

Preparing For Success

The satisfaction one gets out of any endeavor is usually proportional to what one puts into it. Preparation leads to confidence and confidence leads to success. And nothing prepares us for a hunt like a do-it-yourself attempt. Not only will you gain a lot more satisfaction from the hunt but you'll acquire a learning experience you can use for the rest of your life, and even pass down.

In my naivety I thought everyone prepared for every hunt. There are many pieces of the puzzle to consider. In this piece, I'm purposely not going to get into the "whole picture" regarding land contours and/or structural positioning. But I want to touch on a few details that will hopefully get guys/gals to thinking. This will likely not be an easy read. It might even seem confusing but the fact is it will make you a better deer hunter. May I respectfully suggest you draw out some little schematics if it will help you to understand.

Over the years my personal success has depended on hunting terrain structure. Once in the right region you must pick the right tree. A lot goes into the right tree selection. Many times I've stated I'd prefer a mediocre tree in a great location over a great tree in a mediocre location. One of the most important aspects of the right tree is entrance/exit, something that will create as little disturbance as possible. In almost all cases we are better off hunting undisturbed deer. Undisturbed animals will be moving with some predictability. This is a fundamental fact.

When everything is naturally balanced in the woods there will be a normal "buzz". Background noises of birds, insects, frogs, etc. are accepted and expected in the everyday normal cycle/rhythm. Temporary dead silence is a sign of disturbance. Area wildlife will pick up on it. This is one of the reasons I'm an advocate of arriving an hour early over a minute late in most stand situations. I want a buffer to lessen the adverse effects of my disturbances on entering. Not disturbing the "buzz" is also why I'm a big advocate of quietly remaining in position once the ambush has been established. Changing stands, moving in/out for a lunch break or potty break will all disturb the normal buzz, thus costing you a half hour before the common expected/normal noises return. Game in the immediate area will pick up on this.

A low impact entrance/exit is vital. The smart hunter needs to consider sight, sound and scent in his approach and departure. Let's use an example of each in illustration. Often your stand placement might be just off the crest of a ridgeline. HUMAN nature is for old logging/skid roads to follow the crest of the ridge. It just makes sense for ease of travel for humans and equipment. But it doesn't make sense for the deer. Although not always the case, game will shy away from being sky lined on a ridge top. They'll normally tend to walk parallel to the crest on the downwind side. It sometimes depends on the angle of the terrain and visibility (density) but usually they will prefer just far enough off to the side to keep their silhouette not obvious, yet passage where they can see downhill more so or equal to being crested. You'll also notice their passage will tend to be on the downwind side of the crest. Think about it.

They can see just as well or better downhill; they can wind/scent check areas upwind and they are still not silhouetted. We, as hunters, must do the same thing. When entering a stand site along a ridge line it's easy to walk the logging road on the top. This is fine when it's dark (another advantage of stand approach before light). But when it's already light, or in the afternoon, you're usually better off picking your way in walking parallel to the crest.

If you do walk in on a logging road, I try to walk in the "tire track" of the downwind side. In other words as an example, say the logging road is running north/south and the wind is coming from the west. You walk in the east tire track so the wind carries your residual ground scent off the road. This insures any deer that happen to be walking the road later will be less likely to smell your passage. Additional to this, if you use a scent drag on approach you will notice it will benefit you even more so. Tie a scent soaked rag to a short cord off a four foot switch (or your bow tip) and drag it (in the example above) down the west tire track while you walk the east (downwind) track.

Because I tend to sweat I normally carry my extra clothing/gear in a backpack. When I get to within 100 yards or so of the stand I'll stop and put my layered jacket, facemask, gloves and safety belt/harness on. It's an obvious advantage having your scent on final approach blowing away from the direction you think the deer will be coming/going.

To ensure a silent approach I like to rake out foot steps to the stand. For those of you who have hunted bear over a bait site you will notice when multiple bears are hitting the bait they will approach it via specific foot prints. This is a dominant/subordinate situation. A subordinate bear knows if he is caught by a dominant bear on his approach to the bait he will likely get his butt kicked and it could even be a fatal mistake. Therefore, if you look closely around the bait site you will notice distinct, separate foot print/pad marks that will insure the bear a more silent approach. He/she will actually purposely place their pads in the specific footprints of a previous entrance in order to insure a silent entry. I do the same thing when approaching my stand site.

After the foliage drops you'll often have six inches of dry leaves covering the ground. Walking through dry leaves silently is pretty hopeless. If there is any cadence/rhythm to your gait it's almost impossible to keep your entrance/exit covert. Right here I should mention leaving your ambush silently is just about as important as entering in order to keep your disturbances less invasive. Therefore, I use "the bear trick" to my advantage.

After the majority of leaves drop I face the fact I will be disturbing the areas and go for it. Time it for mid-day knowing what you'll gain will be worth it in the long run. You can use a regular garden rake with the stiff teeth but a garden hoe actually works better by not having to be constantly cleaning leaves from the teeth. Clear away the leaves every couple feet in order to place your boots on

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solid ground rather than six inches of leaves. Yes, continued foliage dropping will fill in the raked spots somewhat, but you can just kick them away with your boot tip if needed. Quiet foot placement is especially important on quiet days or if you are within hearing and/or sight of a known bedding area. Of course there are variables but I have often quietly slipped into a pre-raked, pre-set stand and taken advantage of the situation. You'll know it was all worth it when after quietly entering you'll see the flick of an ear and notice a deer bedded within eyesight that you know would have not allowed you to get into your stand unnoticed had you not pre-raked a perfectly silent approach.

Another use for the hoe/rake is to create a visually more obvious trail or path in the leaves that will direct passing deer to angle slightly to your advantage. I'm not talking about moving them greater distances. I'm saying if their normal passage angles slightly away from your best shooting option you can shift their movement a little closer by raking out a more obvious path/trail in the ground cover in order to create a visual that will catch their eye and shift their minimal angle of movement to your advantage. As long as the visual continues to where they've intended to go you're fine.

I will also often (almost daily) break out my trusty ratchet belt hand pruners to open and clear the understory of brushy twigs both for where the deer will be walking as well as my own approach. An opening through the brush will shift the deer where passage will be easier for them. They will adapt in short order. At the same time I want to keep my entrance where I am brushing against twigs minimal for less scent retention, as well as the noise of your clothing fabric rubbing against the twigs/brush. This is all just common pre-season detailing.

On approaching a stand set-up I try not to cross the main travel pattern I am hunting. Sometimes there are situations you have to do that. In these cases I will plan my approach to the stand right in a pre-cut shooting lane. That way if the deer cuts your entrance trail on approach and stops to smell minimal ground scent at least he is standing in a shooting lane. This is another applicable situation for what I call "bowling for bucks." On the way into my stand I'll pick up a couple hedge apples (osage oranges) with gloved hands. For those not familiar with them, they are the fruit of the osage tree. They are yellowish/green, about the size of a grapefruit, with an outer texture that looks grooved similar to a brain. To make matters confusing osage oranges and hedge apples are the same thing when comparing apples to oranges. Farmers often use the trees themselves for fence posts because the wood normally takes a long time to ground-rot. Hence the term "hedge row". And of course we all know osage wood is commonly used to make beautiful yellowish colored wood bows. Anyway, after climbing into my stand I'll take a liquid or gel deer lure and run a bead around the hedge apple. By the way, for those who live in states without osage trees you can use a regular apple. Just be sure it's legal. The grooved texture of a hedge apple will accept the scent easier than an eating apple (especially if a gel scent is used). After scenting up the fruit while in my stand I'll roll (as in bowling) the apple across the deer trail right through one of my shooting lanes. The normal scenario is the deer comes walking down the trail and hits the fresh scent where it

crossed their path. Because of their ability for directional tracking they will stop and look in the direction you rolled it. It will offer you a standing, broadside shot at a deer looking the other way. Perfect. No directional, audible bleat necessary.

I also like to play the odds by prepping my stands by hinge cutting trees for blockage. Before I get into hinge cutting let's talk about girdling. It's a practice where someone cuts the bark all the way around a live tree. It can be accomplished with an axe, a hatchet, a hand saw or chain saw. This will cut off the life-blood to the tree and eventually kill it. The practice is used to kill the tree which will eventually topple whatever direction the winds happen to be blowing that fateful day. You have no control over that. The fallen tree will open up the canopy, therefore allowing more light to enter the surrounding grounds, thus generating more secondary growth and thicker understory for better habitat densities. The advantage you have with hinge cutting over girdling is the fact you have control of the angle you want the tree to fall for your benefit. Make sure you have total permission from the landowner so he/she understands what you are doing.

My definition of hinge cutting is cutting the living, upright tree straight across horizontally until it can be dropped/pushed over in the right direction. Because the tree is not girdled, nor cut all the way through, it hopefully will continue to live. Yes, the tree will be horizontal to the ground but it should still be able to draw water and nutrients up from the soil. This has the same effect of opening the canopy and allowing sunlight in, yet the still alive tree allows for continued leafing and promotes supplemental feeding where it was previously out of reach, as well as increasing ground bedding cover and densities. You achieve the benefit of both worlds.

I prefer to use a good handsaw on trees that are usually six to eight inches in diameter and usually forty or fifty feet tall. The handsaw is tougher but it allows me to control the cut and push the tree exactly the direction I want it to fall. I normally make my cut just under four feet above ground level so as to make the blockage high enough to shift their movement, yet low enough they won't just duck under the barricade.

Because I only hunt with a recurve bow I prefer my shots to be at 12 to 15 yards. Not under 10 yards and not over 20 yards... but that's just me. By dropping a tree at a specific distance and angle you can shift the normal movement pattern so they'll walk right where you want them to.

I fear some younger bowhunters today are not learning the woodsmanship skills to fully enjoy our sport. They are being taught all that is necessary is to sit over a food plot in a shooting house while playing a video game until a big buck appears. Spending time in the woods preparing for the hunt is half the fun. Not only is the father/son bonding beneficial but it will create valuable life-long memories of earned and learned success. I have mentored younger whitetail hunters for decades via my educational

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sessions (www.brothersofthebow.com). Some of this stuff is hard to follow along unless you are actually shown. The bottom line is there will be a lot of satisfaction to your efforts. Not only will you watch a deer react exactly as you wanted and intended him to, but your efforts will hopefully shift his movement to a position where you almost can't miss the sucker-shot. And that itself will help bowhunting success rates tremendously.

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