

INTRODUCTION

FROM GROUND TO GUN



Thirty eight days into the archery season, Neil finally moved on a buck he had been watching since before the season. The pieces of the plan were coming together and it was time to kill him.

The 10-point first appeared on camera during the first week of our initial camera survey. Like most of our mature bucks, he first showed under the cover (and safety) of darkness. We didn't have to look too hard to know he belonged on the "shooter list," in fact, he belonged at the top of the list. Bucks like this one are hard to come by in our area of western New York; he clearly was better than 99% of the bucks in our area or, as we like to say, he was a member of the "top 1% club."

This nice 10-pointer got our attention the first time our cameras caught up with him. He went to the top of our "shooter list" and stayed there all season. We used cameras to pinpoint his whereabouts and tell us when he started to move during daylight hours.



We took one look at the buck and began working on a hunting strategy. Our first task was to learn more about him. He could be a "traveler" passing through or we could be in luck and have photographed a "resident" buck. The "travelers" show up for a photo op and are never seen again. The "residents" generally show up on camera on a somewhat regular basis; their home range can often be identified by triangulating with camera locations. Until we knew more about how he was using (or not using) the property, it would be counter productive to even think about hunting him.

Neil set a few more cameras in some of the areas he suspected the buck would frequent and sure enough he showed a few more times on 3 strategically located cameras. He seemed to be working a 100-acre section of our property. The problem was, he would disappear for days at a time which generally means we were dealing with "a traveling man" who liked to wander about the neighborhood. "Travelers" don't live long in our part

of the country. A neighbor caught him on film a mile away confirming our worse suspicions. We were dealing with a “traveler” and that’s what we called him.

We were also dealing with a buck that appeared to be almost completely nocturnal. His nocturnal wandering habits were keeping him alive for now but before long, the rut would be in full swing and he would throw caution to the wind and start moving during daylight hours.

We’ve been managing 500 acres for almost 25 years, and have come to understand how important land and habitat is to whitetails. We’ve planted dozens of acres of food plots, created hundreds of acres of cover, and set aside hundreds of acres of “off limits” whitetail sanctuaries. We spent hundreds of hours on the land, figuring out the rhythms and cycles of the land; what grows when and where and sometimes even the “why” of natural things and how deer use them. For the first time in our hunting lives, we were actually beginning to understand how deer interact with the land and how important land is to understanding deer. We started to connect the dots and the stage was set to grow and kill mature bucks like “Traveler.”



“Traveler’s” name was well-earned. He came and went on a whim and was anything but predictable. He even showed once as daylight was drawing to a close. There was no hunting this guy until he settled down to some sort of a predictable pattern and gave up his vampire ways.

The buck seemed to be hanging out on a 100-acre or so section of our property. It encompassed 12 acres of food plots, 50+ acres of improved cover, and 5 or so off-limits sanctuary areas. Six or 7 doe family groups called the area home to complete the picture. It was the perfect spot for a wise old buck to settle in.

Our strategy was to settle him in the area by giving him plenty of room and keeping the pressure off him. We'd let our cameras do the work for us. We put the 100 acres completely off limits to hunting and other activity other than checking cameras (once per week at mid-day). We would hunt him when the time was right. We wanted to create a "comfort zone" for him to set up in for the breeding season.

Hunting pressure was mounting in the neighborhood and, if the past was any indication of the future, he would begin to feel the pressure and head for a safe place to set up for the rut. We are surrounded by thousands of acres of big mountain country which is pretty safe to lay up in but the surrounding mountains offer little in the way of quality habitat. If we could "anchor him" on our property, it would only be a matter of time before he showed during daylight hours. Our food, cover, and ample population of "soon to be in estrus" does would entice him to come home and stay home (at least we hoped). It would also only be a matter of time until he started working the hunting complex Neil had built a few years earlier with bucks like him in mind.

And boy, did he ever come home (as the amazing "welcome home" photo below clearly shows). With the developing rut, he not only came home but started to move in the light of day as 4 consecutive days of daylight pictures indicate. He was home, in love, and no longer nocturnal. He

This early morning pic shows him staying out well beyond his usual bed time. Things were definitely headed in the right direction. There are at least 5 does in the background and our buck is out and about on the prowl.



was also using the hunting complex Neil had designed. Our cameras had caught “Traveler” on the large destination plot a number of times since the breeding pictures were taken; there was a good chance he would stop by to check out the resident does who feed there every evening. He had become a bit complacent and was doing a good deal of doe-checking in and around the plot. And for good reason, we were 38 days into the archery season and the area had yet to be hunted!

The hunting complex featured a large 6-acre destination food plot, some heavy sanctuary cover and some smaller hunting plots. It was designed with the prevailing winds in mind which were primarily from the SW-W-NW. Years of layout experience went into the design which was carefully laid out with air movement in mind. Any wind from the W-NW would pass across the 6-acre field, then climb above the surrounding woodlands (which rapidly fell off into a valley). The area had all kinds of “clean air” which is what we look for in hunting locations.

We’d set a stand back 30 yards off of the field a few months earlier. The stand overlooked a “natural” crossing gap created by strategically placing brush barriers along the field’s perimeter. You could shoot into the woods, cover the gap, and shoot 10 or 15 yards out into the field if need be. Best of all, the downwind side of the stand featured plenty of “safe air” (see Chapter 10 on wind) so the hunter would not be detected by deer moving downwind of the stand. It was a high probability stand which had already produced a number of mature buck sightings. Neil needed a steady NW wind to hunt it and the weatherman cooperated right on schedule. The hunt was officially on, exactly 52 days after we first laid eyes on the buck.



We waited patiently for “Traveler” to abandon his nocturnal habits. We also were looking for him to set up shop and “stay to home.” This pic was proof positive that the pieces of the puzzle had come together and it was time to get after him.