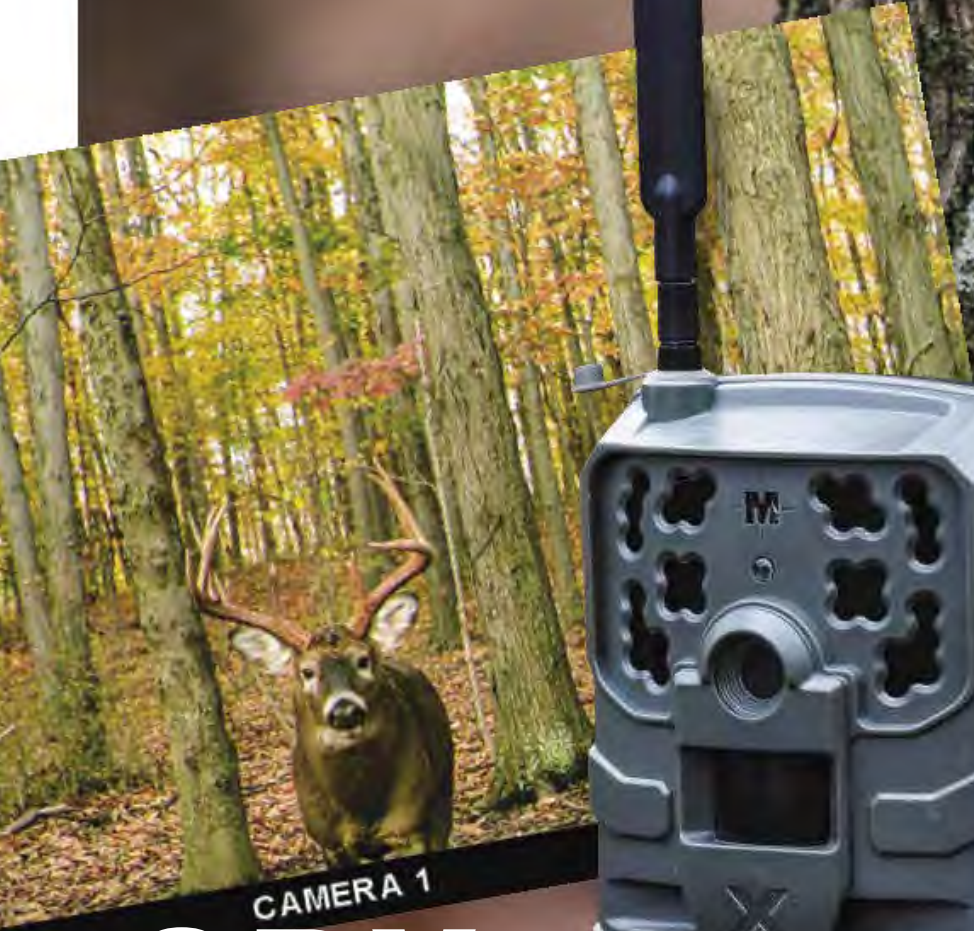


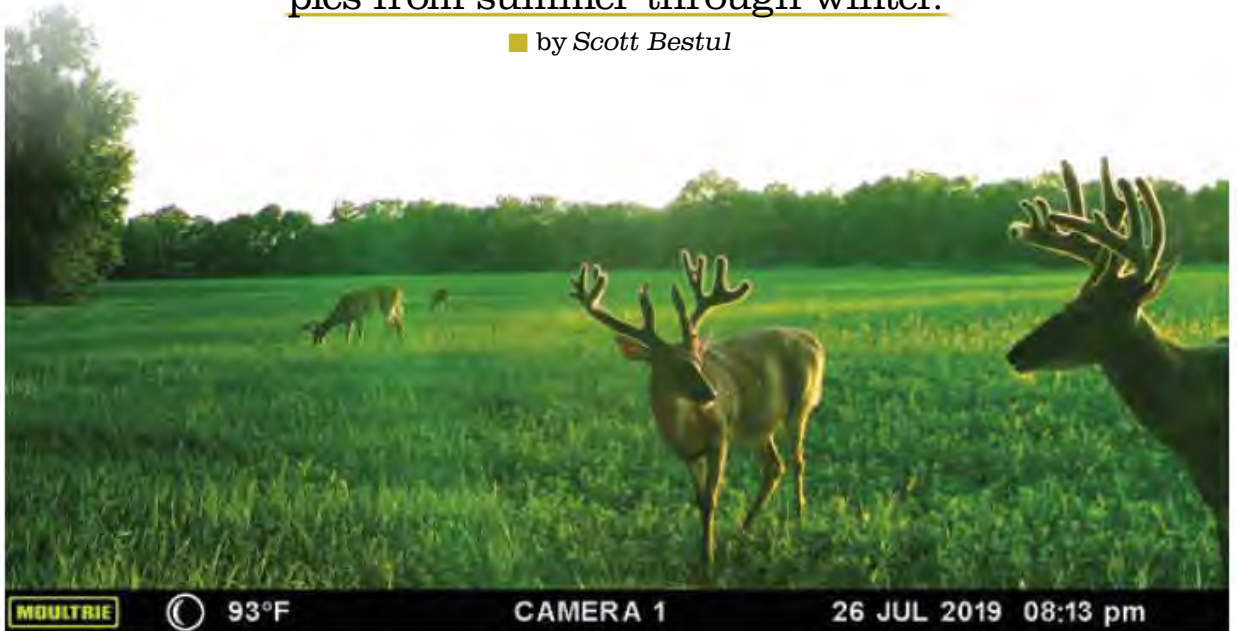
- MOULTRIE MOBILE
game cameras allow hunters to scout deer
without disturbing them. It also reduces the
time and miles required to switch SD cards.



SPY GAMES

This four-step plan will help you acquire better trail-cam pics from summer through winter.

■ by *Scott Bestul*



It's no secret that trail cameras have changed the face of modern deer hunting. Before their appearance, so much of what we “knew” about whitetails was simply guesswork: where deer lived, when they moved, what they ate, how they behaved with other deer — the stuff of speculation and old wives' tales.

Remote scouting cameras flipped all that on its head. Suddenly, the answers to so many unanswered questions could be revealed, and hunters/managers could become better at what they were. Make no mistake, cameras have been hugely responsible for upping our knowledge about the deer we hunt and the best methods for managing them.

Despite the popularity of trail cameras, there's still plenty of mystery about how to run them correctly and the best times and locations to use them. What follows is a seasonal guide to trail cams and the best methods for deploying them in a typical year.

SUMMER VELVET

I started deer hunting when dinosaurs roamed the earth, and back then, the whitetail opener was the Saturday before Thanksgiving. These days, I consider the opening of the whitetail season to be the first day I hang a trail camera that year. Although I've placed cams in almost every month of the year, I get truly serious in summer. Here in the upper Midwest, bucks are getting a good start on antler growth about the last week of June into July 4, so this period marks opening day for me.

Mineral licks create an excellent trail cam opportunity and are typically the site of my opening day setups for several reasons. First, whitetails crave mineral from spring into late summer. Obviously, bucks are the focus of that camera effort, but lactating does and their fawns also flock to mineral sites, their bodies reminding them of the constant need for essential macro and trace minerals along with vitamins A, D and E, as well as sodium — found in Whitetail

Institute's 30-06 Plus and Plus Protein mineral — and the simple fact that mineral tastes good.

I also love mineral licks for trail-cam setups because deer are the most relaxed they'll be all year. That means it's usually easy to get several quality pictures of bucks — often the same bucks — during many days or weeks. I've watched some bucks grow up on camera, thanks to their annual return to their favorite licks. These summer pics also offer an important glimpse at a buck's potential, as it's often possible to watch his velvet-covered antlers grow, change and max out as summer progresses.

One often-overlooked opportunity with summer cams is they can reveal nuggets about a buck's personality. Summer bucks typically travel in bachelor groups, and if your pictures and videos include several bucks in the same shot or clip, it can become apparent which bucks are dominant, and which are shy or aren't fighters. These personality clues can be a huge advantage when hunting season rolls around.

For example, I don't hesitate to call or rattle to a buck that's revealed himself as a bully. Conversely, I'll typically stow my calls if I encounter a buck I know to be shy or non-confrontational. Summer cameras have granted me this edge on several bucks I've hunted.

Although it's easy to focus on growing antlers, don't forget to pay attention to does and fawns at your licks. Pics and video clips can reveal the health of your does and the number of fawns they're carrying into the year. This can help you judge herd health and adapt harvest strategies accordingly. I pay particular attention to the presence of fawns. If they're not showing up in healthy numbers, I intentionally back off on doe harvest for the coming hunt.

EARLY SEASON MOCK SCRAPE

As summer gives way to fall, the attraction of mineral licks gradually declines. Now's the time to start switching cameras to mock scrapes, as all members of the deer herd — especially bucks — visit scrapes to communicate with each other. Ideally, you've started your mock months before, but if not, late summer and early fall is a great time to get them going. Peak scraping activity obviously occurs as the rut approaches, but deer hit scrapes throughout the year. In my experience, early fall and the weeks leading to peak breeding are the best time to get fantastic buck pics over mock scrapes.

If you haven't started mock scrapes, my favorite tactic is to find an existing scrape (bucks start making them as soon as they shed velvet) and then add a couple of my own in the immediate vicinity. I call this "blowing up" a scrape, and it seems to drive area bucks crazy. Their home ranges are relatively small, and they know the sight, sound and scent of area bucks, so the sudden presence of a strange or intruding buck is highly irritating.

To pull this off, find an existing scrape, pace off a few feet from the original and create a pair of mocks on each side of the original. These need to include the same overhanging branch as the original. If that branch doesn't exist, you need to create one. Take a limb from a cedar, pine or other softwood and staple or zip-tie it to the tree you need. It doesn't matter

if the tree you're attaching it to isn't the same species. Deer aren't smart enough to figure that out. They just like to have a soft, aromatic limb to rub against their glands and antlers. I like to add scents to the scrape and the overhanging limb to increase the attraction. I'll probably irritate scent makers when I say I don't think it makes a lot of difference what the odor is. I've used the hottest new scent, outdated doe pee or even my own urine-based scent (created from frequent pulls on a bottle of Mountain Dew) and had equally positive results.

Checking trail cams hung at these scrapes can be dicey. I never hesitate to frequently check mock scrape setups on field edge or transition areas. I know if I go in midday and with the right wind direction (read: from the bedding area to me), I can swap out SD cards, freshen scents and get out without disturbing a nearby buck. If I don't have those advantages, it's probably best to keep the area undisturbed by using a cellular unit, such as the Moultrie Mobile, to monitor scrape activity.

It's important to note the presence of any target bucks in your hunting area. Then judge their vulnerability to harvest by their frequency of appearance and the amount of daytime visits to your scrape. Any buck hitting your mocks during shooting hours is vulnerable somewhere nearby. Bucks that visit the scrape often but at night are highly active, but to arrange a daylight visit, you'll probably need to search for other areas in his home range where he might be vulnerable.

RUT FUNNEL

As breeding activity heats up and bucks pay less attention to scrapes, it's time to devote some camera attention to funnels. These are terrain features that bucks follow as they seek estrous-ready does, and some of my favorites are creek or ditch crossings, saddles or benches on a ridge, and wooded or brushy fencelines that connect blocks of timber in farm country.

Cameras at these funnels are important because they reveal where resident bucks are moving and if any foreign bucks have wandered in from other areas. Research has shown that some bucks make excursions

that take them out of their home range as they search for does. Some of those excursions are pretty amazing and result in treks of several miles, which means that Booner your neighbor was getting pics of on a distant farm could wind up on your place sniffing for action. That's the good news. The bad news is that those excursions rarely last more than a handful of days, so if your cameras reveal a whopper cruising your property, you'd better jump on that information and hunt him before he returns home.

Rut-funnel cams are somewhat tricky, as deer are not likely to pause or linger there as they do at mineral licks or pre-rut scrapes. One way to slow down a traveling buck is to make a mock scrape in the funnel. Unless he's following a hot scent or a doe, the wanderer will likely pause to check out the scrape and get his mug shot taken. Another trick for rut-funnel cameras is to mount the cam at a 45-degree angle to the trail. Bucks often move through funnels quickly, and a camera mounted perpendicular to the trail might get only a partial pic or video of a buck.

Because the rut is a dynamic and fast-moving event, rut-funnel cams need to be checked every few days. Obviously, if you have a cellular model, these are perfect spots. The camera sends you the most recent information, and you won't waste time checking cams when you should be hunting. And of course, cell-cams eliminate the intrusion required to check a conventional model.

POST-RUT FOOD SOURCE

The weeks after the rut close out the trail-cam year. It's time to focus on what whitetails are most concerned about: food. Although I frequently preach against attempts to oversimplify deer hunting, this is not one of those examples. With peak rut in the tail lights and cold temps and snow across much of deer range, you focus on food sources or eat your tag. It can get worse. If you don't have quality late-season whitetail feed, you might not even see deer, and I have lived that scenario. Fifteen years ago in my neighborhood, there were few winter sources for deer. When the combines finished, the fall plows were

right behind them, and food plots were a distant dream. Deer migrated out of the area, seeking south-facing slopes miles away where they found natural browse to make it through winter. I could go from early December into mid-March without seeing a deer track in my area.

So, food is important. In ag country, focus on farm crops where fall tillage hasn't occurred. Obviously, any late-season food plots, such as Winter-Greens or other high-protein annuals, are an obvious choice. Deer will flock to those plots as temps cool and they're eager to replenish fat reserves wiped out from the rigors of breeding activities. Find these spots and you might get some of the best camera setups, as well as hunting opportunities, of the year.

Trail cams set up near post-rut food sources will reveal the bucks that made it through a long hunting season, including those that might need a pass until the next fall or those that deserve some hunting effort, regardless of the uncomfortable hunting conditions. Case in point; My neighbor Alan killed a great mature

8-pointer in December when cam pics revealed the buck was hitting a late-season plot with frequency in daylight, but only when temps were 10 degrees or colder. Alan hunted two nights in brutal conditions before tagging this awesome late-season trophy.

Entry trails leading to post-rut food plots are an obvious site for trail cams during this period. But I only place a cam in such a spot if I believe the entry is broad enough so a wary buck won't get spooked by a flash or the shutter-noise of a nearby cam. Whenever possible, mount a camera in the food source itself. I like to use a tripod I can tuck into standing corn, along a brushy fencerow or even on the legs of an elevated blind or shooting house. In my experience, cameras in those open areas don't seem to disturb deer as much or are at least less frightening than they are in tighter quarters.

Because deer frequently bed close to post-rut food sources, it's important to be uber-careful when monitoring them. I wait for a perfect wind, go at mid-day and make as little noise as possible

during my quick visits. It's important to get fresh batteries in late-season cams, as cold temps can quickly sap them. I study these pics soon after collecting SD cards, as I've learned patterns of bucks that have helped arrange encounters. The most memorable was a pretty 10-pointer that hit a late-season plot in the morning rather than afternoon, when other area bucks fed. I set my buddy up for a morning hunt immediately, and sure enough, the buck showed up on schedule and was 50 yards from the stand — when a trio of does distracted him and led him off.

CONCLUSION

Trail cams have extended the deer season and increased our knowledge of whitetails and our enjoyment in chasing them. This four-step approach has helped me become a better hunter and manager, not to mention providing endless fun and excitement. Instead of a one-week frenzy in November, deer season now lasts from July to January — and I have trail cams to thank.



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