



DOWN AND DIRTY WITH MOCK SCRAPES

One of the quickest ways to locate, pattern and even condition mature buck activity is to use mock scrapes throughout each transitional phase of fall. Here's how you can maximize this high-impact strategy.

■ by *Travis Faulkner*



My late grandfather used to say that a whitetail buck lives by his nose, and anyone who has tangled with a long-tined giant in fall knows that statement holds a lot of truth. A buck's keen sense of smell is one of his main lines of defense, and it's how he interacts daily with his world.

Fortunately, it's possible to turn that strength into a major weakness you can strategically exploit through creating, monitoring and hunting big bucks over mock scrapes. This is one of my favorite scouting, patterning and hunting tactics on highly pressured tracts of public land and intensely managed private ground. For good reason, mock scrapes produce results throughout the entire season, not just during the much-anticipated rut. With the right steps and techniques, you can use these methods to help keep you on top of shooter bucks from before opening day until the final buzzer. Let's break down the real dirt on mock scrapes and see how you can add these strategies to your hunting arsenal.

MAKING REALISTIC AND NATURAL SCRAPES

If you want to maximize the productivity of mock scrapes, you need to replicate the real deal. Pay close attention to details, such as the average height of overhanging licking branches, positioning of scrapes, preference of tree-branch types, locations of existing scrapes and texture of the soil. You'll almost immediately notice that some scrapes stay well established and extremely active throughout the season, but others dry up quickly from minimal use. Directly mimicking the common factors that make scrapes more active will dramatically increase your overall success.

In more than 20 years of making mock scrapes across the country, I've noticed that mature bucks seem to prefer an overhanging branch that holds its leaves longer in fall, with lots of sticks and dangling limbs. That lets bucks bite multiple limbs and work their scent directly into the branches. Those overhanging

■ After locating ideal overhead branches, clear out the ground beneath them in an oval shape about the size of a small to medium beach ball. Try to find granular soil that can soak up and retain scent for long periods.



branches retain the scent and disperse the aroma through the wind to cover a wider detection zone. The sprawling leafy branches of beech, sycamore, maple, oak and hickory trees are some of my favorite choices, but grapevine clusters and even cedar or pine limbs can also make very productive mock scrapes. The trick is to select overhanging branches that are about 6 feet high so bucks can really get up under the limbs and thoroughly work their scent glands. Overhead branches that are too low or excessively high will often be less active.

After you locate ideal overhead branches, clear out the ground beneath them to form an oval shape about the diameter of a small- to-medium sized beach ball. Try to find mock scrape setups that offer good dirt, meaning granular-type soil that can soak up and retain scent for extended periods. Avoid soil that's swampy, muddy, extremely hard, or thin and bone-dry, which can lead to excess erosion and less overall scent retention. Simply use a stick to scrape away dead leaves, sticks and other debris to reach the good soil and apply your preselected scents.

During this process, it's crucial that you take steps not to contaminate the mock scrape with human scent and other potentially alarming odors. Wear knee-high rubber boots and latex gloves, and take similar precautions with your clothing and gear as you would during an actual hunt. I even spray down zip-ties, cotton scent wicks, game cameras, straps and scent drippers with an odor eliminator before drying and storing them in separate plastic Ziplock bags placed inside of sealed plastic containers. Doing this will drastically reduce the chances of spooking deer and educating veteran bucks. It also increases the chances of deer using and establishing the mock scrape much faster. This is how a mock scrape becomes an actual active scrape in the shortest time.

MATCHING SCENT WITH THE SEASON

The scents you apply to a mock scrape vary depending on the transitional phase of the season. Deer routinely use scrapes to communicate throughout the entire year, not just during the breeding phases of the primary and secondary

rutting transitions. You don't want to send the wrong message by saturating your mock scrape with heavy rut-related scents such as tarsal, rutting buck urine or doe estrus during the early pre-rut and late post-rut periods. The scent you're communicating with needs to match the current deer activity and behavior in your area.

Typically, I start making mock scrapes and monitoring those setups with cameras as early as July and continue until the close of season. The only things that really change are the setup locations and type of scent application. With the right tactics, this is a precision scouting, patterning and hunting tool that consistently produces results, especially when coupled with game cameras and high-impact setups. In my opinion, it's one of the fastest ways to locate a shooter, figure out his pattern and even dictate his movement. This is especially true when scouting and hunting large tracts or new areas that can be somewhat intimidating. If a buck is anywhere near a fresh mock scrape, he will head to it, just like a neighborhood dog goes to a truck tire.

EARLY PRE-RUT AND LATE POST-RUT TIPS

During the early pre-rut and late post-rut periods, deer are not breeding and are focused more on feeding and bedding. Strategically constructing mock scrapes along the edges of current early- or late-season food sources, bedding areas and main travel corridors that connect those prime-time locations is a good start. Pinch points, staging areas, funnels and areas near watering holes are also excellent choices. Only apply non-rut buck and doe urine on the ground and preorbital gland scent to overhead licking branches. You want to communicate a non-threatening message to generate a curious or investigatory response from deer.

After you've made several mock scrapes at critical locations, start monitoring those sites with multiple game cameras. Cellular cameras equipped with solar panels or extended battery packs will let you locate potential shooters and establish patterns in real time without having to disturb the area frequently to pull cards and change batter-

ies. With a little work, you can locate a target buck, start piecing together the patterning puzzle and establish a daily routine you can exploit with the right ambush setups.

PRIMARY RUT AND SECONDARY RUT TIPS

When whitetails begin focusing more on breeding just before the primary and secondary rut phases, switch up scent-application tactics and setup locations of your mock scrapes. These are the periods to concentrate more on high-traffic doe areas and get more aggressive with your scents. Hanging tarsal glands in overhanging branches and applying dominant buck urine inside a scrape can be deadly. Mechanical scent drippers that are pre-programmed to release scent at specific times can condition a mature buck to work those sites when you can hunt him.

When you start observing actual breeding activity, it's time to begin adding doe estrus scents to the mix. Mechanical scent drippers filled with rutting buck and doe-in-heat urine blends are very productive. There are even whitetail rut dirt combo mixes that are water resistant and have time-release capabilities to make the scent last longer. In the past, I've even taken a small handheld gardening shovel to dig up active scrape dirt from one hunting location and transported it in a sealed plastic bag to create mock scrapes at other hunting spots. This helps add a new degree of realism to your mock scrapes, which can trigger an aggressive reaction from your target buck.

THE MOCK SCRAPE GAME

The past several years, I've relied on mock scrapes to help me locate, pattern and tag mature bucks across several states on private and public land. I have countless game-cam videos and pictures of bucks of all ages, does and yearlings hitting my scrapes from the hot summer days of July until the dead-cold winter days of February. When done correctly, these tactics will help you put more meat in the freezer and more bone on the wall. Don't be afraid to give them a try this season.

