



HOME ON THE RANGE

Create core areas rather than just locating them. Learn to recognize what deer want, and then make that happen.

■ by Bob Humphrey



If you hunt the same general area for years or decades, you begin to notice certain special places — honey holes that seem to produce more consistently than others.

Sometimes, the reasons are obvious, but often, they're more subtle. You can't quite tell why, but such spots just seem to hold more deer year after year. As noted, it often takes time to find them. You can accelerate the process a bit with intensive scouting and trail cameras, but it would be much easier if you could recognize those hotspots even without deer sightings. After you learn to identify those spots, you can then go a step farther and create them. Find out what makes a place special to deer, and if you build it, they will come.

Too often, hunters focus on locating home ranges and core areas of certain deer (bucks). That's effective from one year to the next, but a better long-range approach might be manipulating your habitat to make it more attractive — that is, building perennial core areas. Research has shown that although bucks have individual home ranges and core areas, they often overlap, particularly in areas of prime habitat.

HOME RANGES AND CORE AREAS

Let's start with some defining parameters so you know what we're talking about. A deer's home range is defined as where that animal spends 95 percent of its time during a year. People often cite a square mile as the average home range for a whitetail. That's actually a reasonable estimate but can be misleading because it's an average. For every home range that's smaller, there's another that's larger, and the differences can be considerable. Studies from Louisiana, Maryland and Pennsylvania showed home range sizes for adult bucks averaged about 250 to 500 acres. Meanwhile, a Texas study found home ranges averaging more than 2,000 acres. Home range size is influenced by several variables, especially habitat, but more on that later. It's also important to remember this includes where a buck traveled on excursions during the rut.

Within that home range is a core area, where a deer spends at least 50 percent of its time. Deer might travel far from home during the rut or as diet and food sources shift, but they'll spend most of their time in a relatively small area. Several of the aforementioned studies showed core areas of less than 100 acres. Find these core areas and your odds of encountering the deer that inhabit them increase, provided you keep human disturbance to a minimum.

Let's return to those excursions for a moment. Not surprisingly, does tend to have smaller home ranges than bucks, because the latter leave home looking for love when the season is right. So your odds of finding a buck in its core area are better before and after the rut. During the rut, all bets are off, because a buck might show up almost anywhere, right?



MORE ON CORE AREAS

Although it's somewhat of a generality, does typically disperse in what biologists refer to as a rose petal pattern. When a young doe finally reaches breeding age, she'll leave her natal core area and establish a new one nearby, often adjacent or even overlapping that of her mother's. Successive generations will do likewise, and vacancies are quickly filled when a doe is removed — particularly an older doe that has probably secured the best habitat.

Bucks behave somewhat differently. They disperse as yearlings and might end up far from home before establishing a core area. When they do, it's usually in prime habitat, where food is close to cover. And they don't mind company, which is why you commonly see bachelor groups in late summer and early fall. They'll be less tolerant of each other during the rut, but only for a relatively brief period. Then it's back to the boy's club.

Not necessarily. Young bucks tend to travel farther and wider, especially yearlings that are dispersing from their natal home range. Studies have found that mature bucks don't stray as far from home, and some might only use 30 percent of their home ranges during the rut. This is likely in part because of experience. They have learned where to find does. Even more interesting are results from studies on mature bucks fitted with satellite tracking collars. Researchers found the destinations of their excursions often overlap in the core areas of does.

Bottom line: Does inhabit their core areas year-round. Bucks inhabit their core areas most of the time but leave briefly during the rut, and older bucks don't go as far as younger ones. When they leave, they go to the core areas of does. The question then is, what makes one area more attractive than another as a core area?

The answer, in a word, is habitat, which is defined as food, water, cover and the juxtaposition of those elements. The better the habitat, the more likely deer will establish a core area. If you do it right, you can hold a lot of deer in a relatively small area.

FOOD

Let's start with food. There's ample information on specific plantings on the other pages of this and past issues of Whitetail News, so we can skip those and talk in generalities. The most important thing is to provide enough of the right types of food to meet a deer's year-round nutritional requirements. If your ground lacks anything, deer will go elsewhere to find it, and if they find something better, they might not be back.

In general, you want a sufficient amount of perennials so that at least some of your food plots will provide food from the first green-up. Imperial Whitetail Clover and Fusion will probably be your go-to varieties, but there are others. When conditions allow, you can supplement existing food with warm-season annuals such as Power-Plant, sunn hemp and others. All of those will carry deer through the abundance of midsummer and the smaller nutritional gap of late summer.

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Next comes your late summer-fall planting. Although the focus will be mainly on cool-season annuals for attraction, you'll want to make sure to plant enough species that will persist into winter, such as Winter Peas Plus, Pure Attraction and Beets & Greens, the latter of which will provide abundant food when it's most needed. And don't be afraid to add or top-seed with more perennials to ensure fast, early green-up the next spring.

If you have enough ground, you should be able to meet most nutritional needs with food plots, but adding hard and soft mast will make your ground richer and more attractive. If you already have hard mast species such as oaks on site, you can promote better mast production by removing undesirable species that compete for soil moisture, minerals and sunlight. Volunteer species such as raspberries and blackberries will usually pioneer in disturbed areas such as recent cutovers if you're also managing for timber, and those provide great cover. Plum thickets and persimmon patches also perform dual duty.

Speaking of cover, it's the next most important habitat element in encouraging deer to establish core areas on your property. It might even be equally important to food when you consider that deer spend far more time bedding than they do feeding. Make sure you have enough and in close proximity to feeding areas. An ideal situation might be a wide strip of dense shrubby cover, fallow field or CRP between your food plot and forest. It might be easier and more efficient to plant larger plots, but smaller is often better. It creates more diversity and more of the edge habitat deer prefer.

If you manage for timber, much of your forest will be in even-aged stands. In that case, it's preferable to rotate your harvesting so you have a diversity of age classes in various stands and you're cutting smaller blocks during a longer period. This also creates more diversity by having a variety of young, middle-aged and mature stands rather than having all

or most of your harvest trees in the same age class. If you have hardwoods, small selective cuts and firewood cuts will provide food in the form of coarse woody browse from stump sprouts and patches of dense cover.

One of the most important things you can do to make more deer feel more comfortable on your property is nothing. If you have the acreage, set aside as much as you can as sanctuaries. Those are places where nobody goes — ever. The only time you should ever go into a sanctuary is to retrieve a wounded deer. It might be tempting to slip in there once in a while, but you'll only detract from your efforts. We know that deer react negatively to human interaction, and the more they experience, the less likely they'll stick around. Give them a place to feel safe and secure. Be patient, and wait for them to come out.

Last but not least is water. During average conditions, deer can get most of what they need from the plants they eat, but with few exceptions, you can't have too much. It's definitely a plus to have natural water bodies and waterways on your property. They'll provide enough water, and those riparian zones often have the dense cover deer prefer to travel and bed in. If not, you can dig ponds or irrigate. Again, if they need to go elsewhere to find it, you'll lose deer.

The overriding factor for all the elements is juxtaposition. We've discussed it, but it's worth re-stating. The more diversity, the better the habitat. Food plots and pine stands are OK, but your ground will be infinitely more attractive if you add cutovers, sanctuaries, fallow fields, bottomland hardwoods and shrub thickets. Make it a place where deer want to spend most of their time and you'll spend less time scouting and more time hunting.



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