

Barrier Bucks

It's no secret to deer hunters that heavy hunting pressure and human activity can seriously alter the movement patterns and routines of whitetails, especially mature bucks. Unfortunately, on hunting grounds with high levels of human activity, it is almost impossible to prevent a mature buck from crossing paths with a human, and these deer can become very difficult to kill.

To overcome the challenge of killing heavily pressured mature bucks on my family's three small farms in South Carolina, I started experimenting with new stand placements several years ago that focus on using natural barriers as an advantage. The results have been sub-

stantial, so I decided to document the last 25 years of deer hunting on these farms and the stand location strategies that have proved to be highly successful over the last three years.

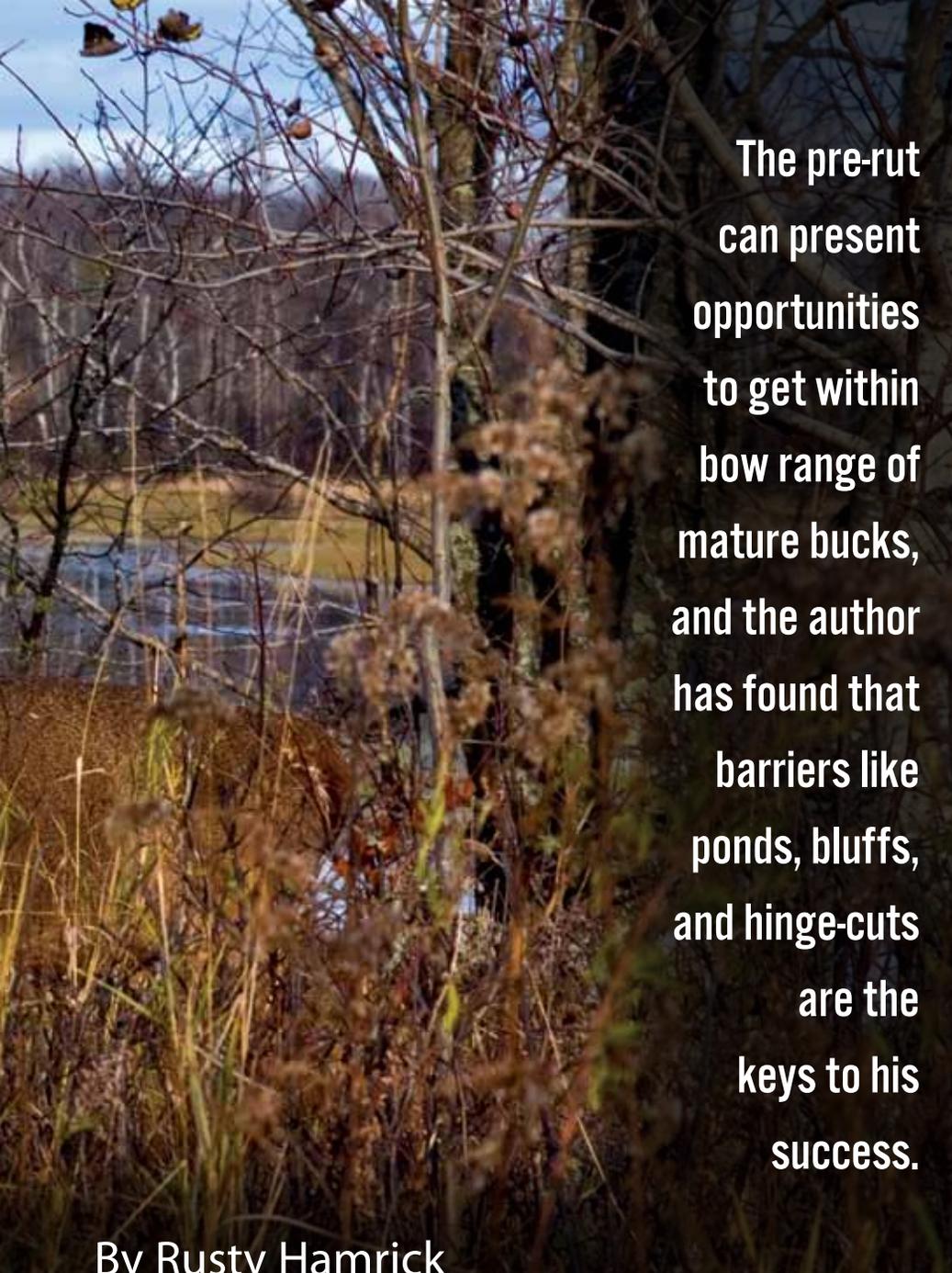
Before I discuss stand set-ups, however, I want to share the history of habitat management on our land, which helps explain why we have mature bucks to hunt in the first place. You can't hunt mature bucks until you produce them through quality herd and habitat management.

The Beginning

In 1985 my grandfather relocated from Charleston, South Carolina, to the western part of the state. He had just sold

his small farm in Charleston and was able to purchase two farms 20 miles south of Greenville. The majority of the properties were planted in pines, and it didn't take long for the pines to provide excellent cover for the whitetail herd. Pop, my father, and my uncle Eric went to work putting in food plots and establishing antler restrictions with the hopes of growing mature bucks. After a few years they started killing some very nice deer.

During these first years of hunting our farms, I took a few does and a small 6-pointer. The older men in my family constantly reassured me that if I kept going, I would have a chance at a mature buck. As I continued to hunt into my early



The pre-rut
can present
opportunities
to get within
bow range of
mature bucks,
and the author
has found that
barriers like
ponds, bluffs,
and hinge-cuts
are the
keys to his
success.

By Rusty Hamrick

LINDA ARNDT

teenage years, the young planted pines grew to an age where they no longer provided quality cover for deer. At the same time, the human population grew around our properties. Many more rooftops had popped up around and among our now 700 acres, and stolen deer stands and poaching were becoming regular occurrences. I guess bad things happen in threes, because at this time a stand of hardwoods on the neighbor's property that served as a sanctuary was sold and became a housing development. I was very young during the first 10 years we had the farm, but I can distinctly remember understanding that the deer hunting on our farm had gone from great to average almost overnight.

I began to wonder if I would ever get a chance at a quality whitetail. I had spent many hours in a deer stand, and the deer hunting on our farm seemed to be getting worse every year. What I didn't realize then that I am sure of now is mature whitetails still used our property, but not nearly as many as during the years when our planted pines were young enough to offer an abundance of cover. And, thanks to the loss of the sanctuary next door and the human population increase in the area, those that remained had gotten much harder to kill!

My family had all but given up on the notion of having quality deer hunting on our farm. My uncle started taking trips to

the Midwest, and Dad joined a lease 30 miles away. After I left for college, I continued to hunt our farms when I could. But those would be remembered as the drought years for mature bucks.

The First and Second Thin

Toward the end of my college years our planted pines were thinned for the first time, and none of us were prepared for the impact this would have on the deer hunting. My uncle, Eric, was the first one to pick up on the immediate improvement in our deer population and convinced my Dad and I to take the time to see for ourselves. He and Dad both lived on the property, so it didn't take long to realize that our deer population had spiked. We did start to hunt around the house again with a little more seriousness and were excited to see the deer hunting getting better.

Timing can be everything in life and that's exactly what brought me back to upstate South Carolina for good – right after the second thinning of our pine stand. Our planted pines now offered an abundance of food and cover, and our deer population was higher than it had been in fifteen years. Watching the progression of our planted pines and the effect this progression had on the deer herd taught me a very important lesson from a habitat management standpoint. Throughout its life, a stand of planted pines – or any type of forest for that matter – goes through different stages, and each stage offers a different quality of deer habitat. Mature trees block more sunlight and prevent understory growth, which supplies food and cover for whitetails. Therefore, no matter what type of forest you are working with, it is imperative that you offer a diversity of stand ages and successional stages.

The twice thinned pines on our farm have been good for deer. Not only is there an abundance of food from the understory regeneration but great cover as well. We'd like to burn sections of the pines to further diversify our pine plantation, but we are in an area where the risk is too great. In the future, we will have to use additional techniques, such as clearcutting some sections and replanting others, to maintain stand diversity and habitat quality.

Homecoming

During the 2007 season I hunted our family farms harder than ever before and

Continued.

couldn't remember seeing such a healthy deer herd. By this time in my hunting career I had taken a few nice bucks that included one wall hanger, not to mention a few other encounters, misses, and one heartbreaking non-recovery on a monster 10-pointer. But there was still a large void that could only be filled with a quality whitetail from my family's land. I committed myself to accomplishing this goal, and after two months of seeing lots of deer but no shooters I set out to find one. My uncle and I walked through a small hardwood drain right next to a paved road where he

had often hunted years before. At the same time, we spotted a glowing thigh-sized cedar that had been rubbed to shreds. That afternoon I hung a lock-on and hunted until dark without seeing anything. The next morning I was back on stand with plans to hunt all day. About an hour before dark I saw a big-bodied deer cross the draw about 80 yards away. He swung his head around at the first flip of the bleat can, and he came on a string after a second bleat, passing to my right. I shot when he stopped broadside at 22 yards.

He had appeared so quickly that I

never really got a good look at him before I shot – probably a good thing. The shoulders and neck on the buck gave away his maturity. The deer, which weighed 197 pounds when I killed him that day, November 9, would have easily surpassed the 200-lb. mark before the rut – huge for a South Carolina whitetail. I had accomplished a major goal of mine by taking a mature whitetail on my family's farm, and it was a very gratifying moment.

A Strategy Falls Into Place

By September 2009, we were starting to lean very heavily toward a bow-only policy, so 90 percent of our stands were bow setups. In the past, I would hunt the early season no matter the temperature, but this year it stayed in the 90s all the way through the end of September. We didn't hunt until a cold front hit the first week of October.

The day the front hit it was around 60 degrees with a drizzling rain and north-east wind, and I didn't have to think twice about where I was going to sit.

Over the previous five years, my father had two late-season encounters with mature bucks in a box blind overlooking a small food plot. I had experimented with hanging a bow stand closer to where we thought the bucks were bedded, and after two years of trial-and-error with location and wind direction, I was confident I had finally put the pieces of the puzzle together: a big buck bedding area and feeding location connected by a travel route. I was sitting over a gas utility line the buck had to cross to get to the food plot, which was about 100 yards from his bedding area (see Map 1 on page 74). The huge 8-pointer showed up much earlier than I had anticipated and, thanks to a release malfunction, I barely got drawn on him. The arrow went an inch or two over his back at 27 yards, and nausea set in immediately. He was by far the biggest deer I'd ever seen on the farm while on stand – great width, mass and tine length - and in my mind I know that I blew it on a legitimate South Carolina Pope & Young.

Less than a week later I was in another bowstand with the same ingredients – very close to a bedding area along a travel route leading to a food plot, early afternoon and a cold front. This stand also had a similar history in the sense that a couple of encounters with big bucks had guided me to this location as the ideal ambush spot



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for getting a shot with the bow. I was in a strip of dense hardwoods adjacent to the 25-acre lake that gave this farm its name (Big Lake), and I had kayaked to the stand (see Map 2 on page 74). The wind was blowing from the hardwood strip toward the lake.

A doe had been feeding on white oak acorns about 15 yards in front of me for several minutes when I heard soft grunts off to my left. The wide, tall-tined buck never stopped as he ran right down the trail, passing by my stand at 10 yards, chasing the doe that had run off. Never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined having the chance at two mature bucks in the same week. Part of me chalked it up to luck, but I began to wonder if after 20 years of hunting the Big Lake I had finally stumbled onto a strategy that consistently put big bucks in bow range at these two stand locations.

For the rest of 2009 and all of 2010 I started applying my new strategy in several different areas on our farms, as well as the two stand locations that already produced encounters. The results were unbelievable. During 2010 we had 12 encounters with mature bucks on six different stands – all of them 100 yards or less from a thick bedding area.

One of the most important factors to the productivity of these stands was predicting how the buck would use the wind to his advantage as he exited his bed to make his rounds. I tried to pick stand locations that would be just downwind of a path that was adjacent to some sort of natural barrier. It didn't take long to suspect that old bucks felt safe walking along the barrier edge when the wind was blowing toward the barrier. In four of the six stand locations the barrier is a pond, one a paved road, the last a steep bluff. Obviously getting to these stand locations took an entire new approach and in some instances accessing the stand was very easy, others extremely difficult. In every instance, accessing the stand correctly was vital, and if done properly, would heavily sway the odds in favor of an encounter with a mature buck.

The Strategy

In general, the best time of year to kill a mature whitetail buck is during the rut. Mature bucks that rarely move during daylight hours will begin to be on their feet during shooting light either follow-

ing or seeking receptive does. However, if you make the decision to chase a mature whitetail buck with archery equipment in an area with heavy hunting pressure, the rut can prove to be a frustrating time. Whether it's chasing a hot doe or leaving their core area in search of a receptive doe, mature bucks cover more of their home range at this time of year, and patterning one can prove to be very difficult.

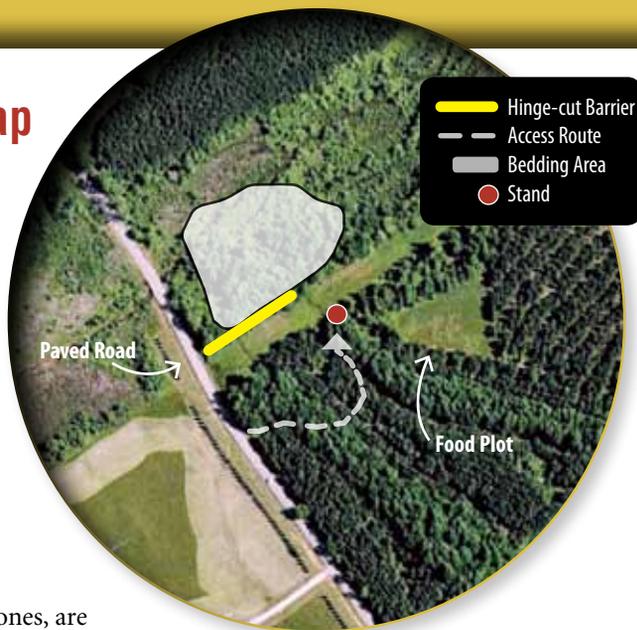
In my experience, the best time to harvest a mature buck with a bow using a "barrier" approach is before the peak of the rut. This strategy depends on weather

conditions and a mature buck's changing travel patterns. To implement this strategy successfully, it is imperative that bucks are no longer in their summer patterns and are now using autumn travel routes. I look for fresh rubs and scrapes to indicate and reveal these new routes.

Where I hunt in upstate South Carolina, you can expect to see the change in buck travel routes by October 1. This change does not mean the buck you want to shoot is not on the move during daylight hours. But old bucks, especially pres-

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Map 1

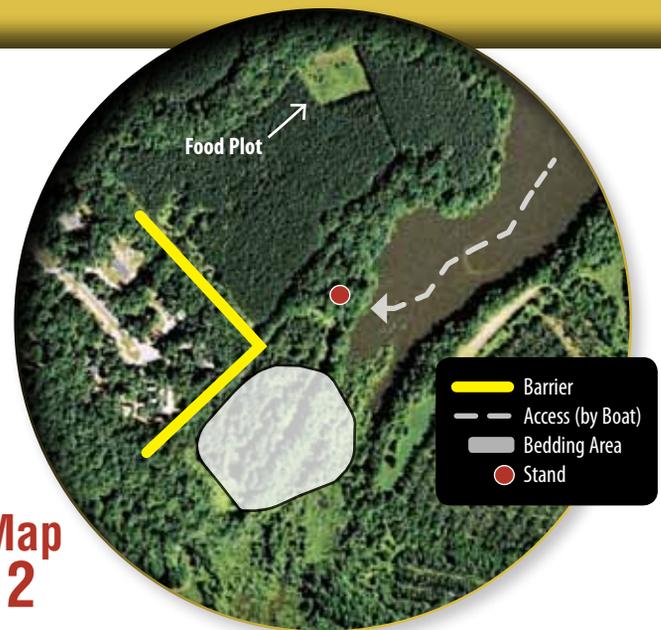


sured ones, are going to use every available terrain feature to ensure they are moving through an area undetected. Therefore, getting a pressured quality deer within bow range at this time of year is going to require an aggressive setup in which every detail is considered.

The first step of my pre-rut strategy is to locate a mature buck's bedding area, but not just any big buck haunt. This particular bed *must* have terrain features that

force the deer to choose a specific area to exit his bed and make his rounds. I also prefer a location in which I believe the buck is bedded less than 200 yards away. The closer you are to his bedding area, the more likely he will pass by your stand during shooting light. The buck will usually give the bedding area away with fresh rubs leading into thick brush. Do not be con-

Map 2



cerned if the rubs are not on huge trees. This does not mean there is not a mature buck traveling along this route. If you are careful, you can use a trail-camera to confirm a mature buck's presence and find out more about his movement patterns.

In an ideal situation, this type of bed, whether it's an old cutover, thick swamp or young pine thicket, will be located adjacent to not only a woodlot, but also some type of natural or artificial barrier such as a steep bluff, a pond (my personal favorite), or a paved road. In Map 1, a road with very open terrain on the other side serves as one barrier, and I hinge-cut trees along the wooded edge of the gas line to create a second barrier, helping narrow the available travel route. In Map 2, there are two barriers: a pond, and a row of houses in a developed neighborhood that make a right angle. These types of barriers make it almost impossible for deer to maneuver downwind of your setup while on the move, and I believe mature bucks often travel these barriers because they have eliminated danger in at least one direction. Through the use of an aerial map, determine what wind direction will allow the buck to exit the bed and enter the woodlot with the wind blowing toward the barrier.

The second step is possibly the most difficult. It requires positioning your stand next to the barrier but also downwind of the buck's travel route, allowing him to move with the wind in his face and the barrier at his back. Also decide how you will reach the stand without your scent being carried toward the buck's bed. Then, hunt a wind that angles into the buck's

CREATING BARRIERS

If your hunting land doesn't offer any of the natural barriers mentioned in this article, I recommend taking matters into your own hands and creating artificial ones.

My favorite barrier is a pond. It has been my experience that mature bucks feel comfortable close to a pond when the wind is blowing toward the water. This is a large project, I admit, but building a pond adjacent to a bedding area will give you two excellent barrier stand locations that you can hunt on opposite winds. This doesn't have to be a large lake. Even small waterholes can serve as a barrier that influences deer movement.

More affordable barrier projects can be tackled in a number of creative ways. Hinge-cutting can be used to enhance lanes and pinch points that make for predictable travel routes between bedding areas and food sources. Debris from timber harvest activities can be pushed into windrows on or around logging decks. In short, it's a matter of getting creative with the materials and techniques you have at your disposal. Set up lanes near likely bedding areas, position your stands in these lanes between bedding areas and food sources, and you are in business.

face as he exits his bed, but also carries your scent away from his bed. Waiting for such an ideal wind will severely limit the days you can hunt a particular setup, but you have to maintain your discipline! Do not hunt the stand if the wind is wrong no matter how badly you want to get in there. Fooling a mature buck requires paying attention to every little detail.

The third step is to wait for the first low pressure system that causes the barometric pressure to fall. I like to wait for

a low pressure system accompanied by cool temperatures and rain, as this type of weather system almost never fails to get bucks on their feet before dark. If you are lucky enough to find several of these setups, you will be able to pick and choose which ones to hunt depending on the wind direction when these low pressure systems arrive.

The final step is to ease into your stand two to three hours before dark and mentally prepare yourself for a bow shot at

a wallhanger, because your chances of having a close encounter with a mature buck when all of these conditions align are as good as any time during the rut!

Conclusion

If the area you hunt receives heavy hunting pressure and you don't see as many big bucks as you think you should during the pre-rut, give this strategy a try this season. It is somewhat of an unorthodox approach as it focuses on getting close to a buck's bed and steers you away from hunting over food plots. However, I have found that hunting heavily pressured mature bucks requires a totally different mindset with totally different strategies.



About the Author: *Rusty Hamrick is vice president of QDMA's Foothills Branch of South Carolina and the communications coordinator for QDMA's Palmetto State Chapter Advisory Committee. He is a real estate broker with Huff Creek Properties, where he represents buyers and sellers of large recreational and timber tracts in South Carolina, North Carolina and Georgia.*



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