

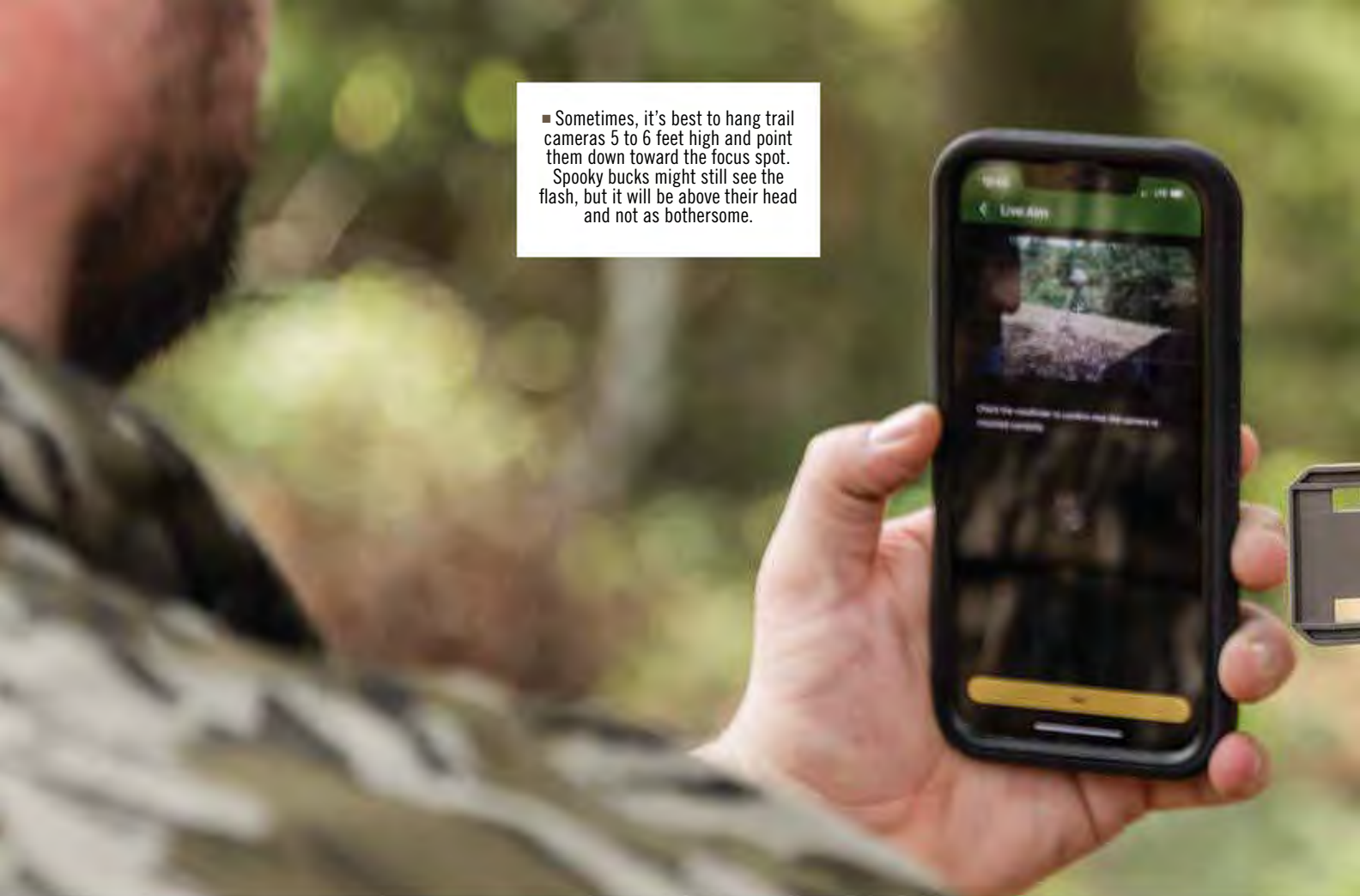




# TRAIL CAM MASTER CLASS

Try these creative tips to capture  
your best buck pics ever this year.

■ by *Scott Bestul*

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a smartphone. The phone's screen displays a trail camera image of a deer in a wooded area. The background is a blurred natural setting with green foliage. A white text box is overlaid on the top left of the image.

■ Sometimes, it's best to hang trail cameras 5 to 6 feet high and point them down toward the focus spot. Spooky bucks might still see the flash, but it will be above their head and not as bothersome.

**E**arly archery and muzzleloader deer season are months away, but as someone who has as much fun running trail cams as I do sitting in a tree stand, I'm ready to declare cam season is open, and I'm off to the races.

I've been running cameras long enough to have seen their infancy, and I can attest that today's models are about as efficient and user-friendly as possible. Still, these are electronic, nonsentient beings that can be more maddening than a bored toddler. Like many trail cam nuts, I've learned a few tips through the years that have helped me get better. Here are a few of my favorite basic suggestions to get you started — with a few advanced-level hints.

\* **Drop the alkali:** Sure, gas prices are ridiculous, and grocery bills make us groan, but this is no time to start skimping on trail cam batteries. Yeah, you can save a few dollars buying cheapie alkaline batteries, but trust me, it's not worth it. Cough up a bit extra for lithium batteries, which will simply

last longer and power your cameras better and more efficiently. Save the cheap stuff for your kid's toys.

\* **Bug off.** If you've never had ants colonize your camera, you're missing one of nature's great wonders. How these tiny critters can infiltrate nearly water-tight seals, crawl into every crevice by the dozens and lay eggs in places that defy description is truly impressive. Sadly, this invasion can also fry your circuit board and render a marvelous piece of technology basically worthless. On a happy note, you can prevent this by adding a dryer sheet to the inside of your camera. If space is tight, you don't need the whole sheet. Just trim a small section off a full piece with a scissor and cram it in a corner. Hint: The smellier the sheet, the better, and if you're worried about deer spooking from the scent, don't. I have plenty of pics of nanny does sticking their nose right up to a lens, apparently inhaling the odors from my dryer sheet.

\* **Stay in contact:** If your cams are

more than a year old, they've spent some time in the weather, enduring heat, cold and moisture. All that exposure can oxidize the battery contacts and result in a poor connection that will compromise camera performance. Before I deploy my veteran cameras for another season, I use a small section of Scotch-Brite pad to lightly buff the battery contacts inside each cam.

\* **Wipe your eyes:** If you wear eyeglasses, you likely clean your lenses at least once — if not several times — per day. Nothing is more irritating than trying to see through streaks, smears and water spots, right? It only makes sense to treat your trail cam lens similarly. After all, it's out there getting hammered by rain and blasted by dust 24/7. I give my cam lenses, sensors and flash unit a thorough wipe-down at the beginning of season, and I carry lens wipes with me as I make milk runs to check my cameras. Clean cams are more sensitive and simply take better pics.

\* **Make a kit:** Anyone who knows me well can attest to my disorganized na-



**“MODERN TRAIL CAMERAS ARE EFFICIENT AND USER-FRIENDLY, BUT SOME TRICKS CAN BOOST THEIR EFFECTIVENESS.”**

ture, and I spent a long time cussing myself when I forgot the tools needed to do a good job running trail cams. I overcame that by assembling a trail cam kit that goes in my truck at the start of summer and never leaves. I stuff a plastic ammo box (a backpack works nicely too) with extra batteries, SD cards, zip ties, deer scent, clippers, a zip-loc baggie with dryer sheets, and as many prepped-and-ready fresh cameras as I can fit. Now when I visit my cams, I'm ready to replace or tend to them, as well as slap up a new unit where I've spotted a good buck.

\* Hang 'em high: Many deer — including some old, massive bucks — are pretty mellow around trail cams, but let's face it: We've all had those one-and-done bucks who freaked out when a flash (even an infrared or no-flash) went off. This typically happens where deer linger (a mineral lick, bait pile or mock scrape), because the flash isn't a one-time event, and the continued

exposure finally makes deer goosey. You can largely eliminate this by hanging your cameras 5 to 6 feet high and pointing them down at the focus spot. Simply leave a little slack in the camera's strap and jamming a stick behind it. A buck might still see the flash, but it's definitely not as bothersome. My working theory is that deer see light sources above their head fairly frequently (lightning bugs, aircraft, stars, for example), but a flashing light 3 feet from their nose? Not so much.

\* Spit on a stick: In a world where mineral licks and bait piles are increasingly taboo, trail cammers have to get creative, and I can always count on my friend and whitetail expert Ted Marum to do that. One of Ted's favorite tricks is to jam a stick in a logging road, or at the junction of several deer trails, and train a camera on it. Before he walks off, Ted spits on his palm, and rubs it up and down the stick.

“Every buck that walks down that

road or trail is gonna stop and smell that stick,” he said with a laugh. “And that includes bobcats, coyotes and foxes. I've got pics of 'em all, not only sniffing that stick, but licking it themselves and returning to do so whenever they're on that trail.”

\* Make a quickie-licking branch: Mock scrapes are some of my favorite cam sites, and I make a lot of them. Sometimes I simply don't have the time to do the full deal and create a complete scrape, or I might want to check the edges of a soybean or alfalfa field but not want to damage plants by creating a scrape. Quick and easy fix: Simply zip-tie a chunk of grape vine (lacking a vine, a chunk of frayed rope will do) to a branch that overhangs the field edge. Although there might be several existing branches, bucks will spend more time at my viney one than all the others. I don't know what magical elixir grows within a vine, but bucks adore it. Hang your cam point-

ing at the vine and you'll get the best bucks in the neighborhood. And hey, if they start a scrape there and wreck some hay or beans, it's the buck's fault, not yours.

\* Establish a milk run: Although it's generally a good idea to keep cams away from sensitive spots such as bedding areas, it's not always possible, especially when bucks are bedding close to food sources (which is common in summer). The trick is to drive as close as possible with your truck or ATV at the same time midday on a regular schedule. These predictable visits condition bucks to your presence and quickly become routine for them, especially in farm country, where vehicles are a normal part of everyday life for deer.

\* Organize your pics: Most of us run more trail cams every year, and with SD cards holding more images than ever, the sheer number of pics we gather can quickly become ridiculous. It's a happy problem but also frustrating

mount on the underside, and there are lots of commercial rods made specifically for cameras that can be driven in the ground at any location. Being a cheapie, I had a welding buddy attach appropriately sized bolts on metal rods I already had, for a fraction of the cost. I've also used camera tripods and fence posts for camera mounting, but my masterpiece was making a "tree" by gathering three stalks of standing corn together and wrapping the camera strap around them. No corn plants were harmed in the process, and I got some nice pics of a buck I'd have never captured from the tree line.

\* Stock up on SD cards: The folks in electronics at my local superstore know me well. Every time I swing through, I ask them to unlock the SD card rack so I can buy a couple more. I don't have an accurate count, but I easily have three times as many cards as I do cameras. Not only does having an arsenal of SDs let me swap them out frequently on my milk runs, but I've learned the hard

a look at the rack because the sun has blown out the pic."

Avoiding the sun will also reduce those blank shots when the camera was simply triggered by heat.

\* Study the conditions: Some of the most consistently successful trophy hunters I know are masters at identifying conditions that make a buck vulnerable to harvest: wind direction, barometric pressure, temperature and others. In the pre-camera era, the only way to glean this data was to observe a buck on his feet — a decidedly laborious and time-consuming process. Trail cams have all this data stored on a time stamp, and noting that information every time you get a daylight pic of a target buck can reveal reams of info on when the buck is most likely to move. In addition to offering huge hints about the best conditions, daylight pics can reveal clues about where the buck beds and feeds during legal shooting hours.

\* Scan the plot: One of the least-used functions of trail cams, I'm convinced,

### "NEVER FACE A CAMERA DIRECTLY EAST OR WEST UNLESS YOU'RE WILLING TO COMPLETELY SACRIFICE MORNING OR EVENING PICS."

when you're trying to find a photo of your favorite bucks. Solve this by creating folders on your computer and label them by buck name or camera location, and immediately filing each new pic you want to save in the folder. If you start this immediately, it will save you tons of time later.

\* Fight the dew: Moisture can also compromise camera performance, and although the seal on most cams will keep out dew and driving rain, some locations (or cameras) just seem more prone to moisture problems. Fight this by slipping in a desiccant pack (those annoying packets you find in jerky and almost anything else these days) into your camera. You can tape it to the door if you don't want it rattling around in there. These packets can absorb up to 40 percent of their weight in moisture and help keep your camera humming along nicely in damp conditions.

\* Leave the trees: Strapping cams to trees is Trail Cam 101. Trouble is, insisting on a handy tree to find a good buck is foolish. Most cams have a threaded

way that some cameras simply don't like certain cards. I'm not enough of an electronics geek to explain this, but I know if I get an error message when I power up a camera, the easy fix is to feed it another card. That's a far better solution than taking the camera home, calling customer support, and having them troubleshoot the situation — until they tell me to try inserting a different SD card. Oh, weirdness alert: The same card rejected by one camera will often work just fine in another.

\* Run from the sun: My friend and Kansas outfitter Tim Clark is adamant about directional positioning of cameras. "Never face a camera directly east or west unless you're willing to completely sacrifice morning (east-facing) or evening (west-facing) pics, at least in daylight," he said. "And now we've got the solstice, so the sun will be dropping farther south by the day. Any time I can cheat a camera to the north side of a setup, I'm taking it. Nothing drives me crazier than getting a washed-out pic of a big-bodied deer and I can't get

is the field scan mode offered on most models. Rather than triggering solely on the heat or movement of an animal within the cam's detection range, field scan simply takes a pic at a designated interval programmed by the user. This function is an excellent tool to learn when deer are visiting a food plot of ag field, and it also offers clues about where deer are entering and exiting the field. I love to use this function when I'm hunting a plot for the first time, or during late season, when bucks are spooky and sensitive to intrusion and the presence of camera flash going off in their faces at night. I simply set the camera on one end of a plot, program it to take pics only during daylight, and walk away. When I check the card later, I know the prime feeding times of deer and where they enter the plot or field. I can then plan the best hunting times and places to hang a stand.

