



MAKING SMALL FARMS
HUNT BIGGER



Don't have unlimited ground? Try these 25 tips to hold more deer and have better hunting on small properties.

■ by *Josh Honeycutt*

Some small farms hunt bigger than they are. For example, a 50-acre tract might feel like a 75-acre piece, depending on the circumstances. Or a property might hunt smaller than it is, such as a 50-acre property feeling more like 30 acres. But if a land manager has the right property canvas to work with and sets it up correctly, small farms can hunt significantly bigger.

I've played a role in many small properties that yielded big, mature bucks, including a 10-acre tract (all huntable) that produced a big nontypical, a 50-acre tract with 25 huntable acres that cranked out four great bucks in four years, and an 80-acre farm with 40 huntable acres that produced five bucks in four seasons. I've helped manage small farms that outperformed their fighting weight. My biggest deer came off that 50-acre property, only half of which is huntable ground. And on that 25 huntable acres, I've shot six bucks, all of which were within a 150-yard radius. That shows you don't need massive acreages to find success. You can make small farms hunt bigger. Here are several ways to accomplish that.

1. GOOD PROXIMITY TO NEIGHBORING TRACTS

The average whitetail home range is about 650 acres, or just more than 1 square mile. The average core area is about 50 acres. Obviously, although you can enhance a property to encourage more usage, there's no way to hold a deer in one small area all the time. That makes neighboring lands very influential. Having a piece of land that borders un hunted ground is a good situation, especially if your place is set up to produce minimal realized hunting pressure.

2. LIKE-MINDED NEIGHBORS

If people hunt neighboring tracts, it's crucial to have like-minded neighbors. If they're willing to shoot a bunch of 1½-, 2½- and 3½-year-old bucks, seeing mature deer is unlikely. You and your neighbors should share similar management and harvest goals.

3. MINIMAL HUNTING PRESSURE

Smaller tracts are easier to overhunt and burn out. Applying minimal hunting pressure is necessary for folks hoping to preserve a property's longevity. Quality doesn't last long when deer are constantly running for their lives.

4. HIGHER DEER DENSITIES

Higher deer densities aren't always good. Never allow populations to reach or surpass the area's carrying capacity. That will result in poor herd health and habitat destruction. In unique situations when numbers increase in a healthy manner, higher deer densities can withstand more harvest, effectively making the land seem larger than it is.

5. IDEAL PROPERTY LAYOUTS

Most properties are various shapes and sizes. Some are blocky, like a square. Others are long and slender, like a rectangle. In general, some properties hunt bigger than they are because they have an ideal layout. This might mean more of the border connects to other great habitat on neighboring tracts. It could be a long, slender property that spans a greater distance and crosses into multiple big-buck core areas. Regardless, it hunts bigger.

6. ESTABLISH MINI HUBS

Landowners with enough habitat on a small property can make that tract hunt bigger by creating mini hubs, or pockets, of activity. Create bedding areas, food sources and water sources next to each other at various areas of the property.

7. SEGREGATE BUCKS

Mature bucks don't defend territories, at least not like wolves and other animals. But they defend their hierarchy in the herd. And if a buck thinks it doesn't have the status to succeed during the rut, it might move elsewhere, especially if it has frequent confrontations with a tougher deer. To minimize that, create several bedding areas to help separate bucks when testosterone levels rise.

8. CREATE SEASONAL BEDDING

Deer need various elements from bedding areas. Those needs change throughout the year. In summer, they need to remain cool. In fall, they need security from hunters and predators. During the rut, they need to be closer to does. In winter, they need the security from the elements offered by solar (south-facing slopes) and thermal (conifer stands) bedding. Creating those elements increases the amount of time they spend on your property.

9. PROVIDE GREAT GRUB

Small properties have less acreage, which limits volume. But by taking soil samples (<https://whitetailinstitute.com/soil-tests/>), improving the ground, planting species that get greater yields and maintaining food plots (<https://whitetailinstitute.com/herbicides/>), you can increase the available food tonnage. Further, maximize food production by improving the soil nutrients and plant health. This will also lead to a greater yield, which is necessary for increasing forage tonnage with minimal acreage. A good product to consider for this is Impact (<https://whitetailinstitute.com/impact-soil-amendment/>). Further, a mixture of spring- (<https://whitetailinstitute.com/spring-seeds/>) and fall-based (<https://whitetailinstitute.com/fall-seeds/>) food sources is ideal.

10. OFFER UNIQUE FOOD SOURCES

Although smaller properties can't compete with larger tracts for volume, they can level the field with quality and uniqueness. Offer unique food sources deer can't find elsewhere. Soft mast, such as fruit trees, are great options. Apples, pears, plums and persimmons are solid bets. Hard mast, such as chestnuts, red oaks and white oaks are, too. Plant whatever grows well in that growing zone, and make sure it's stuff deer can't find elsewhere. Chestnut Hill Outdoors has a great selection.

11. INSTALL WATER SOURCES

Deer need water, too. Placing small watering holes that hold water year-round can boost the time deer spend at your place. Locating those between bedding areas and associated food sources (but closer to the beds) is also a good idea.

12. OFFER THE EXTRAS

Giving deer extra incentives is always a good idea. They might not always make the difference in whether a whitetail takes up residence, but they can help influence travel patterns. For example, where legal, minerals supplements (<https://whitetailinstitute.com/minerals-supplements/>) are great additions. Done responsibly, supplemental feeding can be, too. Adding mock scrapes, scrape trees, rubbing posts and other focal points are also solid bets.

13. EVERY-ACRE OPTIMIZATION

Every inch of dirt needs to serve a purpose. Small properties don't have the luxury of wasted space. When planning a property, make sure each acre is destined to provide bedding, food, water, travel routes, screening, sanctuary, entry routes or exit routes. Don't leave dead space.

14. MORE STAND LOCATIONS

It might sound counterintuitive to have a lot of stand and blind locations on a small property, but it's necessary.

Amplifying the number of spots helps fine-tune your perch for subtle changes in the wind. You need to be confident in your spots, as small-farm hunters can't afford to spook deer like big-tract hunters can. Fifty, 25 or even 10 yards can be the difference in a deer smelling you.

15. AIR-TIGHT BOX BLINDS

Sometimes, the best spots aren't great for the wind. Whether it's swirling winds or a consistent prevailing wind that just doesn't work, some spots look so good you must hunt them anyway. Of course, that isn't possible with a tree stand or soft-sided blind. Deer will smell you. But sometimes, you might make it happen by using an air-tight box blind, keeping the windows shut and opening them when it's time for the shot.

16. QUALITY ACCESS

Property access can make or break a farm. Depending on where deer bed and feed, and how the land lays out, deer can easily see hunters come and go. Access direction — north, south, east or west — greatly influences the pressure applied to a property.

17. GOOD ENTRY AND EXIT ROUTES

In addition to quality directional access, good entry and exit routes are necessary. This is true from the truck to the stand or blind. If deer see, smell or hear you at any point, it negatively affects the property. Having designated paths that get hunters from A to B and back again without alerting deer is crucial. When hunters do this, they can hunt the property far more often while avoiding burn-out, especially on smaller tracts.

18. ADEQUATE SCREENING COVER

Screening cover plays a big role in ensuring deer don't see you along entry routes. Planting a tall-growing screen is a great way to shield your approach and departure. Planting screening along roadways, property lines and other areas where people can see into the property is a good practice, too. Plus, using screens as borders around food plots feathers the edges and makes deer more comfortable entering the open during daylight. Whitetail Institute's Conceal (<https://whitetailinstitute.com/conceal/>) is a great option. Imperial PowerPlant (<https://>

“WITH AMPLE PLANNING AND EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT, YOU CAN MAKE SMALL FARMS HUNT MUCH BIGGER.”



whitetailinstitute.com/imperial-power-plant-annual/) is tall-growing, too, and also attracts deer as a food source.

19. OFF-LIMITS BEDDING AREAS

Although I like to hunt the edges of bedding areas, that can be riskier on smaller tracts. There is less room for error, as deer can be easily pressured onto neighboring lands. You can still be intelligently and strategically aggressive on smaller farms, but it needs to be a high-odds situation. Most of the time, that means bedding areas are off limits.

20. LOW-IMPACT TACTICS

There are many plays in a hunter's playbook. Each can be classified as low-impact (low risk but lower odds) or high impact (higher risk but higher odds). Often, smaller properties require lower-impact tactics, such as hunting the fringes and calling less. Times to toss that strategy include the rut, the final days of the season, and if you believe a buck is about to be killed by a neighbor or likely to transition elsewhere because of an anticipated shift.

21. CULL SOME BUCKS

We don't cull bucks to improve genetics. The science says that isn't possible in wild herds. But you can remove inferior-antlered deer to make room for bucks with bigger and more desirable antler characteristics. That's the reason behind culling bucks.

22. SHOOT MORE DOES

Matriarchal does sometimes push bucks around — even off a property. Shooting an appropriate number of does mitigates that and makes bucks work harder to find receptive does during the rut. That leads to target deer being more visible, as they spend less time locked down and more time on their feet.

23. STRICT GO AND NO-GO RULES

Certain situations might dictate that hunters should or shouldn't go afield. Following surefire reasons to hunt on a specific day, as well as specific reasons not to hunt, are important in preserving the quality of a small tract's hunting value.

24. GIVE IT NEEDED BREAKS

Smaller lands often require longer recovery periods between hunts, especially if they're not set up with bulletproof access, entry routes and exit strategies. Let things go back to normal between sits, or it will regress — sometimes quickly.

25. HUNT PEAK TIMES

Unless they're set up to hold deer all season, it's likely that smaller farms will peak at certain times. That might be the early or late season, or the pre-rut and rut. Recognize when a property is at its best, and hunt it during those phases.

CONCLUSION

Overall, hunters don't need massive properties to find consistent success. With ample planning and effective land management, you can make small farms hunt much bigger.

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