



A MINERAL SITE ROAD MAP

How do you pick the best spot for a mineral site and decide how many sites to create? Experience has given the author tremendous insights into the equation.

■ by *Matt Haper*



My dad always says, “You have to have the right tool for the job.” I realize that’s not a John Harper original, but it’s still true.

The right tool helps you complete a job accurately and can make the process more efficient. Then again, even the perfect tool, if used improperly, can produce disappointing results. Case in point: I used a backhoe attachment on my skid loader a couple of summers ago to dig a trench for a power line, and suffice to say, it did not work well. In fact, my “trench” looked like I was attempting to dig it blindfolded, resulting in a series of misshaped, uneven holes that varied in depth and straightness. I was convinced the attachment was a piece of crap, and I was resigned to head to town and rent a trencher. Before I could extricate myself from the loader cab, my nephew showed up, grinning, and asked how it was going. I shrugged off the not-so-subtle slight and expounded on the worthlessness of that implement. He asked if he could give it a shot and jumped in the skid loader while I pontificated on the futility of his attempt. After about 10 minutes, I was seeking a fork and knife to help me eat crow, as he dug a perfectly straight, even trench. After completing the job and tidying up my mess, he shut off the machine and made a comment about offering operating lessons.

Much like a tool must be used properly, a product must be used correctly for it to perform as intended. Some products don’t work even if used as directed, but even the best items won’t perform if they’re not used appropriately. Several years ago, I was working a booth at a hunting showing when an upset and slightly inebriated guy told me the food plot seed I was representing didn’t work. I was working for Whitetail Institute, so I knew the seed worked as advertised, but he insisted otherwise. I asked several questions, including whether he’d followed the directions for soil testing, ground prep and other considerations on the back of the bag. In colorful terms, he insisted he’d followed them to the letter. When I asked which product he’d used, he loudly exclaimed it was the seed in “that blue bag right there.” “Sir,” I replied, “we don’t have any food plot seed in a blue bag. What was the name of the product?” With much bravado, he yelled, “That 30-06 (expletive).” “Um, that’s a mineral product,” I said. “Yep,” he said, “and not a damn thing grew.” I was about ready to

respond when a bystander said, “You idiot, you just planted a half-acre mineral lick.”

That’s an extreme example of misusing a product. It’s far more common to make a few unknowing missteps, which can result in less-than-perfect outcomes.

WHY USE A DEER MINERAL?

Deer mineral products have been on the market for years. They are intended to supplement the mineral and vitamin needs of deer, some of which might be lacking in the natural environment. Critics contend that deer have survived for years by getting minerals from food. That’s true, because deer as a species would survive without nutritional supplementation. However, you must consider the changing habitat in whitetail country. Humans continue to expand our occupation of the land for dwellings or food production. Urban sprawl continues its advance on traditional deer habitat, diminishing the natural resources deer use, including forage (lawn grass replacing browse, for example). In ag country, the objective is to produce as much food as possible. To accomplish that, farmers depend on the soil to give up nutrients to spur production. Some of those nutrients include minerals deer need. Proper agricultural practice calls for replenishing those nutrients through fertilization, but we see mineral deficiencies in most soils. In fact, almost all soils are deficient in one or more minerals regardless of location.

There’s another consideration: the desired goal for a deer herd and the strategy required to achieve that. If you simply want deer on your property to survive, you probably don’t need mineral supplementation. But if your objective is to improve the health and vitality of the herd, mineral supplementation should be part of your program.

As mentioned, all soils have some type of mineral deficiency. If you want to provide the best nutrition possible, a mineral supplement can help boost limited mineral levels on your property. Think of it like taking your daily mineral/vitamin supplement. We get minerals and vitamins from some food, but if we want improved nutritional health, we need to take a supplement. We could design a food consumption strategy to achieve that, but realistically, that approach is impractical to impossible. The same holds true for mineral nutrition in a wild deer herd.

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If you still question the importance or validity of mineral supplementation, ask why it's a common practice in cattle production. Stacks of research have shown that mineral supplementation for cattle helps improve breeding success, milk production, weight gain and many other beneficial outcomes. Cattle mineral and deer mineral differ in specific component levels, but the effect on deer provides the same benefits.

HOW TO USE DEER MINERALS: WHERE TO PUT THEM

When considering mineral tactics, you must first decide where to locate sites. I've created successful sites (meaning deer used them) in many types of locations. I've created sites in the open, next to cover, in cover, on a trail, off a trail, near ponds, in river bottoms, on oak ridges and next to bedding cover. It's worked in every case, but the caveat is the frequency and probability of success. Some areas are far better bets for creating mineral sites deer use heavily. Although there are probably more contributing factors, focus on these main considerations: comfort and safety, normal travel routes and soil type.

Deer are nervous animals, which comes as no revelation to hunters. They're constantly on alert, smelling, listening and looking for danger, especially when they're eating. A deer's level of vulnerability is dictated by how fast and efficiently it can escape if threatened. Often, that equates to the proximity of escape cover it can use to elude and hide from danger. Considering that, the closer to cover you create a mineral site, the more likely deer will feel comfortable spending time there. That doesn't necessarily mean the site should be in the thickest cover on the property. Rather, it should be close to cover. I'm not saying deer wouldn't use a mineral site deep in the brush, but I've found that simply placing it close to or on the edge of cover works equally well. Plus, consider how much pressure you produce when replenishing the mineral. One of my first sites, created more than two decades ago, was in a heavily wooded finger strewn with blowdowns and choked with wild rose bushes and buck brush. The site worked well, and deer used it consistently. But even if I cleared a path to the site, I still crashed through 100 yards of cover every time I went there. Most of the time, I spooked deer that were bedded nearby or were at the site eating mineral. Further, I like to run cameras at my mineral sites, so I visited now and then to pull camera cards or replace batteries. Camera evidence showed it took a little time for things to get back to normal after my intrusion. That was especially true with older bucks, which didn't appreciate the human smell and commotion I created by wandering deep in cover. So I moved the site closer to the edge of the wooded finger — maybe 10 yards in the cover before it opened to a food plot. After a brief time, deer were using the site regularly, and I wasn't adding as much human pressure. I drove along the food plot and got to within 15 yards of the site in my side-by-side or truck, which would move deer in the area away without me tromping around in 90-degree weather, getting sweat everywhere. Additionally, I greatly reduced the number of ticks, mosquitoes, poison ivy rashes and thorn scratches I endured.

The second factor is finding an area deer already frequent. That seems obvious. Why would you create a mineral site where deer rarely visit? Yet I have seen this and done it myself. Some marketing copy on deer mineral packaging claims the product attracts deer from miles away. Heck, you might even bring in a different subspecies if the wind blows in the right direction. Minerals are

made to attract deer, but that doesn't mean you should hide the sites from them. The purpose of using a deer mineral is to create a site that will best encourage use regardless of the attractiveness of the mineral. I like to find heavily traveled deer trails and create sites no more than a yard or two to the side of the trail. I've shifted my focus to trails that lead to food plots or watering sites, because deer have a reason to use those travel routes. Locating sites there seems to produce the most frequent and consistent activity.

The final factor is soil type. This consideration has not been discussed much but can dramatically effect site usage. Commonly, a hole starts to emerge at a mineral site deer use consistently. Deer dig and paw the ground and actually eat dirt to get to the mineral. Even if you use a mineral block, you'll find that deer more often eat the dirt around that block rather than licking the block. The dirt around the block contains minerals that have leached into the soil, and deer work on that versus the block. Therefore, the type of soil in which you create a mineral site is important, as it plays



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a part in the consumption equation. If you create a site in sandy soil that leaches rapidly, it will be underused long term. In other words, you want the mineral to leach into the soil, but you don't want it to leach in so rapidly and deeply that it goes away. I like to create sites in soils that drain well but are not sandy. I don't like standing water, but I also don't want a mineral site in light, sandy soil that will leach the mineral away after the first couple of hard rains.

HOW TO USE DEER MINERALS: HOW MANY SHOULD I HAVE

After you've determined where to locate a site, the next question is how many sites you should create. The rule of thumb — or at least the most common recommendation — is one site per 40 acres. But as with most rules, situational variability can alter the plan. The deer population will play a major role in the amount of minerals sites you create at a property. The objective is to have all the deer on the property consume the mineral to benefit overall herd nutrition. You need each deer to eat sufficient amounts of mineral. If you set up simple attraction sites, those factors would not be that important, but you must consider them for nutritional management. Mineral sites can also be areas of high competition, as does and bucks try to assert themselves over less dominant deer to use the site for themselves. Thus, having fewer mineral sites creates more competition, which is multiplied in areas with high deer densities. To overcome that, many folks create more sites. Some properties with lots of deer might require a mineral site for every 20 or even 15 acres. Generally, I err on the side of having more sites. If you have cameras at the sites and notice consistent aggres-

sion or that your sites must be replenished often, that's a good indicator you should create more sites.

HOW TO USE DEER MINERALS: STARTING OUT

Some mineral sites at my farm have been there several years. Deer consistently use those sites year after year, and provided they're in the right spots, there's no need to change them. However, if you're starting with a new property or want to create more sites, how do you go about it? First, follow the where-to instructions discussed earlier to identify possibilities. Then, I like to run a trial. I map the property into sections or grids to make sure my test sites are not on top of each other but rather spread out. Then I put out several test spots using a small amount of mineral — maybe 5 pounds per site. During the next few weeks, deer will tell you which sites they like best. Add more mineral to sites deer are using heavily, and abandon the less-used areas, continuing the process until you have enough permanent sites.

CONCLUSION

Mineral supplementation can be an extremely beneficial component of a nutritional management program. But it's not as easy as just pouring some on the ground and expecting to maximize the benefit. With a bit of planning and some experimentation, however, you can develop highly productive and nutritionally beneficial mineral sites.



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