

Outdoors

How to ruin a perfectly good hunting stand

Ruining a good deer stand is easy. I used to do it without even knowing it. You can do it in about three days, simply by using it too much.

I first wrote about “stand burnout” many years ago, and a friend of mine, another writer who lives in North Dakota, told me later that he’d never noticed, until he read my piece, the gradual decline in deer sightings from a new tripod in a hot spot.

“The first day I hunted there,” he said, “whitetails practically walked between the legs of the tripod. I’d seen a fine buck there, and I hunted it pretty hard early in the season, but he never showed up. After I read your piece on stand burnout, the light dawned: the more I hunted that stand, the fewer deer I saw from it, and even those few sightings were at two or three hundred yards.” This fellow is a handgun hunter, and that kind of range is stretching a pistol barrel pretty hard.

Another friend was the manager of a large hunting club in a river bottom in east Texas. He’s also a wildlife professor at a university and as part of a

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research project, he had radio-collared several mature bucks on the club property so he could track their movements.

The club had a number of comfortable box blinds strategically located around the property, and they were quite regularly occupied during deer season.

“Watching those bucks work their way between our stands reminded me of NFL wide receivers finding the seams in a zone defense,” he chuckled. “They had their routes laid out very precisely, so they could walk between two stands with minimum exposure to a hunter in either one. Obviously, they understood the nature and purpose of those blinds perfectly.”

A hunter cannot drive or walk to a deer blind every day for three consecutive days without notifying

every whitetail of either sex living within a quarter-mile radius of the blind that danger lurks there.

On my Webb County ranch I recorded sightings from new stands on senderos offering long vistas through the brush. On the first day I might see multiple bucks within easy rifleshot, but after three days of steady hunting from that stand, the sightings – if any – were of deer crossing the sendero perhaps three or four hundred yards downwind.

And deer don’t forget quickly, either; I also saw bucks stick their heads out of the brush and study a favorite hunting stand for many minutes before exposing themselves – and this was in summertime when no human had been near that stand for more than six months!

Not even an automatic corn feeder can overcome the stand burnout syndrome. The animals just shift their visits mostly to nighttime.

Out of curiosity, I once put in a new ground blind and swept all the trails and sandy spots downwind of it clean of tracks. The very next morning the sign plain-



To preserve a well-placed deer stand’s usefulness, let it rest a few days between hunts, and take great care not to let a passing whitetail become aware of your approach, presence, or departure.

ly revealed that deer had scent-checked the new blind under cover of night. And some of those tracks were too big to be does.

Is there any way to beat stand burnout? Yes, a couple of ways. The first and

best is to avoid hunting the same blind more than one half-day per week.

The second is to devise an approach to a new stand that lets you reach and enter it with minimum exposure at any point along the way.

An example might be walking to the stand under cover of the banks of a gully or creek, or behind a ridge. Lacking a gully, try to find — or clear — an upwind approach through heavy underbrush, along which you can quietly move unseen. Be extremely careful about your scent, even if you’re a gun hunter. And make a point of getting into the stand well before daylight and leaving it after dark. In other words, take every possible precaution to avoid being seen, heard, or smelled while getting to or from the stand, as well as when actually in/on the stand.

I know this is all a lot of extra trouble, but it can make the difference between having a chance at the cunning old wallhanger bucks and settling for those immature pencil-horns for which the Hill Country is famous.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Peterson’s hunting magazine and author of the monthly column “Buck Sense” and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, “Hunting Trophy deer.” He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for “Shooting Times,” “Rifle,” “Handloader,” “Guns & Ammo” and Peterson’s “Hunting.”