

BY JOE KOSACK

WASH - DUCKS  
STAY -  
Y OR SHOU



**S**hould I stay, or should I go? The Clash hammered out that lyric about a bad relationship decades ago. But the question also has become a mantra for me after I sit in a tree too long without seeing deer.

In a way, I suppose that's a bad relationship, too.

If there's sign in an area where I haven't seen deer, I usually figure there's still a chance and return. But within a season, I try to decide if I'm too invested in a place.

Time-proven hotspots go cold, almost always weeks before we come to the realization that we played them too often, or trusted them too long.

We also commit to places found through preseason scouting that are loaded with deer sign, only to spend the opener without seeing a deer.

Then there are those hunch spots, usually where you find scrapes or rubs every November. When you hunt them, you might see squat. Yet, you might come back, year after year.

Deer hunters want to see deer, as often as possible. It's why we go. But your ability to see deer is influenced by so many factors.

Some you control. Some you don't.

## **SELECT A SPOT**

The first thing every deer hunter must do is figure out where deer are, because to take one, you must position along traveled routes, or in funnels deer are forced through, or in feeding areas.

Try to steer clear of bedding areas. Visiting them can really disrupt the movements of deer you plan to hunt.

You usually can sort out why deer are in an area by reading sign. Look for signs of feeding – chewed up acorns, nibbled ears of corn, and rut signs – rubs and scrapes. Deer also just might be passing through between feeding and bedding areas, or loafing in the shade. Try to figure it out.

Be cautious about committing to easy-to-reach places that are overrun with deer sign. Unless you're using a trail camera, it's almost impossible to know when those deer are coming through or visiting. I don't use trail-cams because they generally would require me to return to areas I'd sooner stay out of until I hunt them.

When abundant sign is found near open areas, by roads or in farm country, expect most of those movements to be after dark in firearms season. Deer typically prefer to keep a low profile, unless they become habituated to people, or their activities.

Don't pick a hunting spot weeks before the start of season, unless prior years have confirmed its value. There's too much time for deer to shift their activities.

Good bow spots often are not good firearms stands, because of changes in food abundance, cover and hunter densities.

Also, areas that require next to no effort to reach on public property often

# **LD I GO?**

draw a crowd.

If you're hunting public land, you need to get into out-of-the-way places. If you can't, temper your expectations.

Increases in hunter activity in most any area always lead to decreases in deer movements at dawn and dusk. So, strive to stay a step ahead of the other hunters; it could bring you one step closer to whitetails.

Look for fresh sign – particularly in a stand of oaks dripping acorns, or near a cornfield – in less-traveled areas just before the start of season. Go where the crowd doesn't. If you hunt private property, this isn't as big a concern.

It's a good idea to cover your tracks and avoid touching anything while scouting. Don't use obvious trail-markers. If you can find your new hunting spot only in daylight, then hunt it in the afternoon until you become more familiar with it.

Once you pick your spot, stay away from it until you can hunt. Show some restraint.

It likely will help you better control your on-stand patience, a characteristic most good hunters share.

## **FIND FOOD**

Patience is an asset to any deer hunter.

Lacking it will ruin hunts.

Attentiveness also is important. If you don't know what's happening around you, your chances for success as a hunter reduce precipitously.

You must hunt to be a hunter.

Otherwise, you're sitting in the woods, preoccupied with something else.

Consider also that it might be better to take an afternoon off work – if it'll get you deeper in the woods or into places others aren't hunting – than to hunt with the crowd after work.

Extra effort matters a lot in hunting. So

does having a flexible schedule.

In deer hunting, there comes a point when you must gauge whether what you're doing is working.

It's somewhere between the hunter who waits forever and sees nothing and the hunter who bails the quickest.

It's when you start asking yourself, "Should I stay or should I go?"

I've often noticed that if I'm bowhunting and not seeing or hearing squirrels, I'm usually not seeing deer.

Squirrels are always where the food is. And, if they aren't where you are, you're probably in the wrong place.

Squirrels have been especially helpful to me in bow season the past two years, when oaks hit locally by late spring frosts yielded no or small acorns.

Areas where I usually encountered deer were dead quiet. Nothing moved.

After a few hunts of not seeing squirrels, or anything else, I knew I was wasting my time, even though I was on travel routes deer used annually between feeding and bedding areas.

With no cornfields in the area, I set out to find stands of oaks dropping acorns. Most were in mixed stands of red oak, in areas where moist soils and hemlock cover were found.

The first night I set up in a new area – hours after I found it – I saw deer.

## **CHANGE UP**

Don't wait forever for deer to come.

Ladder-stand hunters often fall prey to this, because it's such a pain to move that contraption.

But if you're not seeing deer, you ought to move it.

Unless food becomes available nearby, or hunters push deer back into your area, a spot that seems short on deer is unlikely to change the rest of the fall.



People who can't give up their hotspots also find themselves in this situation eventually.

It's why no hunter should invest completely in one location. We all should have at least six to 10 places to rotate through in hunting season.

If you don't, if you overuse a location, you might stop seeing deer.

Ladder-stand hunters can mix things up by still-hunting, hunting on the ground – perhaps in a portable ground blind – or by using a hang-on or portable tree stand.

Remember, this is life-and-death for deer. The easier you make it for them, the harder they'll make it for you.

Firearms opening days are very different for most of us since we've moved almost entirely to buck-only openers – excluding DMAP properties.

Ten years ago, the hills echoed with shooting around sunrise. Deer were pushed everywhere.

More recently, it hasn't been the same. Fewer hunters have been afield on openers. Fewer shots have kept you guessing where deer are.

Time will tell how a Saturday opener might change that.

But the recent toning down of the opening-day ruckus has called for an adjustment in strategies.

Most hardcore hunters used to hunt dark-to-dark in their stand on opening day, but with fewer people sneaking around and pushing deer, sitting tight isn't a sure thing.

Deer on opening day have tended more often to hole-up in cover and stay there until dusk. If you've struck out into lunchtime on a firearms opener, it isn't a bad idea to try some other location.

I prefer to start at a higher elevation and then, if I need to, go to a lower elevation.

Where I live, mountaintop acorns

usually are cleaned up by the firearms season and deer are running the slopes to farm areas.

In the morning, they're usually coming up. In the evening, going down. Bucks often move east and west, trying to intercept does, or pick up their scent.

## **GET CLOSER**

Going elsewhere will rejuvenate your body, provide freedom of movement – something every stand hunter needs after a cold morning up a tree – and a chance to relieve yourself and eat.

A second opening-day stand usually provides the same excitement you started with in the morning, as well, which will help you stay motivated and focused.

Your hope is to catch a deer heading out to feed, or back to where it was chased from earlier in the day.

Deer hunting always is changing, regardless of where you hunt. So it's a good idea to add to your bag of tricks: scout more, become more patient, look for more hunting territory and become more physically fit.

All will help you get closer to white-tails.

There's typically no shortcut to becoming a good deer hunter. It's a maturation that's based on experience earned through trial-and-error, not necessarily how many deer you've killed.

After all, a good guide and luck can greatly influence anyone's tally of white-tails.

So, if you're willing to experiment, or go that extra mile, there's always a chance you'll improve your deer hunting.

It's what the better hunters do. They're never satisfied. And you shouldn't be either.

Not if you want to keep seeing and shooting whitetails. **GN**