

# CHAPTER 10

## HUNTING THE WIND

PHOTO BY CHARLES ALSHEIMER

**Smart hunters know that hunting the wind means much more than setting a stand on the downwind side of a deer trail or food plot; they know that wind will determine how a mature buck will move from area to area, where he will bed, and how he will escape danger.**

**A**bsolutely nothing is as important to hunting deer (particularly mature deer) as the wind. A major portion of a whitetail's brain is dedicated to smell, and as any hunter knows, it shows. Deer use their noses to understand the world they live in and to stay alive. Their sight and hearing senses are plenty keen, but neither even comes close to their sense of smell. They "see" with their nose, and move with their nose, and eat with it as well. Breeding is triggered by scent molecules (pheromones), as is everything important in the life of a whitetail. And how do scent particles reach a deer's nose and the olfactory center of the brain? For the most part, scent particles are carried by air, in most cases moving air, or wind; in order to understand deer, you have to understand wind.

Deer use the wind like teens use text messaging – to stay in touch with their world. Yet all deer do not use wind the same way or with the same skill. It's a learned skill in the whitetail world. Young deer are still learning how to play the wind and frequently seem to ignore what the wind is telling them. In fact, it takes a number of years for a deer to develop a full compliment of "wind smarts." Mature deer stay alive by minimizing movement and identifying danger long before danger identifies them; in everything they do, they're maximizing olfactory input and move about only with the wind in their favor. Older deer know where they want to get to and they use their noses to get there safely.

Imagine a pointer working a bird field? A young pup will work haphazardly, or charging back and forth covering the ground with his legs not his nose. He knows what a bird smells like and he is able to find some, but he hasn't figured out how to use the wind to his advantage yet; that's our immature buck. As the dog ages, and spends more time afield, it will increasingly let the wind do the work for him by working the downwind side of the field. An experienced bird dog will take its time, allowing the wind to carry the scent of birds to his nose. Mature bird dogs have learned that it's a waste of energy to charge through every square yard of cover when they can work downwind and allow the air to carry the scent of hidden birds to them. The same holds true for mature deer. As a deer becomes older and older, it will rely more and more on its nose and minimize movement and the danger associated with it.



When glassing, a hunter positions himself so as to check out as much area as possible without changing his location. A wise old buck does the same. One uses his eyes the other uses his nose. Understanding that a deer “sees” the woods with his nose is they key to successful deer hunting.

Smart hunters know that hunting the wind means much more than setting a stand on the downwind side of a deer trail or food plot; they know that the wind will determine how a mature buck will move from area to area, where he will bed, and how he will escape danger. They know that a mature buck uses his nose to “see” the woods like a hunter uses his binoculars to study a drainage basin. They also know that the only way to “beat” a mature buck’s nose is to stay downwind or stay in camp.

### **AIR MOVEMENT**

Air moves across a property like water in a stream. On relatively wide unobstructed areas, stream water is smooth flat and relatively slow. Add a boulder to flat water and you create turbulence as the water courses around, or over, the obstruction. Channel all the water into an 8 foot space along a rock wall and the water will accelerate into a rapidly flowing run; widen the stream and it slows down again. The same can be said of air moving over land.

Conifer thickets, outcrops, gulches and open fields all affect how air will move across a property. In spite of what the weatherman says about wind direction, wind passing over natural topography will ebb and flow, swirl and double back, and pull a dozen other nasty tricks on unsuspecting hunters; deer know this, and know how to use their nose, to stay alive.

This hunter will have little difficulty reading the wind in this falling snow. The spruce plantings in the background are deflecting air movement dramatically as the swirling flurries indicate. It's time for him to get out of this "tree canyon" and get into some clean air.



Envision yourself in the woods during a moderate snowstorm. Everywhere you look snowflakes are riding the air currents, dipping and diving, floating on air. The next time you are actually out in a snowstorm, try to follow a unique snowflake or two. You will find that in some areas they swirl, while in others they line out like a rifle shot. In other areas, they may float along seemingly without a care in the world. While the movement may seem random, and even chaotic, it is not; snowflakes go where the wind takes them, and the wind is merely reacting to the various forces and factors it encounters on its way over the landscape. Think of a snowstorm as a light switch that, when thrown, can identify the air currents in the woods. The only way humans can turn the switch on is to use something like smoke, or wind floaters, or milkweed seeds to help us "see" the wind. Deer "see" the wind with their nose and the switch is thrown 24-7.

**IT'S HARD TO HAVE A DEER HUNTING CONVERSATION AT KINDRED SPIRITS WITHOUT MENTIONING THE WIND. IN FACT, WE TALK ABOUT IT SO MUCH SOME SPECIALIZED TERMS HAVE WORKED THEIR WAY INTO OUR VOCABULARY.**