

# What the Whitetail Rut Means to You

by Mike Marsh



Every whitetail hunter knows about the rut, that magical time when any hunter can increase his odds of taking a trophy simply by being in the woods at the right place at the right time.

The first order of business in making the most of the rutting period is in knowing exactly when it occurs. Most veteran hunters name a period of one to two weeks for the rut's duration in their hunting area. But few take advantage of science in determining the peak date.

The true peak is the day when does are actually bred. A call to the state game agency can confirm this date. Once this date is known, the hunter should make every effort to hunt this date, dividing his remaining hunting days on either side.

Rutting bucks literally “come out of the woodwork.” Telemetry studies show that a buck with a year-round home range of a couple of hundred acres expands his territory by hundreds to thousands of acres when seeking receptive does. Rather than spending nearly all of their time moving under cover of darkness as they do most of the year, during this narrow window of opportunity trophy bucks spend most of their time moving during daylight. How a hunter uses those few precious hours dictates success or failure.

The first thing to consider is that a buck no longer dictates his own movements. When he locks onto a receptive doe, he sticks with her for up to three days. A legendary buck hunter told me his success was based on deer sign, but not activity at scrapes or rubs.

When he sees big tracks made by a heavy buck, he knows he has three days to get a shot. Biologists have confirmed this observation through telemetry studies.

Does usually don't travel outside their small home ranges and that is key to strategies for taking a trophy buck. Most of us hunt small acreages, either where we lease or own land, or with clubs that allow only limited areas for an individual's stands. Even when hunting large public lands, we tend to concentrate our efforts at small locations.

If the hunter continues concentrating on the same spots during the rut as he has all season and during previous seasons, he is expecting a doe to bring him a buck that more than likely already knows of the danger. The hunter is hoping that the buck's distracted attention, riveted on a doe, causes it to make a mistake. Occasionally, it happens.

But many times I have seen a doe bound into a food plot or field in front of my favorite stands. The buck that chased her into the opening has paused an instant to look up at my stand then poked her with his antlers, forcing her back into cover before I had time to decide whether he was a "shooter." Obviously, old bucks know the locations of places where hunters perpetually perch within their territory.

The hunter should check out areas other than his primary stand sites, paying attention to foot sign. Moving a stand site just a short distance, even to the opposite end of a food plot, can fool a buck while he is hunting down a doe. As simple an act as moving a stand from a field to an entry lane can make all the difference. Tracks are the best indicator of rutting activity because bucks may or may not be hitting scrapes or rubs.

During this time, trophy bucks are spending more time tending does, so scrape activity is often no more than a lick and a promise if he happens to walk by. The types of tracks to look for are those that indicate chasing is occurring, tracks that repeatedly cross an opening showing a buck is tending a doe, or torn-up ground where bucks have been fighting.

For those three magic days after locating some big tracks, the hunter should watch an opening that offers visibility to the maximum range of his weapon. For areas and seasons restricted to limited-range weapons such as shotguns, muzzleloaders or archery equipment, the most modern projectiles should be used to extend killing range. Breeding bucks chase does all over the place, so a shot opportunity isn't always presented at a known crossing or feeding area. Since a buck might chase a doe into view at any distance, it makes sense to be able to take advantage of what may only be a fleeting opportunity.

During the rut deer are very vocal. A tending buck can make an incredible volume of vocalizations. I once shot a buck that grunted for such long periods while chasing a hot doe that I was certain a trespasser was riding an ATV. Both buck and doe calls are effective. If a hunter hasn't used deer calls in the past, now is a great time for practicing in the field. Not only are bucks receptive to buck talk, does become so territorial they may run into an opening to challenge doe calls.

Chances are good that a doe responding to a call may have a buck in tow. Deer are moving around a great deal, so the standard advice of making a call every 15 minutes to 1/2 hour no longer applies. A constant stream of calls a few minutes apart is called for because the hunter is trying to attract the attention of a deer that is moving rapidly in or out of hearing range.

Adding some antler rattling can also increase auditory attraction. While prevailing advice points to pre-rut as the best time to attract bucks through rattling, some savage antler-thrashings between bucks occur over breeding rights to a receptive doe.

Another way to attract deer to an opening is using an estrous scent. When hunting an opening the hunter should deposit a scent trail by using a dropper or dauber on low vegetation and the ground over the entire length of the opening. Wind direction should be perpendicular to the opening, blowing scent into cover that deer use for security travel such as regenerating clear-cuts, young timber or overgrown fields.

Any buck searching for a doe should be attracted to the scent. Another advantage of using scent is that any buck attracted probably stops to check the wind at the opening where the scent stops, which is also exactly where you want him for making that perfect shot.

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