

## FROM AN OWL TO A CAT

I've always considered sitting in a treestand very similar to an owl on a perch watching for movement. In the same respect, I've also always considered a cat the epitome of a still-hunter/stalker. Let me be quite frank. I'm of the opinion when bowhunting for fully mature whitetails you are better off letting them come to you rather than vice versa. First, I want to clarify I am speaking of FULLY mature whitetails. There's a distinct difference between mature and fully mature. A buck might be considered mature at age 4.5, but in my opinion he's not fully mature until 5.5. Assuming he's born in the spring, a buck enters his first fall at approximately 6 months old. That means when he is 5.5 years old he will be going into his sixth autumn hunting season. Each year gives him accumulated knowledge/intelligence.

There's a huge difference both physically and mentally between a 4.5 year old and a 5.5 year old deer. I'm of the opinion a buck generally needs to be at least 5.5 years old to reach his first true trophy potential. As nice as he is at 4.5, if given one more year he'll almost always be bigger. I also believe each animal has a specific, unique personality and psychological makeup. I believe their individual intelligence is derived additionally from survival experiences gained each year as they get older and more mature. The more times they face adversity the smarter they become. It's nature's way. Only the strong (smart or lucky) will survive. It's survival of the fittest for perpetuity of the species. Each added year adds multiple conflicts in a world of survival. They must learn to adapt in order to live. Plain and simple, they learn to use their instincts. They learn to use other deer and their surroundings to their advantage. Their existence/lives depend on it.

On the other side of the equation, be it birds of prey, felines or canines, all predators must also adapt in the predator/prey "game" of survival. If they don't they too will die. It's serious business.

With us, as bowhunters, the outcome of a day in the timber might be momentous but it's not as significant in our survival. We have purposely accepted the close range limitations of our chosen weapons as a distinct disadvantage in our pursuit. It's a primal game that challenges us to the core. Not to get philosophical, It's been rightly stated we hunt in order to have hunted.

Similar to an old buck, age has made me slow down. In some ways it's depressing because my physical capabilities cannot keep up with my mental cravings. But on the other hand I feel like I'm hunting smarter than I did in my youth. And my track record, so to speak, on big, fully mature bucks in the last decade pretty much proves me right.

So, when it comes to success on really big, mature bucks I let them come to me at a well thought out, predetermined ambush site. I get a huge amount of satisfaction studying the terrain, putting together all the pieces for predictability and then taking or passing a trophy buck just like I knew the scenario would eventually play out.

One of the primary ingredients to success is hunting undisturbed deer. Undisturbed animals offer us some predictability in their normal movements. This, along with the increased “normal” activities of the rut will add up to our best chance for opportunity.

Some people think I have sole hunting rights on great private properties. I don't. Although I tend to concentrate my rut hunting efforts on farms with limited access, I don't have exclusivity on any one farm... none.

I'm also a big believer in not disturbing your best areas. Let me put it this way, if you have one specific farm that is excellent hunting and you hunt it all of October and all of November, you'll likely have DECENT hunting both in October and November. But, if you save that same great farm strictly for November, I guarantee you'll see at least TWICE as many good bucks come November (where'd I hear that before?) if you leave it alone in October. It's similar to having a sanctuary or no hunting area within your farm boundaries. It gives the resident deer a sense of security knowing they have a specific region that has absolutely no disturbances within. I think it's sometimes okay to occasionally hunt the fringes in October but one must be very, very careful when doing so. You need to consider if your human scent is drifting down into your sanctuary area you might as well be internal. The same thing is relevant if you are sitting the fringes and continually bust deer going in/out of your property to and from the neighbors. You're defeating the whole purpose of being covert. That's one of the main reasons I stress my brother to only change the chips on the trail cameras once every two weeks or so.

On the other side of the coin, it's necessary to let outsiders know your property is monitored externally and internally with motion activated field cameras. Additionally, the purposeful presence of a parked vehicle (while carefully hunting the fringes) will let the bad guys know your farm hasn't been abandoned.

Back in the '90s we used to hunt/guide on the Milk River of eastern Montana. The ranch controlled several miles of bottoms on both sides of the river. It had not been gun hunted what so ever since 1967 if I recall correctly. It was very interesting you could hunt adjoining properties which were gun hunted and easily see the difference in the demeanor of the resident deer. When deer were disturbed on the gun hunted adjoining farms they had obvious fear in their eyes. Likely because their buddy just got blasted by a magnum. Comparatively, when deer were disturbed in the bowhunting-only area fear was replaced with aggravation. They displayed a behavior like we were just annoying them and they needed to shift accordingly. We were more of a pain in the butt to them.

Since the Milk River divided the ranch longitudinally you could take a patch of timber that was historically better rut hunting in November and purposely disturb sections across, up river or down river making the prime piece even better during the rut. Deer would actually shift their daytime rut activities into less disturbed areas. It's all just common sense. Undisturbed trumps less disturbed.

In more recent years I've been using my October hunting to learn new turf and lessen the impact on my better areas, playing the odds so to speak. Beautiful Indian-summer type balmy weather and peak fall foliage colors come with generally subdued deer movement. Deer don't have to move much between bedding and feeding. They just arise from their beds, take a few steps and start eating. So a plan is put into place to take advantage of the situation.

Think about it. Everything pretty much goes against stand hunting options. The foliage is thick so you are unable to see longer ranges. This means when you do see something it's likely substantially closer. It also means they cannot see you as readily. You don't want to disturb your best areas. The deer aren't moving much anyway. Mast crop abundance and usage is at its peak. It all suggests one option. Use this "down time" to switch from being an owl to being a cat.

But be a smart cat. Don't just go for a walk in the woods. Use your head. This is a perfect time to check out some of your secondary areas, regions/farms that will not FOR NOW be detrimental when slightly disturbed. Your findings might turn up a honey hole you can capitalize on in the future. But most importantly we must hunt with a plan.

Just like any other situation there will be some days that are better than others. I prefer cloudy days. A good cloud cover will block the sunlight and lessen shadows. Deer use shadows and light intensities everyday in their movements in order to survive. We should too. If there are shadows or darker areas along your intended path we must learn to use them to our advantage.

My definition of still-hunting is more or less being a mobile stand. Adjust your pace so you are hardly moving at all. Read that sentence again. Over the years we have been taught when still-hunting to look for the horizontal line of a deer's back or belly, a shiny eyeball, a white throat patch or the "V" of the tail. That's all well and good but I'm here to tell you to look for MOVEMENT.

That's what they do. If I'm in a treestand and have a deer within sight I'll always try to watch it undisturbed. They will pick up any additional animals in the distance way before I will. Watch their body language. If they stare intently at something you better believe they saw some movement. It might have been a squirrel, a bird, coon or whatever but they are studying something and they likely first saw it because of movement. My point is it takes time for us to pick out a distant flick of an ear or flip of a tail. We must slow down in order to catch these things. One of the best tips I ever got regarding still hunting was to quietly and slowly walk into the area you intend to still-hunt. Then LIE DOWN on the ground and close your eyes for five minutes or whatever until you finally hear something fairly close to your position. Then open your eyes and roll to your feet to picture yourself as the prey. Imagine something is after you and you need to slowly... very slowly get out of the area without being detected. You are

doing this in order to get in the proper mind frame for still-hunting. Once at this point you then convert from hunted to hunter.

Slowing your pace will give you time to think and become one with nature. Did you ever notice deer tend to pick up on horizontal movements quicker than vertical movements? I'm told it has something to do with the internal anatomical structure of their eyes. But I'm also of the opinion most of their confrontations come at them horizontally. You can prove it to yourself next time a deer is looking at you questioning you as a threat. Often you can raise your weapon straight up vertically and get away with it. But if you try to swing that same weapon left to right, or right to left, horizontally you'll blow the scene.

I love to hunt in the rain. I'm not talking a downpour but a slow, quiet rain is fine. A mist is even better. The understory is wet. The ground leaves turn to soggy cornflakes. A heavy rain is miserable so most deer will be holed up. But a drizzle will often have game up moving around. Especially right after a storm front moves through. The heavy rain will subside and a mist or slight, mild drizzle will continue. This is often the trigger that draws bedded deer that were holed up into freely moving.

An observant woodsman will also notice deer will tend to bed in the open when the woods are wet, both during and after a rain. They'll often bed in CRP or a weed field rather than the timber. At first one would think, "Why would they do that? Why wouldn't they be curled up under a pine tree in the rain?" The answer is only logical. If they are bedded in the timber their visibility is limited; the wind is blowing the cover all around them; everything is moving; the raindrops are dropping onto the ground/leaves making a constant dripping noisy. They can't see or hear as well defensively. Whereas, if they bed in an open weed field they can see around themselves better; there's less movement of overhanging limbs blowing in the wind; and there's no constant dripping of water drops hitting the ground cover. It's quieter and they can see better. Look for them there.

If it's lightly raining or just recently stopped I accept the fact I'm going to get wet. When it's quiet I'd just as soon leave the raingear at home because it's too noisy. If it's really windy background noise might cover any raincoat noise. But if it's quiet I'll just wear either wool or polar fleece at less risk.

Proper footwear when stalking is imperative. I usually wear rubber bottoms/leather tops. Just make sure to keep away from the lug-type soles used in rocky terrain. Lugs are too thick and stiff. You can't "feel" the ground with them. Legendary bowhunter Paul Schafer used to wear knee-high Indian moccasins that had a double layered leather sole. He only wore them when stalking in dry weather that wasn't slippery or in fairly level terrain where ankle support was not that big of an issue. When it was warm and wet he often wore a heavy wool sock, then a pair of those thin, black, stretchy pull-on shoe/boot rubbers. Then he'd

pull a second pair of heavy, gray wool socks over the rubbers. This combination would be really quiet and still keep your feet dry and let you feel the ground well. Obviously you wouldn't wear this combo if you were hunting near heavy locust thorns or cactus, etc.

I don't know if it's my imagination or what but it sure seems like we've been getting more than our share of high winds in the last several years. I'm talking 25 MPH winds with even higher gusts. Some deer will get down into draws or on the downwind side of slopes to try and escape the higher winds. Some will take shelter in a pine/cedar thicket when it's excessively cold and windy. When the temperatures are not too severe and crops are still standing they'll often take shelter right within the rows of an unharvested cornfield. Modern farming techniques with more narrow corn rows and stalks planted closer together might be better for the deer but aren't as good for the still-hunter. Up until the late '80s or so you could frequently find corn rows wide enough to walk down without having to bull your way through. They often were wide enough to allow substantial weed growth between the corn rows. These little weedy areas were magnets for deer to bed securely. A bowhunter could catch a favorable wind and stalk across the length of the corn rows often catching a buck bedded at extremely close range. This technique worked best on a very windy day. The dry standing corn leaves blowing in the wind covered any normally loud approach.

We need to plan our days carefully. I like to plan my hunt and hunt my plan. I don't just go for "a walk in the woods." When I go into a new area the first thing I usually do is follow any creek bottoms or drainages. They don't even need to have water in them. By walking drainages longitudinally you can locate the best crossings. This will give you a starting point when learning the area. Then I branch out from there to follow seepages while learning specific terrain structures.

This same line of thinking is used to plan a day's still-hunting. If you think about it you'll realize it's again nothing but common sense. The creek bottoms/ drainages are in the valleys where gravity pulls water downward. The increased moisture of the bottoms will tend to be more conducive for both plant and tree growth. In a normal hardwood bottom you'll usually find better soil nutrients because of sedimentation. The increased nutrients result in bigger, healthier, more mature trees. If you are dealing with mast producing trees it will concentrate a desired food source in a focused area. This is where you want to still-hunt.

Now, think about it even more. These are "pieces of the puzzle" you want to take in while you're slowly slipping along. Look closely at the drainage. First, how wide is the valley? A bottom that is a hundred yards or more wide will have a lot more stable wind drifts than one in a tight valley floor.

Next, look at the depth of the creek bottom itself as compared to the flat shelf just above the creek bed. The approximate height of a mature deer's eyelevel is only between three and four feet. Again, think about it. If the creek bed is shallow a deer can walk right in the bed itself, down over the lip, remaining less obvious (out of sight) and still being able to see up over the lip onto the flats paralleling the creek.

If the creek is deeper than the eye level of a creek bottom traveling deer he'll be walking blindly. Therefore, he'll shift his travel pattern up onto the shelf itself while walking parallel to the drainage. Now he'll be able to look down into the creek rather than be looking up out of it. Again, it's just common sense. We must use our ability to reason in order to learn what nature takes for granted. And we must adjust our hunting techniques accordingly in order to be more productive.

Next, consider our "right of passage". Even if the creek bed is dry, or mostly dry, there will usually be fewer leaves littering the ground. Recent, previous rains will have washed a lot of them away. This results in fewer dead, dry leaves to get through. Also note the soil types and adjust your travel accordingly. Soft, sandy soil, clay or solid mud will obviously be much quieter to walk in or on than rocks or gravel. If the creek has water in it often the noise of the babbling brook will cover your intrusion. You should be walking slow enough to avoid any sounds of a human gait. Although I've never gone that far, some still-hunters will actually drag a small branch on a cord behind them in order to alleviate any cadence to their gait.

As previously stated fall mast droppings will concentrate the acorns along AND in the creek itself. Here, common sense tells us mature trees along the creek bank will drop their nuts straight down. If the acorn doesn't drop on the shelf above the creek gravity will result in it rolling down into the creek bed itself. This makes them easier to find by the deer rather than having to scrounge through six inches of dry leaves. Like I said, the nuts will concentrate right on the open, sandy/gravel flats of the creek bed itself making them much easier to locate. Deer know this... trust me.

With this information you can plan your October still-hunt accordingly. You know where the prime food source is concentrated now and therefore, you know where you'll have a better chance of locating your game. Don't stop reasoning yet. Now you need to plan your approach. A lot will depend on the width of the valley and the depth of the creek itself. Remember, if the creek depth (not water depth) is shallow the deer will likely be right down in the creek bed. You only really have one choice here since they can and will be watching the flats above the creek. Hopefully the creek will have multiple twists and turns allowing you to still-hunt according to the best wind direction. In this case your chances are now 50/50 the feeding animal will either be working toward you or away from you. If he's coming your way merely backtrack a little in order to set up and ambush when he comes around the bend. If he's moving away from you either wait him out hoping he'll turn (they often do) or you can backtrack and, depending on the terrain and winds, possibly loop in front of him and hope for the best.

This brings us to the situation of how to still-hunt the bottom if the creek bed is deeper than a standing deer's eyelevel. Knowing many fallen acorns have rolled down into the creek bed and creek bed feeding deer can't see over the shelf because of its height, the best approach will be a "stitching" effect. You quietly slip in from above with the winds obviously in your favor until you can see up or down stream enough to verify any activity. If nothing is present you backtrack slowly and make another stitch or loop that will oversee virgin creek beds. Should you see deer you now have a couple options to choose from and it'll usually depend on the situation. First step is to try to determine the animal's direction of travel. If it's coming in your direction an ambush is possible. If it's not, you have the option to swing/loop ahead of it and possibly set up another ambush. But here's where you need to make an important decision. Always be aware that because of the prey's superior senses you'll more than often get busted. Realize if you do get busted the spooked animal will likely disturb the entire area. So your choices are to either let the situation play out, back off, or go for it. Decisions.... decisions.

A similar plan is used when still-hunting ridges. We don't just go for a walk in the timber. If we have a master plan we'll greatly increase our odds. Undisturbed deer will tend to use the terrain to their advantage. They will generally travel and bed on the lee side of a ridge with the predominate winds at their back. For example, if you have a ridge that basically runs east/west and have prevailing winds that generally come from the south (with variations from SW or SE) the deer will generally bed on the lee side (north side) of the ridge for security reasons. This position will enable them to see well downhill and smell any danger coming in blindly behind them. A stitching or looping travel pattern by the still-hunter that takes advantage of the wind angles (i.e. SW or SE) can be considered. I don't want to get into sky-lined positioning and/or shelving as it gets too complicated and may be confusing when written. But I do want to highlight the fact you are still-hunting with a specific plan designed to increase your odds for success. Different scenarios will vary and that's part of the hunt. We must adapt. Again, plan your hunt and hunt your plan.

Open hardwoods will dictate extremely slow movement. If you are forced to wade through briar thickets you might want to consider the fact if wearing a ghilli suit you'll be dealing with snagging. Two items I always have with me when still-hunting are a good pair of binoculars and a pair of ratchet hand pruners. The binoculars are used almost constantly picking out detail before you advance. Just this item/suggestion alone will force you to slow your pace. A still-hunter can't be moving forward much when using glasses to scan ahead. The pruners will help you cut the best path. Trust me. I guarantee you will sooner or later come to a situation where you will have the option to go around an obstacle of brush creating unnecessary movement or quietly snipping your way through it.

If the understory is not too thick I much prefer still-hunting with a ghilli suit. They are amazingly good camo. I had one made in California with a combination of Mossy Oak's Shadow Grass camo pattern strips along with shaggy burlap and jute strips. It's perfect. I'm of the opinion a lot of ghilli

suits tend to be too dark when viewed from a distance. I also should mention I purposely only wear the three-quarter length coat. This is done for a reason. The three-quarter length is enough to blend your upright torso into the understory while lessening the drag of snagging. If I should come to a log or a stump I want to sit on, the length will cover my sitting legs all the way to the ground.

I should also mention I opted for the lighter weight version as some ghillis tend to be quite heavy/warm. Because you are mobile you are keeping your circulation going, plus October still-hunting tends to be warmer anyway.

Most importantly, when wearing a ghilli suit I always wear the ghilli hat. I'm of the opinion the hat is by far the most important part of the outfit. The shaggy strips which hang down from the circular, full hat brim will totally eliminate the dreaded human head sitting atop human shoulders.

I always go with complete camo. That includes a facemask, gloves or hand-paint too. Another thing to consider is fletching colors. When I first started filming my bowhunts I went with solid yellow feathers coupled with solid yellow arrow crests in hopes the human eye could follow the flight of the arrow on film. This seems to work fine from a treestand since I normally remove my bow quiver from the bow when elevated. When on the ground still-hunting/moving a "block" of yellow feathers/crests is too obvious and is easily detected when in motion. Therefore, either go with barred, less obvious fletching colors, or use a fletch hood/cover.

Often in later October you'll be slipping along when all of a sudden you'll be confronted by a doe that might have prematurely come into heat with a buck or three in hot pursuit. You'll be treated to a front row seat. Accept it with a smile as an offering.

The whole idea is to silently, slowly drift from shadow to shadow until the proper scenario presents itself. Make yourself into a mobile stand. Gear down your mobility, but move with a purpose and direction. After some pre-season scouting gives you an area with some confidence of success, put together a plan and transform yourself from being an owl to a cat. The rewards can be tremendous.

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