

Using Trail Cameras for Whitetail Deer Management

By Heath Walley - Leaf River Outdoor Products

EDITOR'S REMARKS

We've known the founders of Leaf River Outdoor Products, located in Taylorsville, Mississippi, since they started in the hunting industry in 1987. President Roger Lack and Vice-President Don Saxon are truly some of the "good guys" in the hunting industry. They are passionate about hunting and in tune with what hunter's need. Feel free to contact them with any trail camera questions you might have. Their phone number is 866-775-5351 and their e-mail address is info@vibrashine.com. You can also visit their website at www.myleafriver.com for more information on trail cameras.

—Jason



The mere idea of trail cameras has changed immensely over the past several years. Before thought of as a novelty item or most commonly defined in the past as a "hunter's toy," trail cameras once carried the label of being just a fun gadget to have. But trail cameras are much more than that and people have figured this out, not only hunters, but also scientists, biologists, outfitters and ranch managers—just to name a few.

Trail cameras have become very popular and are increasingly growing in popularity as the now exceptionally efficient digital evolution of camera technology continues to advance. Those gadgets, once deemed "toys," are now commonly recognized as an essential instrument in viewing and studying wildlife and are an avenue of gathering a wide spectrum of pertinent annual information about wildlife in the areas that they inhabit. This information spans a variety of directions from patterning movements, to monitoring overall quality and health of a herd, to helping make decisions such as culling possible undesirable bloodlines out of a herd. Foremost, information from the camera is readily available, which gives the user the opportunity to study the composition of an animal or group of animals. One can study a photo or video of an animal without time restraints, which in addition also relays to saving time and money from traveling to and from scouting areas. Plus, cameras continue to offer that recreational value which makes possible the ability to hunt or watch wildlife year-round.

Just as choosing a dependable trail camera is important, knowing how, when, and where to use that camera or set of cameras throughout the year is equally as important.

Leaf River Outdoor Products spends vast amounts of time developing trail cameras and testing cameras in the field.

SCOUTING THE PRE-SEASON

The pre-season is a time for comfortable evaluation of Whitetail deer, but is just as important as the pre-rut and rut when it comes to scouting and healthy management of Whitetail herds. Carefully-placed trail cameras during the spring and summer months of the year can lead to a massive amount of information about the entire herd in an area.

Spring is a time for rejuvenation and new beginnings. Deer are recovering from the harsh conditions of the winter months and begin a period of relaxation from the physical stressors of winter and the previous rut, as well as the pressures of being hunted. Placing trail cameras where there are good signs of deer activity near popular food sources, watering holes, and trails or near bedding areas is perfect for this time of the year. Does begin to drop fawns in late May and early June, and the cameras will give you a glimpse of new additions to a herd. Additionally, this time of the year is also a good time to keep an eye on cameras and get total number counts on deer specific to a certain area.

Summer, for the most part, can be thought of as a "lazy" time for deer. However, bucks will begin grow on new antlers during these months, and although bucks are not as territorially aggressive during the spring and summer months, hierarchy among the group can still be noticed through social behavior and physical behavior such as bucks sparring with their hooves. This early but vital information can be gathered from trail cameras strategically placed along trails and food sources. On a side note, keep in mind cameras that have the capability of capturing video will relay more thorough information of the social tendencies of deer within a herd and how the herd, as a group, interacts with one another. Data from cameras during the pre-season months also will give you an idea of what a deer's favorite food sources are, along with the overall physical condition of the herd from a management aspect, as well as providing you the opportunity to basically enjoy hunting during the off-season.

SCOUTING THE PRE-RUT

Fall, or even as early as the late summer months, is the time to begin adjusting your trail camera scouting strategies. During this time of the year deer are beginning to move quite a bit more and their bodies are preparing for the rut. Daylight hours are reduced, does are close to



becoming ready for the rut, and testosterone levels among bucks are increasing, which causes the antlers to harden and the velvet to fall off. Quality photographs of deer during this specific time of the year offer an early insight that provides the ability to be able to begin determining the age of deer, to study the horn composition of bucks, gain knowledge about the gene pools in the herd, as well as making scientific decisions on which bucks you will harvest whether it be as trophy animals or cull animals and which quality bucks you will let walk to maturity and let spread good genes.

Additionally, Whitetail begin to separate from the same sex social groups they have been in during the summer months and bucks begin to mingle some with does while feeding to begin the process of establishing dominance. Bucks break away from bachelor groups and other “roaming” bucks may begin to make an appearance. As years pass into the management of your herd a dependable trail camera will help keep track of which bucks are more apt to be involved in a bachelor group and which bucks are more the loner type and remain secluded during the summer months. In most instances, if seclusion occurs, it is likely that these are more dominant bucks you may be able to expect to return for the pre-rut and rut from year to year. During the pre-rut, cameras can be placed at food sources, as deer are beginning to consume more carbohydrates to store energy and prepare for the upcoming rut and winter. But, do not single the cameras out to food sources alone during the pre-rut. Carefully begin planning areas around the food sources to hunt by placing cameras in the inner environment of the deer, for example near draws, streams, well-traveled trails, hollows, or natural corridors or funnels. Search for signs of deer in the area, such as droppings, scrapes or rubs, as these are also great places to mount a trail camera for scouting. Once the perfect place for the camera is determined, limit your activity in the area so the wildlife is not disturbed. When checking cameras in these settings and during this time of the year always use a cover scent before hiking into the area and limit time in the area. In these instances the option of removable memory plays a huge role with trail cameras. An excellent rule of thumb is to get into the area where the cameras are positioned, switch memory cards, and get out as quickly as possible so the deer are not disturbed.

SCOUTING THE RUT

By the time the rut rolls around, you should already have been able to gain a great deal of useful information with your trail cameras about the deer or herds of deer in your area. Hunting areas should be established, and stands or

blinds should now be in place, according to the information you’ve been able to acquire with the trail cameras. Continued scouting throughout the rut should be limited; however, there is still useful information to be gained during this time of the year. Just as in the pre-rut, always limit time in the environment during the rut and use good cover as to not disturb the deer when checking trail cameras. Deer, during the rut, are focused on one thing, mating, and their senses are now more precise as the pressures of both mating and being hunted are growing. Attempts to gather useful information about the patterns of bucks should be centered on mating tendencies now, rather than solely on food sources. Cameras can still be mounted around food sources, but the majority of valuable information available as far as the patterning of deer, especially bucks, during the rut should be focused more along the lines of placing cameras on well-traveled trails and scrapes. Bucks will more frequently work scrapes during the rut and will often also roam further distances out of their normal range to find mates, so the rut is a good opportunity to use cameras to quick-pattern bucks that have not previously been seen in your hunting area.

SCOUTING THE POST-RUT

The rut has worn Whitetail deer down and they are now beginning to focus more on food sources that are more than likely short in supply at winter’s end. Mounting cameras around food sources or mineral licks once again is ideal. During the post-rut you will be able to get an idea of which deer, bucks in particular, have possibly been harvested or didn’t make it through the winter, or you will know if there are still “quality-gened” bucks that have not been harvested. The information gained during the post-rut from the trail cameras will circle back to the pre-season, which begins your deer management for another year and continued management for the future.

In all, trail cameras can play a huge role in effectively managing deer and can help you improve the overall quality of the deer in your area, as well as provide you and your family a fun, healthy pastime, an area in which trail camera usage is widely spreading, that can be enjoyed throughout the entire year. We invite you to join the Leaf River family and let us provide you with your first or next trail camera. Leaf River’s commitment to you is to provide quality trail cameras that we stand behind for the best possible price and an efficient service, if the need ever arises, to you as a trail camera user. You will not be disappointed and any question you may ever have will always be addressed in a timely and professional manner.