



*The lower photo was taken from the author's tripod stand on an Alberta cutline just after he shot his buck (right) in November 1995 and shows the vast area of cover from which the deer came. Backtracking by the author and outfitter Dave Bzawy (top) revealed a major trail and deer hair on a nearby fence, where the buck apparently had often crossed. This confirmed that the stand had been put in the best available location. It's easy to see how such examinations of the "scene of the crime" can pay huge dividends on future hunts. Photos by Dr. James C. Kroll.*



PART 1

# How To Become A Deer Detective

*Before you load up your next buck and head for camp, take a few minutes to figure out why you scored. You just might learn something that will help you next time out!*

*by Dr. James C. Kroll*

I peered into the back of the pickup at a stunning 10-pointer that would score in the 180s on the Boone and Crockett scale. The hunter who'd taken this giant was leaning against the truck, pride evident on his face.

"Great buck," I said. "Tell me how you shot him."

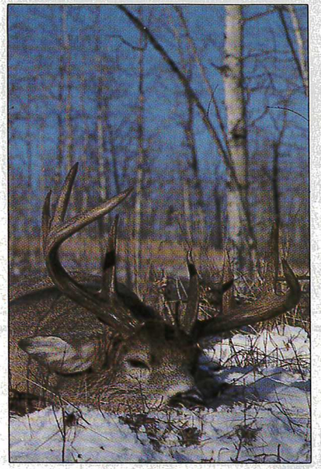
The guy responded that the deer simply had walked up to within 20 yards of his stand and had stopped broadside. "My broadhead caught him right behind the shoulder, and he ran about 60 yards before piling up," he offered. And that was that!

As a deer biologist, I figured there had to be more to it, so I kept probing for details. I soon realized the hunter had no idea why the buck had come along that day; as far as this guy was concerned, it was just an accidental affair.

One of my all-time favorite TV programs was *Quincy*. Each week, I marveled at Dr. Quincy's ability to analyze the facts and circumstances of a crime and then reach a valid conclusion as to what exactly had happened. In most cases, some seemingly insignificant fact usually was the key to solving the case. It's often much the same in deer hunting, for merely being observant can give us a lot of useful information.

**WHAT HAPPENED?**

After you've excitedly walked up to your dead buck and have admired him long enough for the initial wave of excitement to subside, always take a few moments to ponder the hunt. Hopefully, you arrived at that moment through some amount of planning and analysis that gave you a feel for what the local deer were doing. If so, you definitely have succeeded in your hunting effort. But the learning need not end there.



Try to remember exactly what happened. Pinpoint the moment at which you first saw the deer. Where was it, and what was it doing? Was it already alert to your presence, or was it focused on something else?

When hunting, carry a small spiral notebook for such purposes. As my colleague, Ben Koerth, likes to put it, "A short pencil is better than a long memory." Jot down the answers to as many questions as you can think of regarding the events that just transpired. Consider the kill site to be a *de facto* crime scene, in that the best information can be acquired while the evidence is "hot."

You might have to return to your stand to figure out exactly where the deer was when first seen. You might even find that something you noticed before the deer stepped out tipped you off to its approach. I like to construct a small, rough map of the area and mark the buck's travel path with arrows. Be sure to indicate the angle of the deer's body when it was first seen, as this can offer valuable clues to its approach route.

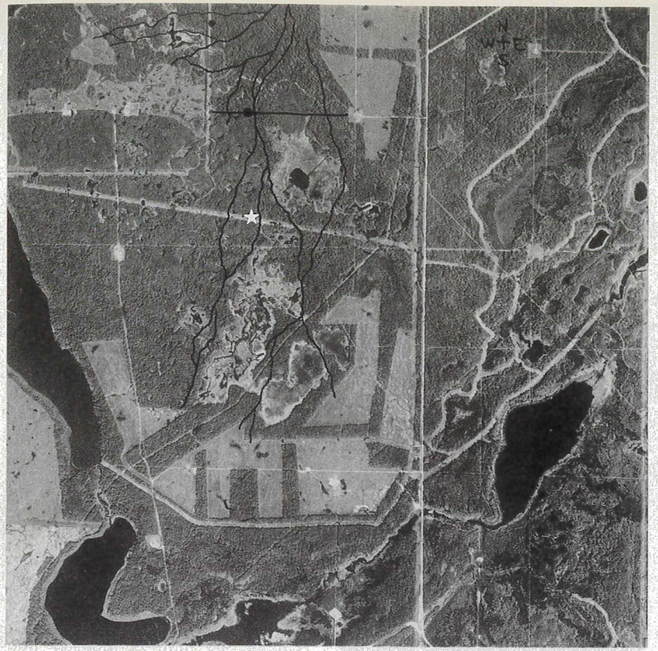
In most cases, a wounded buck will attempt to return in the direction from which he came. Try to remain calm enough to watch the buck run away until either he falls dead or you cannot see him. A monster non-typical I shot back in 1987 ran a long way after being hit in the chest with a 7mm Rem. Mag. bullet, and I found him with an antler lying against one of his own rubs. He'd fled along his approach trail.

Other pertinent questions include the following: Was the buck alone? If not, what other deer were present? How quickly was your deer moving? Did he act dominant? The answers to such questions allow you to get into the buck's mind, so to speak. They also allow you to record some valuable data on local deer patterns at that specific time.

For example, we can assume that a buck shot while bird-dogging a doe was in rut. Making many such observations over several years will allow you to get a better fix on the rut timing for your area. Also, a buck walking in a slow, swaggering gait similar to that of an old Hereford bull is dominant. If you later learn from your forensic examination of the buck that he was immature, it could be an indication that there are very few mature bucks in the herd. (We'll discuss this in detail next month.)

**WHAT WAS HE DOING?**

Once you've gleaned every shred of evidence you can from the actual kill scene, figure out what the buck was doing *before* he arrived. This is



*The location of the stand from which the author shot his 1995 Alberta buck (star) took full advantage of morning deer movement from the fields to the bedding area (south-to-north travel). Black lines indicate trails and show that this part of the cutline was a hotspot. Photo courtesy of Dr. James C. Kroll.*

one of my favorite hunting activities.

I've written many times about my adventures with hunting buddy Dave Bzawy of Alberta Wilderness Guide Service, who in my book is one of the top outfitters and deer hunters in the world. Among the traits that make him so successful is his intensely analytical mind. Once a deer's down, Dave and I immediately take to the woods to find out everything we can about his actions before the shot was fired.

In snow, the obvious first step is to *find the buck's tracks nearest the spot where he was shot.* In most cases, they'll be distinctive enough to follow among those of other deer. We note the width, length and shape of the hooves, as well as the gait. (Most bucks have a distinctive gait that's easy to recognize.)

Now start backtracking, recording every detail in your notebook for later analysis. There are many subtle clues to look for, but *rubs always are the most important diagnostic in backtracking a buck's activity.* Once I've tracked him back to where he first appeared, the next step is determining where he had come from and exactly what he was doing just before we "met."

Last November, I hunted a cutline Dave had scouted for recent buck activity. A frigid wind was howling, but it died just long enough for me to rattle in a mature buck. He emerged from the south edge of the cutline, then turned on a collision course with my stand.

After shooting the deer, I checked to see what he'd been doing out in such horrible weather. Finding where he'd emerged from the woods, I backtracked him for almost a mile. And boy, did I learn a lot!

The buck had been feeding in fields far to the south, perhaps all night long. From the depth of the trail, I decided this was his regular pattern, at least while using this part of his home range. Because there was only a single trail, with no splits or side trails, and only his tracks were present, it was obvious he was the sole user of this travel corridor.

As the buck approached to within a half-mile of the cutline, he was making the most of topography, walking on the side slopes of hills and seldom crossing deep ravines. At one point, he had skirted around a frozen beaver swamp, even though the ice certainly was thick enough to support him. (Deer don't do well on ice — in fact, I've seen them dislocate hips while trying to cross it — so this came as no surprise.)

At about 300 yards from the cutline, his trail made a significant turn to the east. Although filled with snow, it was obviously a frequent route. The buck had had no intention of crossing the cutline near my stand that day. If I hadn't rattled, I'd never have seen him; he simply would have paralleled the cutline and proceeded toward his destination, well out of my sight in the woods.

I soon found the spot where he'd obviously stopped to ponder his next move. It apparently was also where he'd been standing at the moment he'd heard my rattling. His tracks told me he'd stopped at a bend in the trail to listen, then walked in a circle as he "thought" the situation out. At one point, the tracks showed, he'd started my way, then reconsidered. What I did to help him make up his mind I'll never know, but it obviously worked, for he then turned straight away from his trail and started toward the cutline.

By the looks of the buck's gait, there was now a distinct change in his attitude. Whereas he appeared to have been walking slowly and with a swinging gait down the trail, his new tracks showed a much more rapid pace toward me.

Backtracking the buck showed us it would have been better to put the stand at the interface with the beaver swamp, which would have provided a natural funnel for movement. My rattling pulled the buck far enough off his normal route anyway, but I wasn't in the best spot.

Look at all we gained from this. Most other hunters would have just admired their buck, considered themselves lucky and then loaded up the deer and headed for camp. By reconstructing the hunt, Dave and I not only learned something we can use next time, but we also added a great deal to our memories of this hunt.

On my 1995 trip to Alberta, we hunted an area Dave has come to call "Kroll's Mountain." He'd found a perfect stand location (see aerial photo) high atop a hill overlooking — you guessed it — a beaver swamp. Dave knew the deer were moving south to a series of fields


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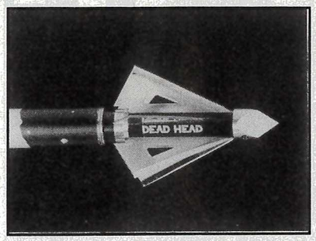
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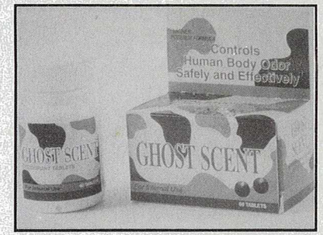

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and pastures to feed at night, then returning to their bedding areas early in the morning.

Just at first light, off in the distance I heard the loud *thwack* of a buck working his signpost. This is an auditory cue to other bucks that a dominant buck is present and is willing to take on all challengers. I decided this was the time to rattle, even though the light was still poor.

The buck responded — not by coming my way, but by again striking his rack against the tree. Once more I rattled, and again came a *thwack*. I figured my grunt call would convince him that another buck was tending a doe in the area, but that didn't work either. To make a long story short, it finally took an aggressive snort-wheeze call, made with my own mouth, to get the old buck to respond.

He suddenly appeared directly in front of me, which wasn't where I'd expected him to show up. Over the next several minutes, we stared at each other in a game of "chicken." There was no way to get the rifle up without being seen. Finally the buck bolted, snorting as he fled. In desperation, I grabbed my fawn bleat and blew it as hard as I could. He stopped at 200 yards to look back, and that was his last move.

When Dave arrived on the scene, we sat down and went over each event as it had happened. I learned from him that below my stand on the hill was a serious trail I couldn't see from that location. We walked down to where that trail crossed a barbed-wire cattle fence, and on the wires we found several tufts of deer hair. (See photo on page 28.) There were back hairs on the upper wire and belly hairs on the next one down, roughly three feet lower. Clearly, a big deer had been crawling through.

We concluded that the buck had come in from below, out of my sight, then crested the hill right in front of me. Backtracking showed he had stopped twice prior to that, each time apparently to consider his options. Rubs along the trail, some of them freshly worked, indicated he'd been taking out his aggression as he approached. The overnight snow around each rub was littered with bark and wood shavings.

Traveling farther, we found the very signpost on which he'd vented his anger at first light. There was an impressive pile of fresh shavings at its base, and this, plus the number of tracks, confirmed that he'd spent several minutes there. From this point, the buck had slowly made his way toward me by skirting the beaver swamp. We followed his trail for a great distance and found only tracks — no rubs or scrapes. Hence, we learned that the buck had been moving quickly away from the feeding area, not stopping to leave sign; however, as he'd approached the bedding area, he'd begun to make his presence known.

A more detailed analysis showed many trails coming together near my tripod location, as it was a place of social interaction for local deer. In other words, Dave had made a great decision in putting a stand there, as it truly was *the* spot for a setup.

Finally, let's look at a buck I shot on Oklahoma's Blue River during blackpowder season a couple of years ago. It was late October, and with bucks just beginning to scrape, rattling seemed a likely tactic.

I'd set up along a drainage in a hardwood bottom adjacent to some small fields. My vantage point was admittedly well out of blackpowder range of most of the area I could see, but it did give me good coverage of a narrow funnel in the woods. Having arrived late the previous day, and never having been on this property, I was relying largely on aerial photos supplied by the manager to give me some feel for where to start my hunt.

At about 9 a.m., I caught a glimpse of a buck moving parallel to the woods edge. From his deliberate manner, he obviously was heading for something familiar. Then, at about 600 yards, I could see he was working a scrape. It had been dry, and dust was flying in the air as he pawed the soil.

I rattled once, and the buck stopped immediately. Then, he turned in my direction and came walking down the woods edge with that peculiar sideways gait. On three occasions he stopped, either to make a scrape or work an existing one.

Circling to my left, the mature buck kept trying to get downwind of the "fight" he'd heard, but he must have miscalculated the source of the sound; when he again stopped to make a scrape, he was only 10 yards from me. The .50-caliber White rifle made short work of the situation.

It was another fine hunt and fond memory, but again, reconstructing the events made it even more interesting. You see, I found I really hadn't selected the "perfect" spot; in fact, I was a good 500 to 600 yards from where I should have been to maximize my chances that morning.

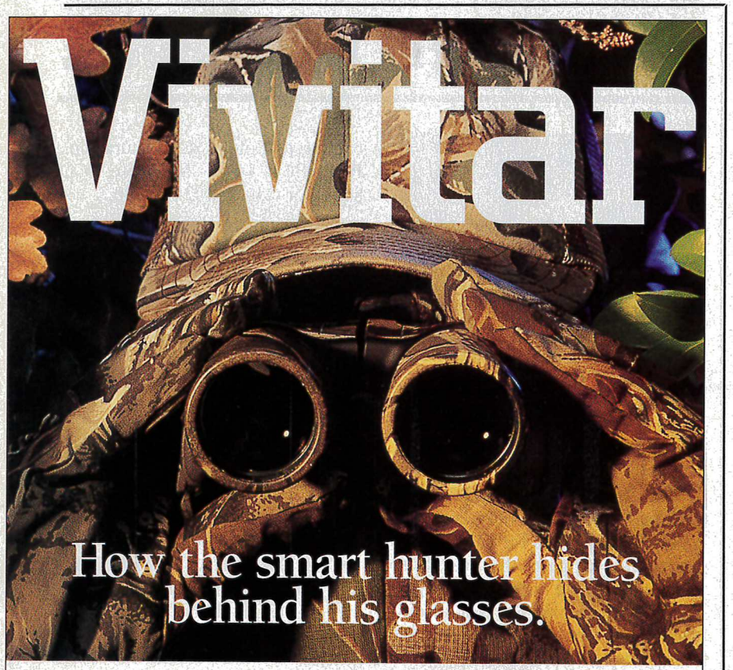
Walking to where I'd first seen the buck, I learned from tracks crossing the stream that he'd used this trail for most of the year. His front hooves were a perfect match for the many tracks there, telling me he'd regularly come down the opposite side of the stream, along a small field. There was a natural funnel here, with the woods necking down to only a few yards wide. (How had I missed such an obvious funnel on the aerial photo? Simple: The field had been enlarged after the photo was taken.)

***The buck you get this year will never run your woods again, but he can teach you a lot about what other deer might do in the future.***

Upon emerging from the stream, the buck had regularly stopped to work a scrape. Nearby rubs had been worked only on the side facing a nearby clover field, suggesting this was exclusively a morning trail; in addition, there were more scrapes in a small woods between there and the field. The buck obviously was on an early-morning feeding pattern, as is often the case during the pre-rut. Had I set up nearer that travel route, it would have been easy to take the buck. Luckily, rattling made up for my slight miscalculation.

The buck you get this season will never run your woods again, but he can tell you a lot about what other deer might do in the future. By reconstructing his actions prior to your final encounter with him, you can boost your knowledge and add a lot to your memories of the hunt.

What's more, a close examination of your deer once it's down also can teach you a great deal about not only that deer but the rest of the herd as well. Next month, we'll see what information a careful analysis of the deer's hooves, teeth, hocks, antlers and overall body condition can provide.


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