

Deer Scouting

You know where to hunt and when to hunt. Now it's time to make a plan.

– *By Brian Strickland*

Sure, there's plenty of luck involved with deer hunting. But those who put an emphasis on scouting are always more successful.

Scouting is the foundation to consistent deer hunting success. Whether you're hunting a small 10-acre patch of urban timber or larger expanses of farmland, the effort you assert in understanding your property and how the deer use it will largely determine the outcome of your season.

The First Steps

Ideally, scouting should begin well before the season opener, but for the traveling hunter, this may not be possible. Regardless, the best starting point to understanding your hunting property is with the use of topographical maps and aerial photos. Using these tools allows you to visually see what the property offers, and also provide detailed topography.

In general, when scoping an area on an aerial map, check for these features:

- **Rivers and creeks.** These are prime locations for traveling deer. It's not uncommon to find trails running along their banks, as well as water crossing locations at gradually sloping and shallow water areas.
- **Travel corridors.** A saddle, which is just a low point between two hills, is an easy spot for deer to travel. East-west ridges allow rutting bucks to use prevailing north-south winds to efficiently scent check an area for estrus does. Draws or gullies leading from open fields to bedding areas can be potential travel routes as well.
- **Fields.** Although you may not be able to tell what a field contains from an aerial map, they are often prime feeding areas, and are always worth investigation.
- **Thickets.** They provide the bedding and security cover deer require, especially in areas with heavy hunting pressure.

[–Watch Video About Scouting with Google Earth and Aerial Maps](#)

Boots on the Ground

Once you have a clear understanding of your hunting ground, it's time to put boots on the ground and take a closer look. This is best done weeks ahead of the opener, but scouting during the season can be amazingly effective if you're careful about it. Be sure to bring your maps and aerial photos along and use them to make notes as you gain a clearer picture of the property. If

you are technically savvy, using a GPS (Global Positioning System) can also be useful in noting deer sign and travel patterns.

Be on the lookout, specifically, for this sign:

Tracks. If a track is dry and eroded, it was made a few days or even weeks prior, but a fresh track will be well-defined and distinct. If it is a very large hoof print compared to others, then it was probably made by a mature buck. Also take notice of the distance between the large tracks. Mature bucks generally have a longer stride.

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Droppings. This is easy enough to figure out. The freshness and amount of them will give you a clue to the number of deer living in a particular area. The size of the dropping tells a lot about the size of the deer that left them. Large clumps indicate that a large deer is in the area, and because mature bucks often defecate as soon as they leave their beds, near a thicket will give you an idea where they might be bedded and the direction they are traveling from their bed.

Trails. As you are walking the property, make note of the deer trails you run across and the directions they are going. They will provide insight on how deer travel between feeding and bedding areas.

Rubs. These start appearing as early as September when bucks begin rubbing the velvet off their antlers, and as the November rut approaches, rub activity increases substantially. Although sometimes not as distinct as rubs made during the rut, early September rubs are often located between feeding and bedding areas, and they will help you narrow down prime locations.

Scrapes. Although they are mostly thought of as "rut sign," scrapes can show up throughout the year and are made to display territorial dominance. Early season scrapes are frequently found near food sources and defined travel corridors.

Beds. Bedding areas are key locations you should locate while scouting; however, if the season opener is just days away, the risk of bumping deer from them far outweighs the actual need to find them. Instead, focus your attention on locating travel routes between potential bedding and feeding areas. Day bedding areas are typically located in the densest, thickest, swampiest and nastiest cover in the area.