

“Wicked Wicks Part II”

by Gene Wensel

In a past issue of *Bowhunter* magazine, I wrote an article concerning a project I was undertaking in 2012 to study vertical mock “licking branches,” using heavy rope wicks doctored with pre-orbital gland deer lure hung over mock scrapes laced with interdigital foot scent. Readers are encouraged to refresh their memory on our www.brothersofthebow.com website.

I promised to share my findings with readers after the 2012 hunting season. Needless to say, this was a learning experience for me in many ways. I made some mistakes that I’ll share here, but I also gained a lot of intriguing information that might help those who want to try their own future application of the process.

Before we get into specific observations and details, I must remind readers that I deal strictly with 100% wild, free ranging whitetails here in Iowa. My project started in May of 2012 and ran through late January of 2013. During this period, I hung and tended dozens of rope wicks spread out on various low fenced private properties, at times over a hundred miles apart. With the help of numerous trail cameras working for me 24/7, I accumulated enough evidence to convince almost anyone that using vertical scent ropes is definitely a learning tool worth trying in other parts of the country. The photos alone are very convincing.

First, let’s go over some of my easily correctable mistakes. As far as I knew going in, no one had ever done anything similar, so I expected to make some mistakes. I initially hung the bottom end of the ropes too high. Three feet off the ground seems to be the best height. Bucks often stand on their hind legs to work high limbs, but *obvious convenience* in finding, noticing and using the wicks is very desirable. With wicks hanging above a whitetail’s eye level, I got photos of some deer walking right on by, probably upwind of the ropes hung too high. I quickly learned to make all the wicks visibly noticeable. I also learned to wrap the bottom end of each wick no more than an inch up from the end with a plastic zip tie. Any higher than an inch up the rope caused too much fraying and also increased the difficulty of dipping or freshening the wicks with pre-orbital gland lure.

I tended to use too much lure. Freshening each set every ten days or two weeks with an eye dropper used far less lure, yet seemed to work just as well. Since excellent *oil* based pre-orbital lure is not easy to collect or make, it is not inexpensive but definitely worth the quality and investment. Dipping the entire end of the rope in a jar was not only unnecessary but costly. Using rubber gloves, I learned to turn the very bottom end of the rope up to apply fresh lure with an eye dropper, then (very important) allow a minute or so for the lure to soak in. Although we experienced minimal hard rains last year, normal amounts of rainfall and evaporation didn’t seem to dilute the lure enough to notice any difference in effectiveness, another positive factor resulting from use of an oil based lure.

Timing of maximum use was very interesting. During spring and summer months, fully 50% of visits were made by doe deer, which surprised me. After antler velvet was shed, more than 80% of deer visits were made by bucks. I also noted that yearlings didn’t pay much attention until late November or early December. Then most fawn visits were made by button bucks, and as far as I could tell, mostly whenever accompanied by their

mothers, who by that time had probably already been bred. During early November, when a doe had abandoned her buck fawn(s) of the year, button buck use dropped way off until after the peak of the rut, probably due to intimidation or potential confrontations with older age adult bucks.

I tend to think most doe visits (and many buck visits) were strictly out of curiosity. Once velvet was shed from hardened antlers, some bucks checked the wicks every time they walked by *when alone*, others regularly walked right on past. If wicks were upwind of a passing buck and not obviously noticed visually, some bucks simply passed by, even though still in range of my cameras to have their photos taken. When or if a buck was tending or following a doe, most deer ignored the ropes. "Cruising" lone bucks of all ages were the ones that regularly stopped to check out the wicks. Placing a rope wick within a shooting lane turned out to be a very good idea, but only when dealing with lone, "cruising" bucks.

I particularly found it interesting to see how various bucks used the wicks. Very few actually gave themselves "facials," as I expected they would. About half of visiting bucks moved the rope with their noses, mouths or antlers. The rest stopped, sniffed the wicks and scrapes under them for a few seconds, then moved on. I got one series of photos of three different bucks in velvet recorded on film just one minute apart, checking out the very same wick. These three were essentially "standing in line" to take their turn at the rope! Several bucks actually grabbed the rope in their mouths. One buck had the rope sideways in his mouth as far back as he could get it!

My cameras recorded several sparring matches started right next to the wicks after use. At least one sparring match led to a more serious fight that exposed dozens of photos before the bucks finally broke up and moved off.

One of the biggest problems I encountered was movement of the ropes on days with high winds, causing sensitive camera triggers to trip "empty" photos. Movement of the rope end was confirmed in consecutive photos only seconds apart.

Preference for *rigidity* was definitely noted and something I wasn't expecting. I'm convinced the free swinging ropes were too flexible for many bucks. In one place, I set a rope and trail camera very close to a vertically hanging natural branch about the size of a finger. I applied pre-orbital lure to both the rope and the nearby natural limb. Bucks definitely worked the rigid limb more than the rope. Next year, I plan to stiffen each rope by attaching a thin green limb the size of a pencil along the side of each rope wick to stiffen it. I suspect rigidity needs to run *all the way to the top* to make it as stiff as possible, yet still be able to retain the scent of the lure at the wick end. I also suspect this means we could get away with using smaller diameter or much shorter rope (10" or less) that costs less, and again, braided cotton horse leads, cotton clothes line. As long as it is stiffened with a green limb and the rope made from natural material (not some sort of plastic), I expect the terminal end of a smaller, less expensive cotton or manila rope would hold enough lure and still retain rigidity.

I was surprised to get many photo series of individual mature bucks *one time only*, probably the result of bucks traveling through an area, often long distances from their normal core areas. These nomadic buck photos almost all came during prime rut or pre-peak rut dates and were most likely photos of roaming bucks, those that frequently cause us to ask ourselves, "Where did *he* come from?" I'm convinced many adult bucks take long distant routes during the rut, making trips of up to five miles or more to go back to

where they were born and/or spent the first year and a half of their life before they left their adolescent area and family groups to establish their own new home range. They never forget where they were born nor how to get there!

As the whitetail rut wound down and scrapes were mostly abandoned, I moved many wicks from above scrapes to obvious travel corridors or funnels and didn't even bother to make a mock scrape nor use interdigital ground scent. During late season, I again moved many wicks to areas adjacent to or right on trails being used to and/or from food sources.

Iowa's gun season predictably moved multiple "new faces" onto undisturbed properties set aside for archery-only. As expected, bucks from surrounding areas checked out my rope wick sets regularly, well into late season and right up into mid-January, when I quit monitoring my ropes and cameras. In all honesty, I suspect rope wicks would be checked year round if freshened regularly.

I got quite a few images of other species checking out both the ropes and scrapes under them. Other than whitetails, I recorded investigation from feral cats, stray dogs, badgers, fox, coyotes, coons, possums, skunks, woodchucks, rabbits and squirrels. A friend who also had a couple wicks out got photos of a fisher cat standing upright and even jumping for the rope! But most importantly, all totaled, I got photos of *hundreds* of whitetails checking my sets!

I'd like to be able to tell you that I killed a mature buck while sniffing a rope wick, but in truth, I killed a nice buck on November 9th when he followed a hot doe past my stand. Since Iowa law limits us to only one buck tag until late season, much of my hunting was curtailed during some of the best days of the rut.

I don't believe use of wicks is going to attract deer from long distances. These scented ropes will routinely stop deer but won't actually bring them in from more than proximate distances. Nor can they be used or expected to "hold" deer to keep them from straying onto a neighbor's property. I no longer think of them as any sort of bait or food source type attraction that might draw or hold deer. Long distance "drawing power" seems minimal or non-existent. Nor can they be expected to pull a buck away from a doe he is actually tending. But whenever bucks are "cruising" alone, they will almost always stop for a sniff, hopefully right in one of your shooting lanes.

Like many other tricks of the trade, I'm going to continue to use rope wicks to get good trail camera photos, learn how many top quality bucks are available on the "menu" and hope to stop cruising bucks right where I want them for standing broadside shot opportunities.

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