




FRESH EYES:

NEW LOOKS AT OLD PROPERTIES

Here are five ways hunters and landowners can
completely relearn their hunting land.

■ by *Josh Honeycutt*



■ Collect as much information as possible about your land, but don't be too proud to ask others for help. Combined, that knowledge might shed new light on familiar dirt.

Hunting a property for many years provides several benefits. Unfortunately, through time, we often become entrenched in patterns. Rather than continually adjusting and changing things when needed, we do things the way they've always been done. Sometimes, that's the right call. But often, it's wrong, and we do it anyway.

Further, after years of following potentially incorrect practices, deer become familiar with how hunters traverse and use the property, and in turn, they pattern us. Even when we do things as best as the property or situation allows, it has negative effects. All the while, we wonder why deer aren't doing what they did previously.

Hunters also tend to hunt more based on history rather than the most recent intel. We gravitate to spots deer have fallen in the past instead of hunting areas deer are currently frequenting. That stagnancy and, in a way, arrogance and overly confident laziness, keeps us from filling tags on big deer we might otherwise put in the back of the truck. It prevents us from making the subtle tweaks necessary to target and harvest mature deer.

Although some aspects of deer travel patterns remain the same, many change. And even when they don't, we should still look at properties as if we never have before. Sometimes, fresh eyes and new looks at old properties are vital.

OPTION 1: YOUR OWN FRESH EYES

Start by looking at the property with your eyes. Observe it with new perspective. Things change. Logging happens. Trees fall. Crops rotate. Water sources dry up. The list goes on. And even when it seems things haven't changed, rest assured, they have in some way.

So look at the property as if you've never hunted it before. Start with large-printed maps. This magnified viewpoint helps identify smaller nuances otherwise missed on smaller layouts. Further, rather than looking at it from the correctly oriented north-south axis you always have, turn it 180 degrees to a south-north perspective, or 90 degrees to an east-west perspective. Doing so is ill-advised from a windage perspective, and when dropping stand locations and charting access routes. But it can help you by seeing land in a new way and maybe identifying things you haven't before.

In addition to maps, use hunting apps. Choose the app that best fits your style and needs. Each is slightly different. If you're seeking new things, remove pins and notes. Or create a new layer to avoid losing your collected information. Study it with fresh eyes and without all the things you know about the place.

Further, study it with new layers. Try some you haven't used before. Those can offer different looks, such as foliage versus no foliage. Also, zoom in and out, and observe the land at various elevations. That can also help you find critical elements, even down to a fallen log a buck might bed against.

While scouting in the field, and with your hunting app's trace path feature turned on, walk every trail on your property. If you must get off a trail, pause the feature, and resume it when you're back on a trail. When you've walked all the trails, pause the feature, and every trail will light up on the aerial map. This shows you how deer are using the property, and more than likely, you'll see those trails shifting farther from existing stand locations than they once were. That's how you know your presence and predictability have affected how deer use the area.

While afield, it's important to determine where deer are crossing back and forth on your property lines and what land improvements or property adjustments should be made. Walk boundaries

to determine that.

Last, soak some trail cameras at new places. During the off-season, post cameras in sanctuaries, bedding areas and other high-traffic locations. Let them remain there until the next off-season. Then, study the intel. If you want that information in real-time, use cellular cams paired with external battery boxes, which can last 10 to 12 months. I use several of these.

OPTION 2: EYES IN THE SKY

In addition to your fresh looks, on the ground or via digital scouting, another option is having eyes in the skies. Some hunters can purchase basic prop plane tours of their property from local airports. Usually, these services offer plane rides on an hourly basis, often costing \$100 to 200 per hour.

Such plane rides can help you see what's going on at your property and also what's happening on neighboring tracts. Knowing what's occurring across your property boundaries can help you plan for what's happening on yours. As best you can from above, see what nearby land

■ Use hunting apps to observe your land at various elevations. That can help you find critical features, such as bedding areas. When scouting in the field, use the trace path feature to mark every trail on your land. This will show you how deer use the property.

managers are doing to improve their properties. Note those things, and then brainstorm ways to make your land more attractive.

Independently or in addition to plane rides, drones are also very effective. Where legal, drones can be used to conduct deer population surveys. Drone Deer Recovery is a popular service that emerged recently. It uses an expensive \$20,000 drone and various technologies to determine how many deer are on the property at the time of inspection. These surveys can also reveal where deer bed at various times of year.

OPTION 3: BRINGING IN A TRUSTED FRIEND

Folks who aren't interested in paying for fresh eyes have a couple of options. The first is asking a trusted friend to study the land. That person must be an experienced deer hunter who understands how to hunt deer effectively. They should be accomplished.

That route likely won't produce the quality of results a paid consultant would, but that doesn't mean it can't. I've said many times, we've never heard of the best deer hunters out there. And if your friend is one of those, you might



get even better advice than from a paid professional. If you're equally accomplished hunters, consider trading out this service, where you visit their property and they yours.

OPTION 4: BRINGING IN A FREE PROFESSIONAL

In some cases, a professional might visit your property for free. In most states, wildlife agencies have staff wildlife biologists and foresters who are dedicated to working with private landowners. Consider Ohio (<https://ohiodnr.gov/discover-and-learn/safety-conservation/woodland-management/private-lands-biologist>), Kentucky (<https://fw.ky.gov/Wildlife/Pages/Improve-Your-Land-for-Wildlife.aspx>) and Tennessee (<https://www.tn.gov/twra/wildlife/habitat.html>).

Generally, these biologists are experienced in managing wildlife and forestry species. They can help provide advice on various land management objectives. Sometimes, those people are hunters and can help integrate land

management practices with hunting effectiveness. However, sometimes they aren't hunters or don't completely understand deer behavior and sociology, which is a major aspect of setting up a property for success. That brings us to the final option.

OPTION 5: BRINGING IN NEXT LEVEL CONSULTING

Folks who want to skip other options can turn to Whitetail Institute's Next Level Consulting. The experts at this service incorporate the latest science and university studies to make sure your land has good age structure, herd size and plenty of groceries.

Next Level consultants start by examining your habitat to determine what can be done to improve it for wildlife. They consider timber cutting, herd numbers, natural foods, prescribed fire, soil testing and food plots.

Contact Jody Holdbrooks at (205) 269-5228 to set up a visit from Whitetail Institute's Next Level Consulting.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

As you use these tools or a combination, consider what deer might be doing in areas you already frequent. Also, look at areas that have largely been ignored, especially if they offer overlooked pockets of thick bedding cover. These might be where deer have been escaping your predictable hunting habits.

Of course, garner all new information you can on your own. But don't be too proud to ask others for help. Consider the historical knowledge you have. Pair that with nuggets of information received by others. Then, combine it for the best thoughts and predictions on what future deer movement will look like. Empowered with that information, begin making necessary land management changes, and enjoy the newfound success on your deer hunting property.



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