

# Decoy Tactics for Whitetails



By Mike Groman  
Appalachian Whitetails Field Team

You are sitting on stand in late October when something catches your attention off in the distance. Finally, it is the buck you have been waiting on all season. But wait, he is on a course that will take him well out of bow range. Calmly, you grab your favorite call and blow. Immediately he stops in his tracks! Now the nervous moments begin as he stands, motionless, facing you with his head cranked up and nose meticulously testing the wind. While your mind races and struggles with choosing what to do next, the buck makes that decision for you and continues on his previous course, no longer responding to your last few desperate calls.

If you have bowhunted for any length of time, that scenario has happened to you, maybe more than once. But, if it hasn't, it will, trust me! Now, if you are like me, you would have been wishing you had a decoy out, which surely would have sealed the deal. Unfortunately, it is not that easy, but nothing in bowhunting ever is, and that is why I love it.

## Decoy Evolution

The use of a decoy to improve a hunter's chances is nothing new. The Native Americans used a form of decoying game by draping a buck hide with antlers intact over their body while stalking deer in opens fields, attempting to get within close bow range. As ethics, sportsmanship, and concerns for safety have evolved over the years, many of our hunting methods have changed for the better. However, we still are trying to exploit two of the whitetails weaknesses, curiosity and their social nature. Taking advantage of these traits has put three bucks in my freezer over the past four years, and all were caught on tape, allowing me to break down the encounters and find a few common threads.

Now, before you rush out to buy a decoy please read on. Many of you may have watched videos or television shows where they plopped a decoy out in a field. A buck, upon seeing the decoy, begins to posture (a visual show of dominance), and stiff leg walks up to the decoy. He then pauses, lowers his head as he lunges, and knocks it over. The buck then darts off 40 yards or so and stands in wonder. That makes for good video footage, but it does not consistently put meat on the table.

## The Right Decoy



Mike Groman

**A proper decoy set-up can prove deadly to curious whitetails overcome by hormone-driven emotions.**

So where do you start? First, you have to decide what you need in a decoy, not necessarily what you want. Fortunately, the options are plentiful. When push comes to shove, you will need to consider five issues: size, weight, durability, cost, and noise. All of the three-dimensional replicas are realistic, versatile (changing body postures and gender), and most importantly, are more visible from any angle that a deer might approach from. All the parts can be removed and stored inside the body cavity for safe transport.

With practice, they can be set up quickly and easily, even in the dark. Some drawbacks include their weight, which is especially noticeable on a long pack into a remote stand. Noise can be caused by the plastic material the decoy is made

of, as well as the loose parts inside the cavity. Even in a collapsed state they are difficult to hand



**One drawback to using decoys is the effort required to transport them to your hunting location.**

cautiously assess the situation. Now, this does not mean that the rare occasion where a buck just keeps on coming until his nose meets her tail will not happen, but it is not the norm. More likely he will stop momentarily and circle downwind, walking at that slow step, pause, step, pause pace, all the time watching and waiting for her to react. To increase your odds when using a doe decoy, face her steeply quartering away from your stand at the outermost edge of your effective shooting range.

As he circles downwind with his attention on her, you may get a close, high-percentage (usually quartering or broadside) shot. In this situation, the wind should be blowing from the doe decoy to your stand. If possible, have your shooting lanes planned out in advance, because this buck will not stick around once his curiosity is outweighed by his instinct to survive.

Conversely, during the same time of year, a buck decoy has produced more shot opportunities for my production team than the doe. My belief is that when bucks meet, they immediately size up the competition, which is usually a long stare down. If one of the two is subordinate, he will drop his head, breaking eye contact, tuck his tail, and move off. A more dominant buck will stand his ground and maintain eye contact; this is why buck decoys work during this time of year. This gives the real buck three options: confront the invader posturing all the way, walk off, or circle cautiously downwind and then decide on one of the first two choices. This is why proper decoy set-up is critical.

### **Set-up is Critical**

First, set the decoy upwind from your stand at a comfortable shooting distance. My team uses 20 yards, cover permitting. Next, place the decoy slightly quartering to your stand in a clear shooting lane. If you don't take anything else away from this article, remember this. Always block the decoy's shoulder opposite your stand location with a tree, bush, or some other obstacle. The reason for this is to force the buck into a broadside or quartering-away position between you and the decoy for a

carry or strap to a treestand, and rough terrain and heavy brush just add to the problem. Two-dimensional decoys are compact, lightweight, and some are even photo realistic. They are great for long hikes into a secluded spot, and set-up is quick and quiet. Two-dimensional decoys work best in open fields, logging roads, power lines and any other open areas. On occasion, deer do not notice the decoy, even with calling, due to the angle of approach. Therefore, fields, logging roads, power lines, and any other open areas. On occasion, deer do not notice the decoy, even with calling, due to the angle of approach. Therefore, based on your hunting location, you will have to choose your decoy accordingly. For that reason, I have three, much to my wife's dismay.

### **Understanding Deer Behavior**

Decoy placement should be thought out extensively at every set-up location to increase your chance of success. To consistently have a deer positioned for a good shot, you must understand deer behavior. During the pre-rut and rut phases, if a buck encounters a doe, he will drop his head, stretch out his neck, and trot directly to her hind-end to check her state of readiness to breed. When this occurs, the doe runs off and the buck will stop where she last stood and most likely lip curl. However, with the use of a doe decoy, when a buck comes rushing in, the decoy holds her ground. This lack of reaction is unusual, which may immediately make even a rut-crazed buck stop and

shot. If a buck has committed to confront a challenger, he will approach his opponent from the front, posturing all the way. I know you have seen it: hair bristled, ears laid back, rack tipped toward his foe, and a sideways stiff-legged walk. When a buck decides to charge he will do it from the front, head on (there is your broadside shot), or lunge into his opponent's shoulder, offering you the quartering-away shot. At this point, your bow should already be in hand, and ready to draw and shoot before the buck hits the "lunge zone," one to three yards from the decoy.

Since most of my hunting is done in Pennsylvania and New York, one additional factor must be discussed— hills and slopes. A buck committed to fight will take every advantage he can to win. In hilly terrain, a buck will always choose the advantage of taking that first lunge from higher ground. Exploit that behavior and position your

stand accordingly (not forgetting about the wind) to ensure the best opportunity for a shot.

I have been using decoys for 14 years and have seen a buck swing downwind cautiously only twice, and to this day, I swear it was somehow my fault. When a buck chooses to walk off, try to call or rattle lightly as a last-ditch effort. If he changes his mind, great, but be warned because he will be on high alert. Keep your movements and calling to a minimum.

A perfect set-up can be ruined by a bowhunter being too eager and trying to call or rattle while the buck is looking at the decoy. Rattling is a deer activity that involves a lot of movement. Because the decoy is stationary, the sound of a fight will cause the buck to swing downwind to smell what he cannot see. Unfortunately, the source of the sound is you. Game over! There is nothing wrong with using a load grunt or the clashing of antlers to get a cruising buck to stop and notice a decoy, but never do this when the buck is in a stare down with the decoy.

So how do you know if a buck is going to commit? Pay close attention, because here it is! Watch the buck's body language closely when he sees the decoy. If he begins to salivate with visible drops of fluid dripping from his mouth, he will then begin licking his nose. Get out the pen and the drag rope, because it is all over but the story tellin'.

I have never heard or read why bucks do this before a fight, but my theory is to moisten the membranes of the nose and mouth before a strenuous battle. This may give them that needed edge over their opponent. This could be compared to a heavy-breathing football or soccer player taking a sip of water, swishing it around in their mouth, and spitting it back out. We breathe so much more comfortably if our mucus membranes are moist, and maybe deer are no different.

### **Importance of Scent Control**

No set-up can be successful without tedious attention to scent control. My decoy never stays in my truck until its go time. I shower and my clothes are washed with scent-free soap. I spray down with a scent eliminator like Apparition Phantom Hunter, and wear rubber gloves before picking up the decoy to head into the woods. With a three-dimensional decoy, I assemble it 100 – 150 yards from my stand location to decrease the noise caused by removing the parts and connecting them. I then carry the decoy upside down and wrapped in an orange vest the rest of the way to my stand location. Safety has to be a top priority with any form of hunting. Don't ever cut corners. Finally, I never



Mike Groman

**Human scent elimination is a critical, yet often forgotten, step toward being successful.**

use a decoy during the overlap of early muzzleloader or any other firearm season that coincides with bow season, and neither should you! Spray the entire decoy down with Apparition Phantom Hunter to remove any lingering human odor, and get ready.

### **Conclusion**

In closing, if a buck comes in bold and aggressive, he probably will never hear the bow go off, so aim accordingly. However, if a buck approaches in a submissive posture, one slow step at a time, he is likely high-strung and could bolt at the blink of an eye. I suggest aiming low if he is close. Beyond 18 yards, even with today's fast bows, a high-strung buck will react, potentially causing a poor hit. If you decide to pass on the shot in this situation, I would strongly support that decision. Lastly, never place a decoy on a travel corridor that has thick cover close to the trail, blocking the entire decoy from a passing buck's sight until the moment he is literally on top of it. This will lead to startling a buck, immediately putting him on the defensive. Deer, like humans, have their own personal space or comfort zone. Even big bucks can be startled by faulty decoy placement, and this tends to set the tone for the encounter, which in most cases will end up being an unfavorable outcome.

This article only scratches the surface of correct decoy use. There are many other advanced topics to cover, such as adding movement, scent, and multiple decoys. I encourage you to get out there, and try using these tips this fall. When you succeed, send the pictures in to Appalachian Whitetails and make sure the decoy is in the photo. Good luck, hunt smart, and let the whitetail be your teacher.