

Rattle Loud and Often for Rutting Bucks

by Dave Hurteau

You've heard the standard advice touting realism in rattling: To begin each rattling sequence, rake the antlers against a tree for added realism. At the end of each sequence, emit several deep grunts for a more lifelike illusion. For the most natural-sounding fight, clash the horns in several 30- to 60-second bursts every 20 minutes.

All of this has somehow become accepted whitetail hunting dogma. Well, forget it! Okay, don't totally forget it. There are times when this kind of ultrarealism is not categorically over-the-top—namely, when you know a buck can hear you.

Say you've snuck very close to the bedding area of a late-rising buck in hopes of calling him into range during shooting light. Then, by all means, be the deer. Can't hurt; might help.

Otherwise, the gospel according to outdoor writers doesn't warrant a literal reading on this topic. First, the basic premise is flawed. Raking branches, for example, is not necessarily more realistic. For those who insist it is, I invite them to explain this to the countless bucks that have skipped that step during a fight. Point is, buck battles are extremely variable.

Second, bucks do not read outdoor magazines. They don't hang back listening for some deviation from the accepted rules of rattling before deciding whether or not to commit. By and large, they either hear you and are interested, hear you and are not interested, or just don't hear you.

Which brings us to the crux of the matter. In most situations—especially during the rut, when buck movement is unpredictable—you do not know that a buck can hear you. Rather, you are trying to get one to hear you as he passes through the area. Since you have no idea exactly when he'll be within earshot, it makes no sense to conform to any particular rules of timing. Suppose you follow the standard advice and make three one-minute rattling sequences, but he's out of hearing range. And right in the middle of your obligatory 20 minute pause, he moves into earshot. When you start up again, he's gone.

Oops.

In short, when the goal is to get a roving buck to hear your horns, the most sensible thing is to forget all the complicated rules of realism and do something fundamental: Rattle loud and rattle often.

“My sentiments exactly,” says well-known whitetail consultant and longtime Buffalo County, Wis., outfitter Ted Marum of Midwest Whitetail Management Services (715-495-2988). “If bucks don't hear you, they won't come. Simple as that. Unless you know a buck is close, the best method is to hit the horns hard and often from a location where

you can be heard from a long ways,” he recommends. “Location is critical. When you rattle from the top of a ridge where two or three different pockets of cover come together, for example, the sound travels a lot farther than it does when you’re calling from way down in a timbered bottom.”

When you’re not smashing horns, put all your focus into watching and listening for responding bucks—not fiddling around with grunt calls and bleat cans and tree-raking. You can’t be sure a buck has heard your rattling at this point, so why would you expect one to hear much quieter calls? Instead, save the subtlety for when you can actually see that a buck has responded, is close enough to hear softer calls, and needs extra coaxing to come into shooting range.

Until then, keep it simple. Just bang the horns together.

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