

7 Late-Season Deer Tactics

by Jay Langston



Photo by Jay Langston.

This 5 1/2-year-old buck fell to Jay as he still-hunted his way back to the truck after his morning hunt. It pays to be hunting every minute you are in the woods!

Opening day of deer season is an event. As the first rays of light climb toward the horizon, shots ring out signaling that another deer season has begun. A lot of deer tags get filled the first day or two of the season each year, but what about those hunters who fail to get their bucks so quickly? There's hope — and time — for hunters who don't punch their tags on the opener. Employing some off-the-wall tactics can help.

One of the first things to consider when hunting after the first wave of hunter activity has subsided is that deer are holding tight to cover. After the peak of hunting activity is past, whitetails go into overdrive to fill their bellies ... if the weather is cold enough. When it's below freezing and the whitetails' metabolism requires that they get on their feet during the daylight to eat, mid- to late-season food sources are a good place to start.

HUNT THE BACK DOOR

Brown water dripped from the last in a limit of greenheads hanging from the duck strap slung over my shoulder. I had given up on deer hunting and had resorted to busting waterfowl to pass the time. Standing waist deep in a backwater slough, I felt the steady, southeasterly wind turn and come from the north for the first time in three days. The warm southern wind had stalling the duck migration and created prime waterfowling, but it also made deer hunting tough. While the last of our group scanned the sky for another mallard to fill a limit, I nearly filled my waders trying to get ashore. Three minutes later, I found fifth gear on the big Polaris 4-wheeler as I sped along the gravel road back to

camp. Twenty minutes later, I traded waders for deer gear and was back aboard the ATV stirring up more dust.

The reason for my haste was what longtime friend Stewart “Bear” Dunn and I had found two days earlier while scouting a 90-acre patch of woods on the 6,000-acre farm we were hunting. The familiar patch of timber was home to a mature buck that was laying down some serious sign. The problem I faced was that I wasn’t the only hunter who had found the buck’s sign.

Along with several scrapes and thigh-sized rubs, I located a climbing tree stand that had been set up to hunt the funnel the buck was traveling while the wind was blowing from the southeast. I soon learned that the stand belonged to a relative of the adjacent landowner, who also had permission to hunt that patch of woods. It was time to put a little twisted logic into my plans for hunting the buck.

Instead of crowding the other hunter, Bear and I placed one of his ladder stands against an oak tree along a wooded ditch between two huge plowed fields about 700 yards from where we found the buck’s sign. The stand overlooked a winter wheat field that was 350 yards from the tree line on the backside of the timber block.

More than six hours had passed when I heard the faint sound of a 4-wheeler. About 5 minutes later, I caught movement in my peripheral vision and locked onto the huge buck as it bounded across the field to my left. I tracked the buck in the crosshairs as he raced across the field for the safety of the trees on my side. Just as the buck came into range, I touched the trigger. The shot missed, but turned the buck away from the tree line. At the crack of the gun, the buck kicked in the afterburners, but luckily still headed in my general direction. By the time I racked in a second round and got him in the scope, the buck was just crossing the 100-yard mark. The second shot caught him in the front of his on-side shoulder raking him from stem to stern. His head went down, antlers plowing the turf and flipping him end over end like a rag doll.

Back at camp that night I reveled in the story-telling, while I cradled the buck’s 22-inch-wide antlers in my hands. The 8-point buck later scored 143 B&C. My friends made the moment even more enjoyable when they reminded me that my “back door plan” had worked to perfection: hunt a likely escape route and wait for the other hunter to push him to me.



Photo by Jay Langston.

The author packs out a buck sporting 12 long points. Jay killed the mature buck well past opening day's excitement.

That hunt and many more like it have ended in success when I employed tactics that went against the grain. A wealth of magazines, books, videos and other media have been dedicated to using a buck's predictable travel habits against it. To overcome the whitetails' senses, it is most simple to climb a tree between where they are and where they want to go. Most often, tactics focus on three primary things that influence deer traffic: food, sex and forced movement. More often than not, humans are more predictable than the deer they hunt, which can work to our disadvantage.

HUNT BETWEEN THE TRUCK AND THE TREE

One of the hardest temptations I have had to overcome is the tendency to rush to my stand so I could begin hunting. Not alone in that thought, others have voiced to me a similar experience of spooking deer on the way to the stand. When I started slowing down and still-hunting to and from my stand sites, I began seeing deer before they saw me. I have killed several mature bucks "between the truck and the tree" since I changed my habits.

Choose a route to your stand that is downwind of the stand site, or downwind of the area where you anticipate deer are bedding. That way you'll spot deer before they can scent you. Once you step into the woods, take your time and stay on full alert.

A good pair of binoculars, like Nikon's new ProStaff 7 8×42, will help you know what's ahead.

Walking back out of the woods toward your vehicle is another time to pay attention. Two seasons back, I took the time to still-hunt my way back toward the truck after a late-

season morning hunt. It was the second rut and I caught movement across a wide valley. When I determined it was a deer, I moved to a tree for a rest. I caught the buck in my scope and saw tall tines. I waited for at least 45 seconds while the buck worked along a hidden trail on the side of a hill. When he stepped into an opening, I sent the shot on its way and the “whack” was unmistakable. The 5 1/2-year-old buck weighed far above the local average, and sported 12-inch back tines.



Photo by Jay Langston.

The author's son, Wil Langston, is quite a seasoned hunter. Wil killed this 8-pointer with his muzzleloader after placing a stand for a back door hunt where he was sure deer would be pushed to him by other hunters. Using other hunters to move deer toward you is a good tactic at any time.

GO IN AFTER DAYLIGHT

One of the most annoying sounds I know is that of a deer snorting at me as I approach a stand in poor light. Chances of intercepting a mature buck go way down once other deer go on alert. For this very reason, I began waiting until I had light enough to see and shoot comfortably before using the tactic of still-hunting to my stand.

There are some situations that warrant getting on stand before first light, where legal, but it's a rule that should be broken when it gets in the way of bagging deer. I have noticed that on nearly windless mornings there is a tendency toward very slight easterly wind currents. On mornings like that, it's a good idea to approach your stand with the sun at your back in order to use the slight wind drift to your advantage.

HUNT THE LATE SHIFT

Early-season hunts near large agricultural food sources are difficult at best during the early morning hours. Morning hunts there likely will cause you to spook feeding deer as you approach. If you have a good buck frequenting an open food source, you can increase your odds of connecting by hunting only during afternoons.

DEER CAN'T COUNT

Deer can't count past one, as far as I can tell. Most of the time, that's all the knowledge

they'll need to stay alive. I have watched bucks go on alert as a hunter passes on a 4-wheeler, and then relax again when the hunter drives back by a few minutes later. I've watched bucks react the same way toward hunters on foot.

Last season, I put the tactic to use when I hitched a ride past a stand site overlooking a winter wheat field. A few minutes later, we drove past the stand once again and I dropped off. I saw several deer from the stand, but the monster buck that I was waiting for didn't appear until a few ticks after legal shooting hours. I plan to use the same tactic next month in the same spot on the same deer.

STICK IT TO THEM

Charlie Spear, another old deer hunting buddy, taught me a valuable lesson about buck behavior in relation to their rubs. Charlie has "rubbed up" several respectable bucks by scraping a stick against a sapling to simulate a buck polishing his antlers. Bucks are naturally attracted to the noise of another buck.

I've had similar experiences when bucks heard me scraping bark as I went up a tree with a climbing stand. I learned the hard way to climb as quickly as possible, without banging the metal stand, and getting ready to shoot. After missing a couple of opportunities, I've since bagged three bucks that came to investigate me scraping up a tree with a stand.

HOLY GROUND

One of the strangest places I've hunted was a deer sanctuary ... in more than one sense of the word. Rural church property and cemeteries can be hideouts for cagey bucks. Nick Gilmore, the editor working on this story, is familiar with one church I'm writing about. He's hunted the same place, and has listened to the same country church choir while he's been 30 feet up a tree.

Scattered throughout virtually any rural countryside are small rural churches that often lie on a 5- to 10-acre parcel of land. For example, in nearly every community, benevolent landowners at one time bequeathed parcels of land to build churches for the people who worked their land. Those churches and the surrounding property are still in use today by descendents of the people who worked the land surrounding the churches more than a century ago.

One such church is located adjacent to Loafer's Glory Hunt Club where I was a member for a decade. Since much of the countryside surrounding the property was planted in pines 35 years ago, the big oaks on the church property were deer magnets. Add to the equation the fact that the church property saw no hunting pressure, and it is easy to see why more than one buck used it as a daytime sanctuary. I hunted a trail that crossed our club property and led to the church. Doing so, I put my tag on several respectable bucks that used the church property as a bedding and feeding area.

I know other hunters who successfully hunt either on or near a church or cemetery for the same reasons. Even if you can't get permission to hunt directly on the church's property,

it might be a good idea to do a little scouting. Learn the travel patterns of deer that congregate on church land and then secure permission to hunt adjacent lands.

Put some of these tactics to work if you still have a tag or two to fill later in the deer season. It might make some difference in your freezer space this winter!

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