

'Grand Slam' WHITETAILS

No, we're talking the deer equivalent of a "slam" on wild turkeys. This is about how to get a "four-run" advantage over that trophy buck you're after.

by Steve Rockey

The humidity was high, and the temperature was rising steadily. It was one of those days most people would prefer to spend indoors, enjoying air-conditioned comfort. However, I was spending it scouting for deer.

The heat was zapping my strength. Regardless, I felt great. It was the refreshing satisfaction that comes from finding an area that begs to be hunted.

Part of my plan for this early-summer morning had been to go into a new area that looked promising on an aerial photo, to see if I could discover a good location for a tree stand for the archery opener. Hours later, having uncovered what I'd hoped to find, I was now en route to my car parked over a half-mile away. I felt the pride of accomplishment because of what I'd found, anticipation because I knew what I could expect from what I'd found, and anxiety because I realized four long months would separate the two.

You see, I'd just gained a "four-run advantage" on deer in the area, though I'd never hunted them on that section of public hunting ground.

When I was a boy, playing baseball was one of my favorite forms of recreation. Throughout public school and especially college, playing ball taught me many things. But one of the lasting impressions that the sport

made on me was the confidence that comes from getting a big lead.

Well, my days of playing ball have long since been replaced by the pursuit of mature whitetails. However, I've found that if you're hunting big deer, getting an early lead is just as important as it is on the ball field.

A MASTER OF SURVIVAL

Anyone who has ever taken on the challenge of trying to outwit a mature buck knows that the task is daunting. Defeat is frequent, and it leaves even the experts with a feeling of total admiration for the whitetail's instinctive wiles. Even with every advantage man can possibly achieve, success is far from guaranteed.

Proper scouting is how we get the lead on a big buck and dramatically improve our odds of "winning." This lead not only will put us in better position to fill a tag, it also will produce the confidence to get the job done.

ONE-RUN ADVANTAGE: COVER CHANGES

Among the first things I try to determine in any area I scout is where the deer most likely bed. While I seldom will penetrate this sanctuary, I always want to be as certain as possible where it is that Mr. Big is headed around or before first light.

Certain clues will help you determine the location of these refuges, but in general, just look for the nastiest

cover in a given area. Steep hillsides choked with thorn bushes, impenetrable cutovers and grassy marshes are almost always the exclusive hideout of the real slammers, at least until hunting pressure forces other members of the deer herd into the same sanctuaries.

Of particular importance to me is where this thick cover converges with cover of a different kind. Often referred to as "edges," these fringes are virtual magnets for whitetails.

One of the earliest discoveries that has benefited my trophy hunting is bucks' propensity to travel these habitat seams. Perhaps it's because there's normally an abundance of various foods in such spots. Regardless, when I find a buck's bedroom located closely to a subtle edge, and the edge is in the direction of an obvious nighttime feeding source, I get excited.

Open edges, such as fields or roads, don't ignite my fire as much as "soft" fringes deeper in the forest do. Seams where mature forests meet new growth close to a buck's refuge constitute an advantage if you then strategically place a stand nearby. Upon reaching this point, you have a one-run lead.

TWO-RUN ADVANTAGE: CONFINING CORNERS

Imagine having scored a run to go ahead of an undefeated champ — and then, the next inning, scoring again.



That's essentially what you're doing if you follow up finding an edge with locating a "corner" that funnels the buck through a confined area.

These pinch points exist in often overlooked places, and wise is the hunter who searches for them on aerial photos and topographical maps. When you find one, it's time to get excited. And yes, such un hunted spots do exist, even on public land.

Always check out spots that scream, "Corner!" Whether it's a pond, a steep gully, an isolated field or a tangle of twisted trees, any natural or manmade barrier can alter deer movement. To get around it, whitetails are forced to follow a particular route. If you can determine that the buck's travel will be altered in a specific way as he moves between Point A (bedding area) to

Point B (feeding area), you've given yourself another advantage.

To me, any cover change along with a confining corner means a two-run advantage. Having found one of these on the scouting excursion noted earlier thrilled me. But then, I knew a three-run edge, if possible, would provide an even safer cushion.

THREE-RUN ADVANTAGE: CONDITIONED CHOICES

All of us find certain foods more appealing than others. Just the sight of lima beans at the dinner table is enough to make some people lose their appetites. (Ask my son, Josh). For another, it might be spinach or liver. All of these are conditioned choices we make, based largely upon our personal composition as well as our individual experiences. Conversely, there are certain food

Finding where a mature buck is feeding is only part of a good game plan. There are three other key factors to look for. Photo by Ken Thommes.

items that appeal to us consistently, others largely at select times.

What does this have to do with deer hunting? Every spring, summer and fall, whitetails have conditioned food preferences that are as constant as the heavenly lights. Winter is the only exception, as deer (in the North, anyway) forage on whatever food sources are available.

Armed with the knowledge that deer are also selective feeders, we can give ourselves another big advantage. Whatever time your deer season opens, learn the food sources that deer conditionally crave at that time of year and try to find those sources

in and around buck bedding areas. Ideally, you'll find at least one of these close to edges of cover and not far from a confining corner.

In October, when bow season opens here in New York, the deer are going crazy over certain foods that just seem to trip their trigger. Knowing this, in early season I focus on apple trees laden with ripe fruit, beech trees or oaks dropping mast, etc., all in close proximity to the other habitat features noted.

Preferred foods definitely vary from place to place. In the South, for example, a persimmon tree or swamp oak might serve the same role. The bottom line is that regardless of where you hunt and whatever seasonal food sources deer there conditionally crave, those are the menu items you should try to locate.

When you find a combination of all of these factors together in close proximity, you have a three-run lead. That's quite comfortable, but add one more run in the next inning and you'll have a grand slam advantage.

FOUR-RUN ADVANTAGE: CALLING CARDS

If you take all we've discussed up to this point and add to it an area that's laced with large quantities of rubs from previous seasons and old scrapes that are still visible, you have a truly winning prospect.

If a big buck is in the vicinity, rubs should appear in great numbers in and around the cover edges you've located. Experience has taught me that bucks make the overwhelming majority of their rubs within 20 yards of edges, whether they are of the "soft" or "hard" variety. Scraping patterns seem to be similar.

These rubs and scrapes are visual and olfactory calling cards that are used to stimulate priming pheromones in doe groups, all of which are intricate components that factor into the rut. The importance of verifying such sign in and around a hunting location can't be overemphasized.

AND THE WINNER IS . . .

If you keep in mind prevailing wind direction and pay close attention to scent elimination and concealment, not only will you climb into your opening-day stand with the anticipation and excitement hunting a new area creates, you'll stand watch with more confidence than ever. When you're going against conditioned contestants that are the whitetail equivalent of Barry Bonds, who wouldn't feel more confident being four runs up?

Most match-ups are won by the player who's better at the fundamentals. Take that mindset into your scouting, and you might hit a grand slam of your own this year!



While the author's strategy is great for early season, it works later in the year as well. Through savvy scouting and careful hunting, he arrowed this 154-inch brute four months after he found the deer's sanctuary. Photo courtesy of Steve Rockey.

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