. Distance, infrequency of use and/or a concealed entry and exit all can reduce the deer's suspicion of a box in their domain.

Enclosed blinds conceal movement, eliminate the human form, mask noise and, best of all, retard scent dispersion. The extent to which human scent is trapped depends on how thoroughly enclosed the stand is, but even with one or even two sides open, much of a hunter's scent can still be held inside under favorable winds. Often, while in an enclosed blind I've seen deer catch a whiff of me, only to have them wag it off after a moment and continue on their way. It's as if the scent has "cooled" and no longer spells a serious threat. Of course, I've seen a few others turn inside out trying to get away, but overall, enclosed stands are wonderful tools in the concealment game.

When a shot rings out, every deer in the country pegs your location, right? Not necessarily. Deer unconditioned by constant pressure like a backup confirmation of danger. Often, they'll jump and run a short distance upon hearing a nearby shot, only to then stand and await verification of a threat. When you waltz onto the scene right after the booming "thunder," deer associate the noise and place with people and danger. They might even see you exit the stand.

If low-impact hunting is the goal, it's better to stay put after the shot and, if possible, await the arrival of a vehicle to spook off any nearby deer . . . and to retrieve the downed animal. The later arrival of a vehicle probably won't have nearly the negative impact that a person on foot would have soon after the shot. I know this isn't always feasible, but when it is, it really helps stretch out a stand's life expectancy.

As for the shot, make every effort to have a single pull of the trigger result in a clean kill. Multiple shots and/or tromping around the area in search of missed/wounded game have a negative effect on the happiness of local deer. And choose your targets wisely. During gun season in particular, if you really want to take a stand out of trophy production in a hurry, just shoot does from it.

CHOOSE YOUR TIMES WELL

Again, whenever you enter a deer's domain you're likely to be detected, causing the animal to become more difficult to catch up with next time. But some stands are far more vulnerable to discovery than others.

When I have a prime place in which to intercept a big buck, but that spot is vulnerable to deer scrutiny, I try to pick my time to hunt it to coincide with the best possible deer movement and/or ideal weather conditions for the stand. Knowing that each unsuccessful day I spend on the stand might well drive my quarry farther from my grasp, I don't want to chance burning out the spot on inherently poor-odds days.

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When hunting mature bucks on managed lands — particularly tracts of limited size — you must calculate each move, pick your battleground wisely, keep the advantage of surprise as long as possible and make your first shot count, both literally and figuratively. You won't get many second chances.

(**Editor's Note:** Next month, Dr. James C. Kroll will show how to age the deer harvested off your hunting land. This will give you a better feel for the health of your herd and will help you see how much progress you're making with your management program.)