



FIND YOUR PATH

Put one foot in front of the other along good entry and exit routes this season.

■ by Josh Honeycutt



■ Hunters who use effective entry and exit routes fill more deer tags. Shielding your approach from bedded deer is important when trying to reach blinds and tree stands undetected.

Cloudy skies blanketed the landscape with melancholy repose. The world seemed lifeless, but it wasn't. Those hills were full of whitetails. But my destination was a tree stand at the fringe of a bedding area commonly used by a gross Boone & Crockett buck. I'd been hunting the giant for two seasons and believed I was no closer to filling that tag than the day I first captured a trail camera photo of him. Even so, I slowly ascended the steep hillside, silently reassuring myself this would be the day I arrowed that elusive 185-inch buck. But my brow brimmed heavy with sweat, and doubt surpassed my confidence. Each step was a blow to morale, as I'd experienced what was to come too many times before.

Despite extensive efforts to take different routes, I still had no solution for the open area surrounding the only stand location where my target buck often appeared on camera during daylight. I knew he was bedding nearby, but I couldn't close the final 75 yards to the stand without bumping him or other deer that would then spook him. I'd already watched the buck dash away twice. A few yards later, it became thrice.

I never killed that deer, but if I'd deployed some of the options listed below, I might have. So don't be like me. Instead, plan and use solutions for bad entry and exit routes.

GOOD ENTRY AND EXIT ROUTES DEFINED

First, realize that a stand location is only as good as the entry and exit routes to and from it. If you can't get to a stand without bumping a target deer, it's good for zero hunts. If you can get there but can't get back to the truck without spooking deer, it's good for only one sit.

Of course, if deer see, hear or smell you, the gig is up. Good entry and exit routes solve those problems and keep hunters off the radar of whitetails. That requires an understanding of how winds flow throughout the property, the location of bedding areas and more.

BAD ENTRY AND EXIT ROUTES DEFINED

In contrast, bad entry and exit routes spook deer when you use them. They bring you too close to deer, don't shield you visually, don't help audibly and might carry you upwind of deer. This creates an immediate negative effect.

Bad entry and exit routes also have the potential to spook deer long after you're gone. The scent left behind lasts for hours, and if you're taking a path that crosses commonly used deer trails, it's certainly having a negative effect, even if you don't realize it.

SOLUTIONS FOR BAD ENTRY AND EXIT ROUTES

Fortunately, hunters can take many steps to remedy entry and exit route issues. Some require manipulating the landscape. Others don't. But all have their place.

Choose a new route: Some entry and exit routes can't be fixed, especially if the primary issue is wind direction. There's no solution for that other than to wait for a better wind. If that doesn't solve the issue, the best thing you can do is simply choose a new route.

Walk ditches and drainages: Sure-fire effective routes include ditches and drainages. These are good for several reasons. First, if deep enough, these conceal your profile, which prevents deer from seeing you. If narrow enough, they can be almost void of deer traffic, which means deer shouldn't pick up your ground scent. And third, if they're sufficiently sandy or damp, your footsteps



IMPERIAL WHITETAIL

CONCEAL

Conceal can satisfy many screen-related tasks. It can create bedding cover, cover for travel routes or plot perimeter screens. It can connect islands of cover, divide food plot areas, shield properties from roadways, add cover around stands and blinds and more. Conceal produces the best growth when planted properly, and planting dates are important. People in far northern latitudes should plant May 20 to June 30. Central latitudes should plant May 1 to June 30. Southern latitudes should plant April 1 to May 31. Conceal is available in a 7-pound bag for \$35.98 or a 28-pound bag for \$119.98.

- Strategic planting.
- Available in 7 pounds (plants .25 acre).
- Designed to create thick cover, screens, funnels or other types of strategic plantings.
- Can grow 5 to 8 feet tall.



can be almost noise-free.

Wade shallow creeks and streams: If they're shallow enough to safely wade with rubber boots, creeks and streams are good for the same reasons as drainages and ditches. These offer visual-, audible- and scent-based advantages. Further, if you remain in the creek along the entry or exit route, it can reduce ground scent to almost nothing.

Follow ridge lines: Ridge lines are another terrain feature that can double as an entry or exit route shield. During the right circumstances, walking along the back side of a ridge, and then easing over the top into position, can help you slip into blinds and stands unnoticed. That said, if you must walk through too many deer to get there, it might not pan out.

Use standing corn: I don't advise planting corn as an entry or exit route screen. The goal is to hide hunters from deer — not to attract them to something that's supposed to hide you. Further, farmers will likely harvest corn in September or October, making it an unreliable option.

Cut trails through cover: Folks who have a lot of heavy cover deer don't use as bedding areas should consider cutting access trails through those areas. These can serve as excellent routes to and from tree stands and ground blinds.

Hinge-cut trees: Land managers with a lot of low-odds, hard-to-reach stand locations might consider hinge-cutting trees along these paths. Follow safety protocols, and use safe hinge-cutting practices.

Plant a screen: The best fix for a bad entry route is best solved with a seed. In tillable areas, Whitetail Institute Conceal is the premier option for food plot screens. It's a fast-growing cover that offers the necessary visual shield to create quality entry and exit routes. This annual grows 5 to 8 feet tall, sometimes taller, and creates a great visual buffer. Fortunately, Conceal is not a food producing plant and won't attract deer from other forage.

GOING THE DISTANCE

Regardless of the solution that's right for you, you can do other things to minimize the risk of deer seeing or hearing



SIGNS OF A BAD TREE STAND LOCATION

☞ You've determined the difference between a good entry and exit route. But it's equally important to understand the signs of a bad tree stand location, including:

1. Poor entry routes (spooks deer before a hunt).
2. Bad exit routes (spooks deer after a hunt).
3. Limb cover is too thick (prevents shot opportunities).
4. Limb cover is too thin (offers too little visual cover).
5. Tree trunk is too big (dangerous to hang tree stands in).
6. Tree trunk is too small (dangerous and offers too little back cover).
7. Tree trunk is leaning (dangerous to hang tree stands in and decreases comfort).
8. The stand location is skylit (offers too little back cover).
9. Primary action is too far away (deer tend to skirt by out of range).
10. Primary action is too close (deer tend to see or hear you more easily).

you along entry and exit routes. First, move slowly. Hunters often walk too fast, make too much noise and spook too many deer. Moving slower and taking longer pauses can reduce your visual and audible impact on nearby deer. You might also see or hear deer along the route before they see you.

Further, wearing quiet clothing material, such as fleece, reduces noise when you brush against foliage. Wearing qui-

et footwear, such as moccasins or other soft-bottom shoes, helps minimize noise, too. In contrast, rubber boots are louder, but can leave behind less scent.

Another important task is to lose the light. Deer can see beams of white light, and they don't react favorably. On private land, where other hunters aren't present, and where there aren't terrain-based or other safety risks — such as cliff or sinkholes — the moon often

offers enough navigable light during pre-dawn and post-dusk treks.

No matter the protocols you enact, it takes dedication, effort and skill to go the distance. Find your path this season. Locate or create the best possible entry and exit routes on your properties.



“

“A STAND LOCATION IS ONLY AS GOOD AS THE ENTRY AND EXIT ROUTES TO AND FROM IT.”