

Trail Camera Tactics

Tips for the Post-season

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It was about 20 degrees on a sunny late January morning, and as I peered out my bedroom window, I was thankful that I wasn't suiting up for a brutal few hours on stand. All of the seasons were over for the year, and other than the occasional hunting show, it was the start of the late winter lull that most avid archery hunters dread. I was staring two months of lousy weather and no hunting for several more months in the face, and I wasn't happy about it. In reality, I needed the rest, and truth be told, I had fallen well behind on my to-do list since the season began in October. Although the time off wasn't welcomed, I knew deep down it was necessary.

Just as I was submitting to the mundaneness of the day ahead, I remembered my trail camera that I set on the last day of the late season. Perfect! A reason to get out into the woods, without the necessity of getting up early or suffering through torturous hours of bitter cold. The to-do list would have to wait until later in the day.

Not Just for Pre-season

Although hunters tend to get most use of trail cameras just prior to archery season, I actually find them just as useful during the off-season, particularly the first month or so following the last hunting season. I am always interested in seeing the bucks that made it through, and it also gives me an opportunity to gauge the general health of the herd on my management property.

Oftentimes it's easier to locate main travel corridors during this time of year because of the lack of newly fallen leaves and, sometimes, the presence of snow. Deer tend to travel in larger herds in the winter, making the most-used trails more obvious, which marks a perfect location for your camera set-up. Normally I'm not a fan of sighting my cameras over heavy trails because they tend to be doe magnets. I make an exception during the late winter months though due to the increased likelihood that bucks are traveling with doe groups, and my chances of getting a good buck or two on my film or memory card are pretty good.

If possible, I like to aim my camera directly toward a trail in an effort to get as many deer in the photo as possible. Because deer are more skittish after being hunted for the previous few months, they may be more sensitive to the flash, causing other deer coming down the trail to veer into different directions. By shooting straight up the trail, it's not uncommon to get images of several deer in a row, giving you a better indication of how many deer are in the group, and increasing your odds of getting a buck in the image.

Another good place to site your camera is along crop field edges or other areas that are heavily utilized food sources, such as acorn or other mast crop patches. Deer tend to spend hours browsing these areas since food becomes the number one priority for whitetails during winter. When doing a



Heavy trails are easily located in winter, and they make excellent ambush points for your trail camera.

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field edge or similar setup, set your camera slightly higher than you normally would, which will result in a larger area being covered in the image. A good rule of thumb is waist high, or about three feet.

Finally, stream crossings can be excellent ambush sites during the cold winter months. Deer need water as much as, if not more than, they do during the summer months, and they visit their favorite watering holes often. The best areas can be found by simply examining the most concentrated tracks and trails, and aiming your camera in that direction. With this setup, it's not uncommon to get impressive shots of drinking deer, which is a nice deviation from the common standing deer photo.

Special Considerations

There are a few special considerations for using trail cameras during the post-season. Perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind is that batteries typically exhaust their energy supply more

quickly in cold temperatures. Be sure to keep a good supply of batteries on hand, and always have replacements with you when you visit your sites. There is nothing more frustrating than a camera sitting in the woods with dead batteries, and no replacements on hand to fix the problem.

If there's snow cover, keep in mind that you'll be leaving a walking trail to and from your camera location, which could be easily followed by someone who may be tempted to walk off with a fairly expensive item. If you're using the camera in an area that's open to the public, you may want to consider not visiting the site until snow melt. It's always better to be safe than sorry. Even if you're lucky enough to have private property, a trespasser may get startled by the flash, realize that their photo is

likely stored in the camera, and remove it simply to protect their identity. Despite the best locks and other theft deterrent systems, if someone wants the camera, they'll find a way to get it.

Conclusion

I couldn't wait to get my photos back from the developer, so one-hour processing was the order of the day. I was impressed with the number of photos I got of young bucks that would be a year older next year, and was extremely excited about the picture of the mature buck that would be a guaranteed Pope and Young class animal. These photos would fuel my enthusiasm as I counted down the days until the season opener in October.

Using trail cameras after the season can be an excellent way to gauge the type of bucks you may have around during the following season. You can also get a better understanding of your local population, and the general health of the animals on your property. If nothing else, it's an excuse to spend a few hours in the woods when you otherwise might be swallowed up in the doldrums of winter.



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Getting photos of mature bucks like this one that we captured on January 4 can get your heart pumping, especially considering this deer will likely be around next season.