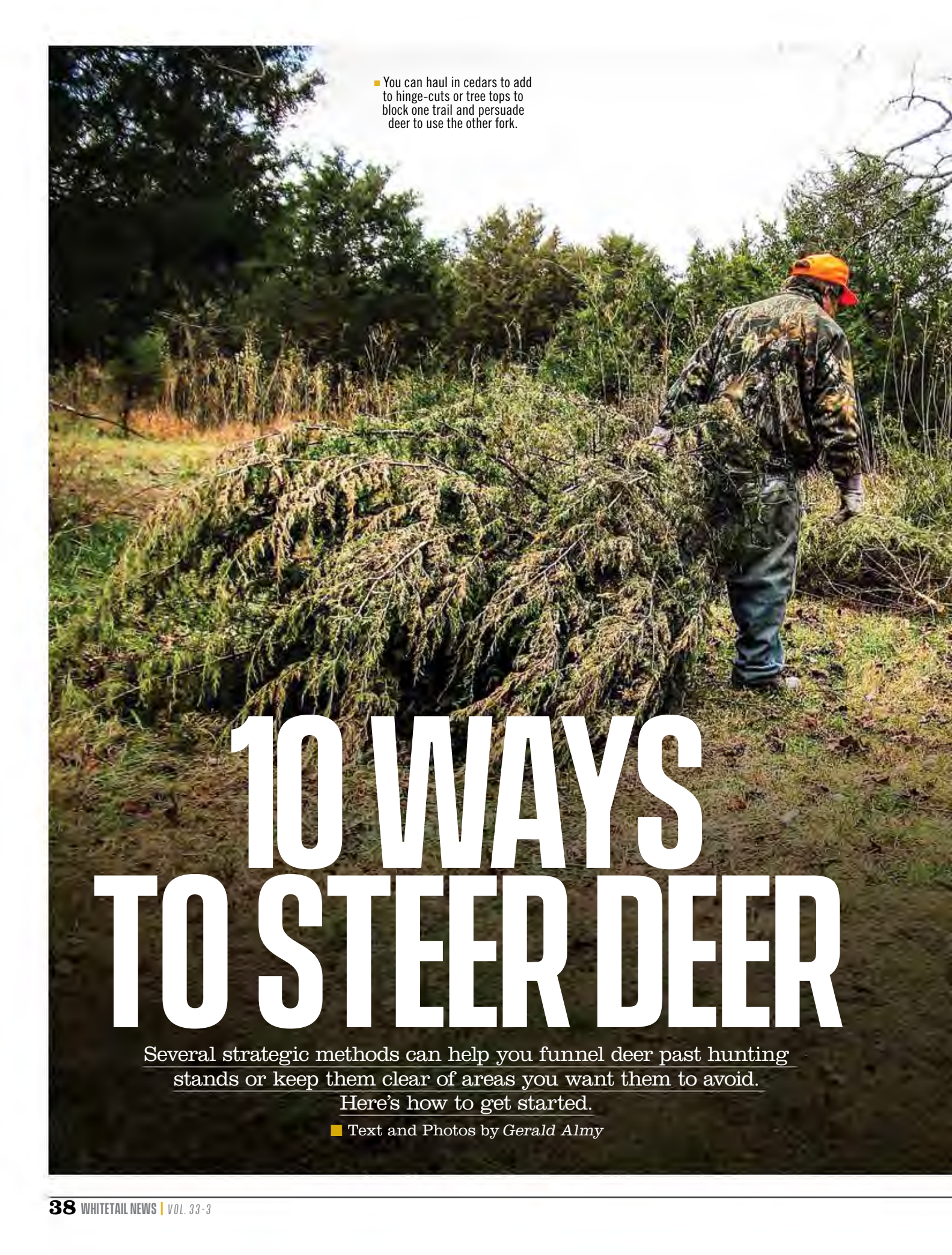


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- You can haul in cedars to add to hinge-cuts or tree tops to block one trail and persuade deer to use the other fork.

# 10 WAYS TO STEER DEER

Several strategic methods can help you funnel deer past hunting stands or keep them clear of areas you want them to avoid.

Here's how to get started.

■ Text and Photos by *Gerald Almy*



**A**fter purchasing land in western Virginia, one of the first things I did was clear trails through tall grasses and brushy areas so my family could hike without getting scratched and bloody.

It turns out we weren't the only ones who liked easier walking. Deer tracks soon appeared on the trails. As fall approached, a stand at one of the paths yielded the first buck from the new property.

Switch to a more recent scene. Faced with an open fork in a trail and a wall of cut cedars and brush I'd placed to block the other fork, a heavy 8-point chose the unobstructed trail, which led to a nearby food plot. That took him directly in front of my stand. Minutes later, I was field-dressing a 200-pound 5-year-old Virginia buck.

It's not always that easy, but steering deer can be a great tactical aid. Through the years, I've found many ways to alter habitat in a positive way and also steer deer past your hunting stand or for other management purposes.

What does it mean to steer a deer? It's basically manipulating the direction a whitetail travels by altering the habitat. Exactly how you do that can vary. It can be as simple as mowing a path through tall grass. Or it can be as far-reaching as doing timber stand improvement and laying out extensive windrows of tree-tops to channel deer toward a specific area.

### **WHY DO IT?**

One of the most obvious reasons to steer deer is to make them travel close to your stand. You're creating a funnel to constrict their movement into bow or rifle range.

Narrowing a broad area of travel to a small pinch point is one of the best situations for using the steering tactic. Entice deer to use that route by making the walking easier or blocking other routes.

Another situation might occur where deer move out of bedding cover in a field of warm-season grasses to approach a food plot. They could walk anywhere, making it difficult to set up. But if you mow a trail through the 5- to 7-foot-tall grasses, you'll concentrate their movement.

These are hunting-related reasons for steering deer. There are other motives, though. For example, you might want to protect young bucks. If you're unlucky to have a trigger-happy neighbor who hunts along your property line, steering deer away from where they might stray onto his land is a worthy project. Similarly, if deer sometimes wander close to a road where poaching has been a problem, steering them away from that spot is wise.

### **DESTINATION AND REWARDS**

To fine-tune your steering efforts, it's important to know the general movements of animals on your property. Where are the likely bedding areas, other heavy cover and major feeding destinations? Bucks don't just meander in their travels. When you have established their travel goal — a food plot or bedding area, for example — you can attempt to alter their route. You've probably already steered deer to some extent by creating food plots, which are a destination. If you build water sources, that will also attract deer and channel their movement.

Providing or locating a goal or reward is the first step in steering deer. If you didn't create an attraction or destination, you'll need to learn where it lies in relation to a buck's daytime bedding area. After you know that, you can strategically manipulate part of their route to your benefit.

Use trail cameras, scouting and your knowledge of the property for the first step in the steering effort — determining the broad pattern of where deer are likely heading. It can help to plot this on a satellite image of the land so you get a clear picture of daytime bedding areas and feeding destinations.

The aerial photo will also often give clues as to exactly where strategically altering or tweaking that travel route would likely succeed.

You can steer deer in many ways. Here are a few I've used. Try to make most of these alterations in spring or early summer so deer will have time to get accustomed to the changes and will use the paths when hunting season arrives.

## 1) CARVE A TRAIL THROUGH DENSE WEEDS AND BRUSH

Depending on the stem thickness and density of vegetation, you can use machetes, chainsaws, pruning shears or weed cutters with blades. Mature bucks like dense-cover areas, but they don't particularly like walking through them. Make it easier.

Cut the trail through thick cover connecting bedding cover and a feeding area or doe hangout during the rut. Don't clear a wide path through the brush. If it's too open, deer might be wary of it. Make it just wide enough for one person or a buck with a wide rack to walk through.

## 2) CREATE A FOOD TRAIL

Logging roads would seem to be great for deer travel. But on my property, they only see limited use. I changed that by adding an enticement: food. I steer deer to use those trails with No-Plow, Bow Stand and Secret Spot. The clovers, brassicas and cereal grains in those blends grow with just a few hours of sunlight

per day. The food trails winding through the open, mostly foodless woods have created great afternoon and morning stand locations. Deer will typically walk them and nibble as they move toward larger evening feeding areas or back to bedding cover in the morning.

Sometimes, you might have to daylight the logging roads by cutting back a few trees that are shading them. You need at least three or four hours of sunlight per day. Rough-up the topsoil with a hand rake or disk behind an ATV, and then add a 19-19-19 or similar fertilizer and a bit of lime. Sow the seed before a rain, and disk or rake it in lightly.

You'll steer deer to use food trails where you can set up an ambush rather than watching them travel through broad areas of woods.

## 3) LOWER A FENCE WIRE

This is a quick, easy tactic for channeling deer movement. Whitetails can jump over 9-foot-high fences, as the late Leonard Lee Rue documented. But they don't like to. Locate a spot with fresh

sign where deer might want to cross or have jumped the fence at nearby spots. Then push the top strand down and attach it to the one below with soft wire.

Deer will soon gravitate to this easy crossing point. Be sure to select a good tree for a stand before choosing the spot to lower the fence.

## 4) CREATE CORRIDORS CONNECTING DOE FAMILY GROUPS

When the rut starts, bucks tend to ramble almost haphazardly as they travel from one doe family group to another, searching for the first females coming into estrus. To predict their travel routes, create trails of cover connecting doe bedding areas. The quickest and easiest way to do that is to plant a corridor of Conceal.

This mixture of proprietary Whitetail Institute sorghums and sunn hemp offers bucks thick cover to use when moving between doe groups. Swing the strip of cover past several tree stand or blind sites that will work in various wind conditions. Plant a strip 20 to 30 feet wide.



■ Here's a trail the author carved through a stand of switchgrass and other warm-season grasses.



■ Hinge-cutting low-value trees such as red maple, shown here, helps the habitat and provides a small amount of forage for deer. It also channels their movement.

### 7) PLANT CONCEAL TO CREATE A COVER TRAIL

Sometimes the best food plot sites might have mostly open terrain surrounding them. Does and young bucks will visit them, but without ground cover, mature bucks won't travel to these sites until dark. Attract them earlier by planting a path of Conceal from the nearest woods or staging area to the feeding location.

The 5- to 8-foot-tall forage will provide cover that will entice mature bucks to feel comfortable approaching the food source during shooting light. For a longer-term cover strip, use a mixture of switchgrass, bluestem and Indiangrass. Strips 20 to 30 feet wide are all you need.

### 8) LAY DOWN A DOE-IN-HEAT SCENT TRAIL

This is a time-tested strategy for the rut. Soak a clean rag tied to a string in high-quality estrous-doe scent, and lay a trail from several potential buck approach routes or staging areas toward good shooting locations for a shot upwind from your stand. Will it always work? No. But it's worth a try almost any time in November. For the best results, combine it with a mock scrape and licking branch setup.

### 9) ROUNDUP A TRAIL

This is an alternative I sometimes use instead of clearing a trail with implements. Use a backpack sprayer or hand-held tank filled with Roundup or glyphosate. Spray the vegetation to kill

IMPERIAL WHITETAIL

## CONCEAL™

- 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.



it and create a travel route for deer. If necessary, repeat in two weeks. After the vegetation dies, walk over it, and stomp it down with clean rubber boots, or drive over it with an ATV. Bucks will walk this trail instead of busting through thickets or dense brush.

### 10) TIMBER STAND IMPROVEMENT TRAILS

If you plan to conduct a timber stand improvement cut on your land, ask the logger to push treetops and slash into windrows at specific areas to make a trail or block certain routes you don't want bucks to take. Discuss this with the logger before you agree to have him make the cut. If you're skilled with a chainsaw and follow all safety rules, you can do these yourself by laying out long trails that will channel deer toward areas you want them to go to or stay away from.

Place some larger trees parallel and some smaller tops at 90-degree angles. Be sure to allow some exit points where a buck can veer off so he doesn't feel totally trapped.

## CONCLUSION

With a careful approach, using these strategies will let you channel deer where you want them to go for hunting and steer them away from spots you don't want them to travel. I've done some horseback hunting and never could steer my mount very well. But I have learned a thing or two about steering whitetails.



### 5) BUILD A BRUSH BARRIER

This is a useful steering tactic when you have just a few spots where deer might veer off the route you want them to take. It's also a good way to steer deer away from a road or property boundary where they might be vulnerable to poachers.

Hinge-cut or sever a few low-value trees and place them across locations where deer might veer off. You'll also be improving the habitat with this step. Deer will nibble on the newly available twigs and leaves, and the partially cut trees will continue to offer additional food for several years. You can also drag a few scrub cedars to the spot to make sure deer don't use the route you want to block.

### 6) MOW A SWATH THROUGH A TALL GRASS FIELD

Native warm-season grasses — such as switchgrass, Indiangrass and bluestem — offer great cover for whitetails. But if you have a large stand of these grasses, knowing where a deer might exit from them to approach a feeding area can be difficult. They can step out anywhere.

Mow a few paths through grass fields so deer will emerge exactly where you have a good stand setup or blind location. You can use a brush hog or hand-cut trails with a machete or strong weed cutter. Deer can walk right through the grasses. But often, they'll take the easier route you've provided. I've also cut paths through Power Plant to channel deer movement.