

Primary Scrapes

A Whitetail Hunter's Gold Mine

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This primary scrape was a hot bed of deer activity during the last week of the season.

There were only two days remaining in the 2005 Pennsylvania archery season, and I hadn't seen the giant buck I was hunting since Monday. I generally knew where he was hanging out, but I was having trouble finding the right ambush point.

I decided I would move my hang-on stand to a spot that I had established in September, thinking that the buck may pass through the area when shooting light was available. As I started toward the stand location, I began to smell the unmistakable odor of rutting buck urine. At first whiff I thought a buck may be in the area, or I just jumped one from its bed.

Just a few steps forward had me staring at the source of the scent. It was one of the most impressive scrapes that I have ever encountered in the woods.

A quick inspection revealed several very large tracks in the scrape, as well as numerous smaller ones. I was positive that this was the work of my buck, and I knew I had to find a way to hunt the scrape on Friday morning. As luck would have it, a perfect climbing tree stood just ten yards away. I could hardly wait for the next morning.

I had just made the decision that there was enough shooting light when I heard a commotion coming from the hillside on my right. This was the exact direction I expected the big buck to come from. My heart was pounding as I prepared for the shot I had been thinking about all night. Finally the deer came into view. My heart sank as it was an adult doe with a fawn trailing behind. The fact that the fawn was with her told me she wasn't in estrous, and that the big buck wasn't likely to follow. It turns out that I was right because just behind the doe were twelve additional deer, all of which were does or fawns.

The only buck I would see that morning was a small 8-pointer that I had seen several times earlier in the week. It was at that point I realized that most of the activity at this scrape was likely occurring at night.

I have never been a big fan of hunting over scrapes, and this situation reminded me of why. With no rut, the odds of me ambushing the buck I was after at the scrape were remote. In hindsight, I should have been hunting at least 100 yards downwind where the mature buck may have been monitoring the scrape from.

What my post-season trail camera photos revealed was interesting. The scrape was actually being used by at least seven different bucks, and about 80% of the photos were shot well into the night. Even more importantly, I didn't get a single photo of the monster buck I was hunting.

From this data we can learn a few important things. First, unless you're there when a mature buck is making the scrape, you're not likely to see him there again later. Secondly, a large scrape made

within a heavy travel corridor will likely be used by several bucks, and be a hot bed for deer activity. Third, and perhaps the most important lesson, the majority of activity near a primary scrape will occur at night when the rut is not in full gear.

Because there was so much scrape activity in the northeast this year, it provided me with an opportunity to study the difference between random scrapes, and those that I have been referring to as primary throughout this article.

During and after the season, I observed in detail approximately 20 different scrapes. Of these, there were three that stood out as primary activity areas for bucks. The others were not nearly as impressive.

Each of the primary scrapes were constructed using great care. Aside from being at least three feet in diameter and clear of leaves and sticks, they also had a clearly visible licking branch, and several fresh rubs nearby. There were also numerous tracks within them that were made by several different deer. Finally, they each had the unmistakable odor of a rutting buck.

Each of the others, which I'll refer to as satellite scrapes, were much smaller and not as well constructed. Most of them had no odor at all, lacked a licking branch, and were not maintained. It was clear that the scrapes were never visited again after they were made. They were likely made as the buck was passing through, or out of frustration. I have witnessed bucks making small scrapes out of frustration numerous times, particularly after I grunted to them, trying to imitate the presence of another buck.

So what do primary scrapes tell us and why are they important? I believe that the biggest thing they tell us is there are bucks active in the area, and when the rut kicks in, the general area where the scrape is located should prove productive.

Based on my experience this season, I would not advise hunting over primary scrapes unless you are sure there are does coming into estrous. There may be several bucks visiting the scrape, but this activity is most likely occurring at night.

Instead of hunting within site of the scrape, I would recommend hunting at least 100 yards downwind, and trying to intercept a mature buck checking the scrape from a distance. A trail camera can be a great help in this case, particularly if you have a digital model that you can check in the field.

I hunted over the primary scrape one more time before realizing that it wasn't the place to be. It wasn't wasted time though because of the lessons I learned from the experience. That experience, as well as my post-season research, will hopefully help me make better decisions in future seasons. I hope it helps you as well.



Even immature bucks were visiting the primary scrape at night. This photo was taken on November 28.

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