

Going Down

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I've always been a big believer in order to consistently kill big mature whitetails you're best chances are to be in an elevated treestand letting them come to you. But it's not the only way.

I love to vary my hunting techniques simply for variety. Stillhunting, spot and stalk, tracking or small pushes/nudges all add spice to the hunts. All the above are done at ground level. But in all honesty, in order to consistently get the really big bucks you must remain motionless and let them come to you. This leaves us with ground stands, either natural or artificial. By artificial I'm referring to pop-up blinds. Hunting success from pop-up blinds varies greatly with the specie you're hunting. In other words, hunting whitetails versus turkeys will usually be vastly different. For turkeys you can set up in a wide open field. Pop-ups for whitetails must be well hidden and brushed in considerably in order to achieve success. The only variable will be if you put up a portable blind in the area and give it a long time for the local deer to accept it as an inanimate object of no threat. Then you also need to consider extremely secure tie-downs to accommodate winds over the extended time of acceptance.

I personally feel natural blinds are far superior for a surprise ambush. Especially when used with a good quality ghilli suit. I ordered my ghilli many years ago from an outfit in California named Rancho Safaris. I had it made in the lightweight material since they sometimes tend to be hot in warmer weather. I chose a combination of the Mossy Oak Shadow Grass pattern with Jute/burlap. I personally feel a lot of the standard Ghilli camo colors appear to be too dark, whereas the above combination blends perfectly in the hardwoods and weeds of our midwest. I only ordered the $\frac{3}{4}$ length because I found that was all that's necessary when shooting from a seated position or occasionally standing behind brush. Please note all the ghillis from Rancho Safari are the same size/cut in the body. When ordering, your specific sizing is adjusted according to your height. In other words, since I normally wear size XL or even 2XL but am "vertically challenged", I ordered mine in a size Small. It's the only size Small I can get into since high school days.

Because I'm strictly a bowhunter the shag rags sewn on the inside of the left arm (I'm right handed) and the left chest area must be trimmed short in order for string clearance when shooting. This trimming does not at all effect the camo efficiency of the finished product. I also wear a good armguard in order to keep stray cloth strips tight against my bow arm/ left sleeve.

Make sure you also order the ghilli hat with your outfit. It's my opinion the hat is absolutely the most important part of the entire outfit. The hat is a soft-brimmed Boone style hat with heavy camo/cloth strips all the way around. I also trim the extra strips in the front of the hat for better vision and clean shooting. Because the hat is so shaggy it

eliminates the appearance of a human head sitting atop the shoulders of a predator, an extremely important factor. I also wear a Spandoflage facemask and light cotton camo gloves to complete the outfit.

I've tried still-hunting in my ghilli and although very effective, it tends to constantly catch on all briars, twigs, understory and cling-ons. Therefore, I've pretty much settled on carrying my suit rolled up until I get to my ambush spot. A rolled up ghilli, with hat included, is only about sixteen inches long and maybe eight inches in diameter. They come with a carry strap included. For shorter ambush sites I tend just to throw the ghilli strap over my shoulder and carry the stool in by hand. If you are going in deeper you can bungee the suit and stool onto a simple pack frame to keep your hands free.

As previously stated, I prefer to keep my profile low to the ground/cover. I therefore sit on a small portable, good quality stool such as the Huntmore. Being able to sit quietly will keep your movements minimal when dealing with game at eye level and ultra close ranges. As they always say, "location, location" is paramount. Whenever possible I prefer to get into a shallow pit, log jam or an uprooted tree well.

Setting up with the wind to your advantage is a no-brainer. But with minimal to no winds one must be aware that scent will pool around you and linger longer at ground levels. Therefore, I tend to set up my ambush spot/shots slightly farther than when elevated. I love close shots. When in a tree stand I'll normally try to position my shot distances at 12 to 15 yards. When in a ground blind I tend to try for 15 to 20 yards because of lingering ground scent pooling.

Ground hunting is much tougher after foliage drops and/or frost kills the understory. You can see much better but so can they. No matter when I ground hunt from an ambush I am ALWAYS using the structure of the terrain to my advantage. One must be aware of slight movement variations dependent on the time of day and time of year also. For example, if you have a thick, brushy creek bottom with an open or semi-open pasture adjacent to it running towards a bedding area/ridge, you'll find in the early season the deer will tend to walk the open pasture rather than the thicker stuff, especially in the mornings on their way between feeding areas and bedding. Think about it. It's just common sense. Rather than "bull" their way through the thick, wet briars and weeds heavy with the morning dew (especially if they're running late from the fields) they'll much prefer to quickly and quietly slip up through the pasture where going is easier, quieter, they can see better and still are just a jump or two away from heavy cover. Set up accordingly.

If you have to set up in the heavy weeds and understory you can increase usage by previously clipping trails by hand, with a weedwacker or by spraying with Roundup to dictate where you want them to pass.

In the early season, the edge of a standing cornfield is a great ambush spot and is usually heavy with early scrapes. Although these scrapes are usually hit during the night you may catch increased activity in route to the bedding areas. Sitting in the woods looking out to the cornfield edge is one option in proper winds. But also consider (wind direction pending) sitting right in the uncut cornfield itself. You'll be surprised what you can get away with by sitting a half dozen or so rows deep. Picking your ambush location will vary greatly on the density of the corn stalks. Because the first few rows of cornstalks will tend to be poor because of earlier heavy browsing, you may need to get in

deeper. Try to find a spot where you can see them coming before they're right in your lap. Another little trick, rather than take the path of least resistance walking right along the edge of the cornfield, consider cutting the leaves from an internal row with a big knife or machete. This will give you a quiet approach even in dry corn. Plus, you won't be visible to deer in the timber if it happens to be daylight. You'll also not leave any ground scent on the edge of the field where the deer will surely be walking.

You might also want to think ahead. Knowing the corn is going to be cut later in the season when we've already likely had a few killing frosts to thin out the understory, the deer will be shifting their field edge movement deeper into the timber. Prepare yourself an ideal ambush spot in advance so it's all ready to slip into when it's time. You might want to consider even shifting their movement to your ambush spot by some selective cutting, such as a hinge cut tree. Obviously, you only do this on your own property or with permission from the landowner. By cutting a six to eight inch diameter tree halfway through the trunk it will still maintain enough water and nutrients drawn up from the soil in order to keep growing and alive. If you're skilled enough to drop the tree at the right angle you can create a blockage in the deer's pattern to shift him closer to your ambush spot.

Entrance/exit to your ambush is a vital aspect of ground hunting. A quiet approach taking consideration in trying not to jump surrounding deer is imperative. Walk down in a shallow or dry creek bed if possible. Dry creek beds are a common, yet overlooked hotspot for deer activity when the acorns are dropping. Most little tributaries will be lined with mature oaks because of the increased moisture in the bottoms. These big oaks will drop acorns where they'll roll down the banks to be deposited in the creek bed and accumulate just like a feed trough. A quick, hard rain will even pool them into "sweet spots." Trust me, all the deer know this.

Walking up and down the dry creek will location the heavier usage. Bear in mind deer will be walking up and down the creek bed. But you can double your pleasure if you can find a heavy deposit of acorns near an established creek crossing. That way you can establish an ambush on deer walking crossways as well as up and down. I often look for log jams within the creek beds near these spots. These will afford you established cover within the creek itself and ideally give you a less distinct profile and yet sometimes let you see up over the shelf. I especially look for wider valleys where the creek bottoms tend to have more consistent winds. A tributary between two steep ridges will make winds very hard to depend on consistently and you'll be forced to deal with the slow walkers from ground level.

As stated, I always try to set up my ambush according to terrain structures. Focus on pinch-points, headers (where seepages begin). Wherever, I'm most concerned with keeping a low profile. One must always consider backlighting. When setting up I prefer to have some cover both in front of me as well as behind me, but cover behind me is more important in my opinion. Put 75% of the cover behind you and on 25% in front. Put your back against a tree or a logjam. Kick out the leaves to expose bare dirt for your feet. Break out your ratchet pruners and clip off a few cedar/juniper boughs (or palmettas if in the south) and stick them both in front and/or behind as needed. Often I'll just cut me out a little hole at the base of an evergreen tree and back in, then pile the cuttings in front of me.

The bottom line is bow hunting on the ground is a superb thrill. Yes, hunting from

an elevated position will likely let you kill more mature bucks. But sometimes as we get older we must adapt to various situations and it's not all bad. One of the scariest parts is watching a big buck blink at eye level. Your chest will pound, your heart will be in your throat. But, frankly, I can't think of many better circumstances for cardiac arrest. BW