

“Wicked Wicks”

By Gene Wensel

Like many serious buck hunters, I’ve always asked myself a lot of questions, hoping to learn tricks that might bring me closer to understanding what makes whitetail bucks tick. As I write this, I’m deep into testing new ideas pertaining to licking branches. As far as I know, no one has ever done much of anything along these lines, and so I’ve been more or less experimenting with various materials, options and different sorts of heavy rope sets. The fact that licking branches are not necessarily seasonal and are used more often than previously realized has opened my eyes to multiple possibilities in finding and getting to know specific bucks. With the help of trail cameras used as learning tools, I’m seeing new traits and exploring multiple interesting theories. I fully expect to learn other techniques, have more buck encounters during my upcoming hunting seasons, produce more standing broadside shots at close range, and allow myself opportunities to observe summer progression of new antler growth....not to mention the fun factor.

In July of 2011, I started doctoring previously used overhead licking branches with pre-orbital deer lure I got from experienced trapper Smokey McNicholas of “deep woods” West Virginia. www.smokeysdeerlure.com I was very pleased with the results, especially considering I was working on wild bucks in full velvet, still growing bone. My trail camera photos revealed lots of attention and curiosity.

I assumed correctly that bucks would not yet use their sensitive velvet antlers, but would in fact investigate with their noses and give themselves regular “facials,” using both pre-orbital and forehead glands. As September 2011 arrived and velvet was shed, bucks quickly worked their fresh grown hard antlers into the process, sooner or later initiating scrapes under each licking branch as part of their routine. I learned that licking branches often came well before the scrapes under them were made. I simply hadn’t paid much attention to licking branch use before scrapes were formed, probably due to the fact that early licking branches are not as obvious and less aggressive than those above active scrapes.

As autumn of 2011 progressed, I observed that broken licking branches hanging *vertically* got much more attention than horizontal ones. Many were chewed on or possibly even broken *on purpose* in order to hang vertically. I also noticed slightly bigger vertical limbs were preferred over smaller ones. Bucks seemed to prefer the rigid resistance of bigger limbs, yet wanted something that gives way a bit while working them over. I recalled multiple previous instances where broken off wild grape vines hanging freely were vigorously and repeatedly utilized by hostile bucks.

I decided to build heavy rope swings, hang them vertically and monitor deer use via trail cameras. In May of 2012, I put out my first vertical heavy manila rope sets with the bottom ends dipped in pre-orbital lure. I scattered them over several different pieces of property with trail cameras trained on each set. I purposely did not put the ropes on any previous licking branches, only building them on likely looking edge or funnel spots where deer would pass. Under each, I also made a mock scrape, doctoring them with inter-digital gland lure.

Now remember, this was in early May, with most new antler growth less than six inches high. I was amazed to get multiple responses within 24 hours. I was also interested in the fact that many doe deer also investigated my rope sets. Almost 50% of use was demonstrated by adult does. Why would female deer investigate licking branches? It lead me to believe there is a social factor involved in licking branches that goes way beyond male sexuality and well into female curiosity or whitetail communication. Multiple visits by the same bucks perked my interest. I suspect buck use will far exceed doe use as soon as velvet sheds in early September. Time will tell.

As stated previously, I'm still in the learning/testing stages of using these rope wick sets. In trying various options on multiple properties, not working with only one deer group, I'm seeing similarities as well as differences. In two different areas, cattle were dumped into hardwood habitat. In one area, whitetails all but vacated the tract, abandoning wick use even at night. In another spot, fewer cattle and a couple horses didn't seem to affect use much at all. Although cattle and horses showed minimal interest in my rope sets, I did get visits to the mock scrapes under the wicks from many other species, including coyotes, bobcats, badgers, possums, coons, etc. I even got photos of a woodchuck climbing the tree trunk one wick hung from.

Here is what I've found to work best so far. My idea was to offer deer something rigid but not too stiff, made of natural material hanging vertically and smelling "right." For whatever reasons, I wanted to encourage them to investigate the wicks by sniffing or giving themselves social "facials."

I bought raw manila (hemp/grass) rope; $\frac{3}{4}$ " or 1" seems to work best. Note, some new hemp rope, like burlap, is pre-soaked in creosote as a preservative but most is not. Brand new rope usually comes from the Philippines and does have a slight odor to it that quickly dissipates when outdoors. Some is soaked in odorless mineral oil. Sniff it or ask your supplier before purchase. I haven't tried any previously used anchor rope, but I doubt residual salt water would make any difference. Manila rope eventually rots or breaks under stress due to moisture but it should last many years the way I'm using it since breaking strength is not a safety factor with rope utilized this way.

Another test option was to use 100% heavy cotton horse lead ropes. A search on the internet or a visit to any tack store provided multiple choices and colors. Most came in ten foot lengths with a snap swivel that I didn't really need. I made sure the rope was heavy braided natural cotton, nothing poly or nylon. I even considered buying a used rope lead previously lathered up by a sweating horse. I decided not to risk it, even though it might have worked even better. Manila rope bought in bulk via the Internet is the least expensive way to proceed and seems to work best although a high percentage of it smells like creosote nowadays. Even though cotton soaks up more rain water, I'm leaning toward shorter lengths of cotton horse leads.

Next, purchase a hundred 8" plastic zip ties found in large hardware, automotive, or building supply stores. Now, with your pre-orbital lure in a small wide mouthed jar with a tight lid, let's get into the woods.

Pick a horizontal limb in a likely place. The limb does not have to be very big but can be. Any green limb bigger than your finger should be fine. If you find what looks like a great spot with no limb where you need one, cut a six foot green sapling, then nail or

screw it horizontally or angled slightly upward right where you want it. Be sure to put it close to a tree suitable for hanging a trail camera.

Wear latex gloves while making the rope set. Once the wick is made, you can reload more lure without touching it by simply dipping it into your wide mouth jar. I always wear 16" rubber boots when building or checking a set to minimize ground odor.

Hang the top of the wick first by looping it over the horizontal branch and securing it with one or two zip ties. I snip off the zip tie ends with ratchet belt pruners after cinching things tight. Now, use your pruners to cut the rope at the business end. Three to four feet off the ground is about right; not too high. I made the mistake of hanging the ends of the wicks too high during my first attempts, which was verified when deer had to stretch too much to sniff it. You want it low enough so they can easily see and touch it with their face, high enough where bucks can use their racks once velvet sheds. I ended up lowering multiple rope sets I initially hung too high.

One inch or so up from the bottom of the wick, wrap another zip tie so the rope doesn't unravel during deer use. Now, again using latex gloves, separate the bottom strands to form what looks like a one inch round brush. Dip this end into the oil-based pre-orbital lure. Its very important the lure is oil based. I discovered initial applications soaked in and almost dried within a couple days but still obviously smelled right. Subsequent dippings eventually keep the oil content moist. Normal amounts of rain won't affect deer use, but heavy rain runs down a rope to necessitate reloading it with fresh lure. Normally, a few drops will be enough to freshen it.

Wicks are an example where trail cameras shine as learning tools. Set up a trail camera trained on the rope wick. I set mine to shoot either 10-15 second video clips or two shot bursts set one minute apart. I originally set video clips for ten seconds but soon realized many film clips ended too soon unless I shortened the down time.

Mock scrapes under my rope worked, showing lots of sniffing, especially when doctored with interdigital scent, but early scrapes usually won't get much pawing activity until later in September.

On windy days, swinging rope or moving foliage might trip some vacant photos, but that can be expected with sensitive cameras. Passing squirrels or birds often give what appears at first to be vacant photos.

Try not to disturb deer too often. I let my sets work at least a week or more between checks unless I can enter and exit covertly.

I'm excited about the possibilities of using these heavy rope wick set ups, especially as autumn progresses. One thing is certain, I definitely plan to have a rope wick hanging 15 yards or so in front of all my favorite selected treestands this coming season. I'm not saying a tending buck will leave a hot doe to check one out, but I feel very confident any cruising lone buck will stop to check and sniff any wick along his route. If he stands broadside at 15 yards, what more can we ask for?

These rope wick sets have opened a whole new window of opportunity for me to watch bucks grow, help monitor summer and autumn deer movement patterns and see what's on the menu for the coming season. Have fun!