

Outdoors

Deer 'sign' can tell hunters a lot

I can hear somebody out there mumbling, "Why do I have to look for deer? I'll just put up a feeder and let the deer look for me!"

That's OK, but you may save yourself half a season's hunting time by putting the feeder in the right place to begin with ... or, if you can have a look around before signing the lease contract, you may avoid wasting your money on a pasture with few or no deer on it.

The next thought of many would be commissioning a helicopter survey. That's OK, too, if you don't mind spending the money, but helicopter results are likely to be disappointing in the Hill Country (or anyplace else with heavy stands of hardwood timber). At best, I think helicopter surveys average little better than about 60 percent accuracy, anywhere.

Besides, it's more fun to do your own scouting. I'm currently in the process of scouting a new 1,200-acre lease in Blanco County, so the subject is currently on my mind.

Talking to anyone who knows the property in question — ranch hands, other hunters, game wardens, meter readers, etc. — can be valuable, but I advise you to take their reports with a grain of salt. Many ranchers pay

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little attention to wildlife on their land, and may not know a big buck when they see him ... or they see anything with antlers as "big".

We begin by looking for sign. Many hunters these days pay little attention to deer sign, much less try to interpret it, but it can greatly shorten your search for a trophy buck. The word "sign" includes tracks, droppings, beds, browse marks and buck sign (rubs, scrapes and shed antlers).

Next, drive or walk the fence lines, both boundary and cross fences, watching for crossing points. These can be spots where the deer can go through or under the fence, or where they jump it, and are quite conspicuous.

Next, do the same thing on the ranch roads, watching for conspicuous game trails, often crossing in low spots or where brush or timber closes in on each side of the road.

If there are watercourses,

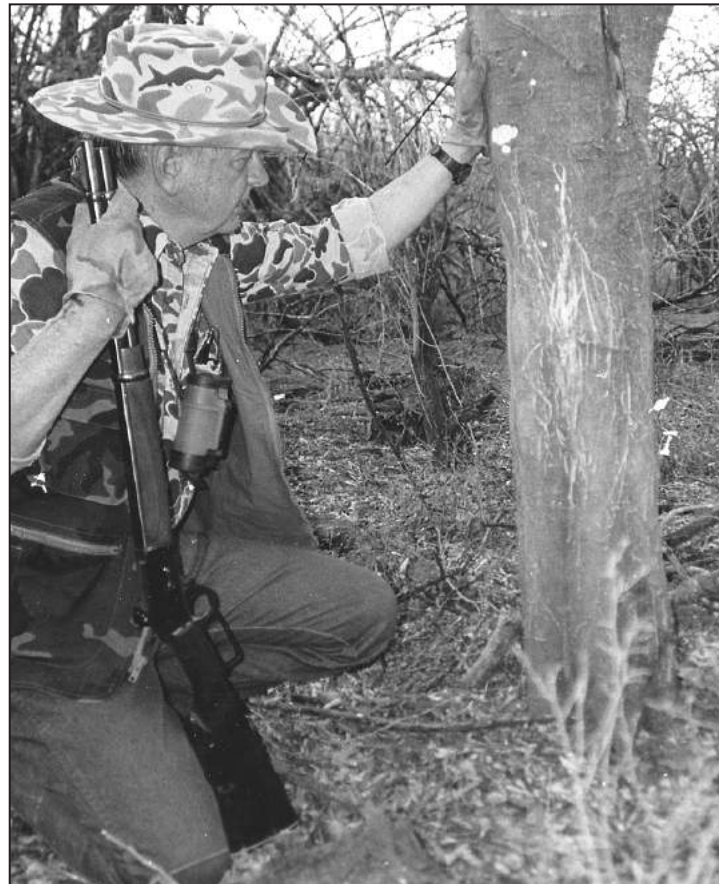


Photo by John Wootters

The author studies a most unusual rub on a South Texas hackberry tree, finally deciding that it was made mostly by the brow tines of a fairly large-antlered buck. Small bucks, no matter how ambitious, never tackle a tree of this size.

the same kind of search will turn up places where deer prefer to cross the streambed. Anything, in fact, that may serve as a barrier to funnel deer movement should be inspected, even windrows of bulldozed brush can change movement patterns; look for the places where large animals can pass through. But remember that cattle, sheep, goats, javelinas, wild hogs, and exotic game also make "game" trails. Make sure those are deer tracks in the trail.

Needless to say, the margins of stock tanks can tell

you a lot, as can crops like wheat or oats, if the deer can get to them. Keep a sharp eye

out for thickets and dense bottomlands that may be retreats for pressured bucks, especially in connection with sharp topographical features in remote, difficult-to-reach spots. Also south-facing slopes with at least some low cover; that may be the buck's bedroom.

Bear in mind that buck scrapes very commonly appear in exactly the same spots from season to season, and that rubbing damage may remain visible on saplings for years.

Also, in any habitat there are certain species of trees preferred as rubbing posts by whitetail bucks. In South Texas, it's the green-barked retama and small mesquites; in the Piney Woods it's pine saplings and an occasional cedar (a different species from our Hill Country variety).

In west Kerr County, I see rubs on several kinds of slender, smooth-barked saplings — persimmon, hackberry, chinaberry, soapberry, etc. — but very rarely on junipers. Rubs are useful indicators of where the bucks are, how

many bucks reside in the area, roughly how big the most dominant ones are, and the progress of the rut.

It pays to make written notes on all these manifestations of deer presence and distribution, either in a journal or on a map (preferably aerial). You'll be surprised at how rapidly your familiarity with the terrain and its inhabitants will grow. In a couple of seasons, your understanding of the local deer herd and how they use the property may actually be more thorough and accurate than that of a non-hunter who has lived on that land all his life.

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."