

Hunting with a Camera

By Lindsay Thomas Jr., Quality Deer Management Association

The mailbox at the Quality Deer Management Association (QDMA) Headquarters is always closely watched by all the staff for envelopes containing entries for the Cuddeback-QDMA Photo Contest. Just as you can't wait to see what your infrared-triggered camera has captured since you last checked the digital, we can't wait to see the ones that QDMA members have selected as worthy of entry in the contest. Over the course of several years, we have come to recognize one name in particular on these envelopes, a member who is not only a regular entrant in the contest but who has come to be known for outstanding photographs every time. Packages of photos from Todd Reabe of Brillion, Wis., are sure to contain high-quality photos that are always impressive in many respects, from excellent lighting and exposure to interesting deer behaviors. Moreover, Todd's photos always contain an amazing number of mature bucks, many of them photographed multiple times in various locations, and a surprising number of them are photographed during daylight hours. Daytime images of mature bucks are uncommon among trail-camera collections, but Todd owns dozens.

The consistent quality of Todd's trail-camera photography made it clear that he must have special techniques for setting up and using trail cameras. Talking to him, we found that he does have an unusual approach to trail-camera photography and that he was more than willing to share what he has learned.

Capturing The Man on Film

You can't capture mature bucks on film if you don't have any. First and foremost, Todd practices Quality Deer Management on his land in south central Wisconsin. His family's farm is 156 acres, but it is one of 28 properties ranging in size from 6 to 870 acres in a 4,800-acre QDM Cooperative.

"We started the Cooperative in 1994," said Todd. "Our neighbors Kevin and Steve Soda, who are brothers and Andy Attar got it going. They went house to house and started asking people to sign up with just a gentleman's agreement. It was not anything binding. But today we have more than 4,800 acres in almost a complete block, and it's expanding. You can do a lot with that much acreage, and we've been very successful with QDM. Kevin and Steve introduced me to the QDMA and they got me started using cameras." Deer density is moderate to high in the area, and while Cooperative members continually emphasize doe harvest, they have also done a good job of protecting yearling bucks. Bucks of all ages turn up on film and are seen during hunting season, though most mature bucks are more easily photographed than harvested. Infrared cameras have become important to the entire Cooperative as a means of inventorying and tracking the whereabouts of these older bucks.

"We all try to coordinate where our cameras are placed so we aren't doubling up and wasting our time," said Todd. "Since I have four cameras for a smaller chunk of property, I'll check with Kevin and

Steve, and if they're not covering a part of their property that borders ours, I'll cover it. We email pictures back and forth and share sheds and try to get a feel for what's out there. It's very nice to have neighbors like that." Cameras have also helped fuel enthusiasm for QDM by revealing the results of protecting young bucks. Though Todd had participated in harvest management by passing yearling bucks, his personal standards rose in 2002 when he began using cameras and capturing bucks on film that he had never seen while hunting. He immediately took interest in a large 13-pointer, and a buck with a unique, palmated rack. "I proceeded to pass up some good bucks knowing those two deer were out there," said Todd. "In 2004 I passed up an 18-inch 10-pointer hoping to get the palmated buck. I actually hunted that palmated buck for three years based strictly on pictures. Near as we can tell from sheds and pictures taken all over the Cooperative, he was covering three square miles. To our knowledge, the guy who pulled the trigger on him in 2004 was the first guy to see him while hunting. That was Steve Soda, one of the guys who started the program. If anybody deserved to get him, it was Kevin or Steve." Todd's 156-acre property is representative of habitats found through the Cooperative, including agricultural fields, hardwood uplands, swamps, ditches, a pond, and a 20-acre field enrolled in CRP that is planted in white spruce, white oaks and green ash. Todd believes his success in capturing mature bucks on film, particularly during daylight, results from a combination of choosing the right camera locations, being selective about when he checks the cameras, and being scent-free when he does so.

Bait-free camera locations

Perhaps most interesting about Todd's technique, and what might be the key to most of his success, is the surprising news that Todd does not use artificial bait of any kind on his camera setups.

In fact, it's not an option for him. Though not inside Wisconsin's CWD eradication zone, Todd's property is in a county just outside this zone where all baiting and feeding has been prohibited.

When setting up trail cameras, most of us choose a convenient place to hang the camera and use bait to draw deer in front of it. Many of us also target scrapes as good places to photograph bucks.

Research has shown that in the case of both bait sites and scrapes, visits by mature bucks almost always occur at night. Because Todd cannot rely on bait, choosing a camera site is much like choosing a stand site in that it involves thorough scouting, trying to predict where the deer will be, and being careful about your own scent and pressure patterns. "Basically, I try to stay in the thickest cover with my cameras," said Todd. "On our land, the best sites are the little funnels and bottlenecks of thick cover between food sources and bedding areas. The neighbors stay more on open edges with their cameras, but I'm not afraid to go wherever I need to be to get a picture." But to get pictures of the quality that Todd gets requires that you pinpoint the exact location of passing deer. Todd focuses his cameras on distinct trails in the funnels and bottlenecks. In addition, he targets scrapes. But as with trails, he chooses the scrapes located in or on the edge of the thickest cover available. These two

locations, trails and scrapes in heavy cover, produce the highest rate of mature buck photos for Todd, particularly daytime photos.

All managers of small hunting properties know the importance of managing pressure.

Overhunting a small tract is easy to do, particularly if you regularly invade areas of good cover or prime travel routes. That's why Todd's strategies for scent control go beyond the norm. Far beyond.

"I'm so worried about spooking the deer that I make sure all my bow stands are set and stand work is done by the end of July," said Todd. "Once I get to that point, and especially once bow season opens, I don't go in the woods unless it's to hunt or check cameras."

In either case, Todd's scent control involves bathing thoroughly before entering the woods. All clothes, safety harness, flashlight holster and anything else that will go into the washing machine are washed in unscented detergent then stored in sealed plastic tubs along with oak leaves. After returning from the woods, everything goes into a "contaminated" tub to stay separate from clean hunting gear. Rubber boots, cleaned regularly, complete his outfit. And that's not all.

"People make fun of me for this, but I go on an almost vegetarian diet during the hunting season," said Todd. "I read about this in Sports Afield many years ago as a way of reducing scent, and it was based on research conducted by the military in the Vietnam era. I believe in it. I've seen too many occasions where I've been able to get close to deer that were downwind." Since Todd is as scent-free as he can get when he is hunting, he checks and reloads his cameras at the same time. Often his stand sites are near his camera sites, and he checks his cameras on his way out of the woods after morning hunts. He never checks cameras during prime hours around dawn and dusk. All this may sound extreme, but remember that Todd has the pictures to prove that his techniques work.

Trail Techniques

Finding the right trail for a camera set-up is not simple. Often the trails that mature bucks use most are not obvious. "I have found that there are some trails that bucks seem to prefer and some that does seem to prefer," said Todd. "On some trails I'll end up with a roll full of does, turkeys and one or two bucks. On other trails I'll have fewer pictures but more bucks. These trails are almost always the ones with more cover, but there are exceptions to every rule. You have to spend some time on different trails to find out which ones are more productive. "I've also found that on the trails where I get more buck pictures, the bucks seem to be passing sporadically. I'll have two or three bucks one week and a dozen another week. I haven't seen any connection between this and the rut phase or weather patterns, but sometimes you'll see a relationship to shifting food sources."

Soybeans are a good example. "Typically I don't watch agricultural crops, but soybeans are an exception," he said. "From about the third week of August through the end of September, I'll have real good luck catching bucks on trails leading to bean fields. I have set cameras over the field itself, but I get more young bucks that way, and mostly all at night. I get the bigger bucks on the trails as they

travel to the beanfield before dark or return to their thicket after sunrise.” Shortly after soybeans play out, acorns are usually falling. Soybeans and acorns are the two most consistent food sources for producing travel patterns that Todd can exploit. The food sources will vary from property to property, but the opportunities for the hunter will be the same.

Camera Positioning

With any subject, whether it is a trail, scrape or food source, Todd tries to predict exactly where the deer will be and set his camera 15 feet from that spot. “I’d rather err on the 10 foot side than the 20 foot side,” he said. “Ten to 15 feet is ideal. If there’s a chance the deer will come in too close, I’ll prop sticks and limbs in the ground to try to divert them.” For trail photography, Todd also tries to shoot at a 45-degree angle to the trail. He has found that with a setup perpendicular to the trail and 10- to 15-feet distant, some deer are moving fast enough that by the time the shutter is triggered, the deer’s head is out of the frame. Shooting straight down the trail is also not the best angle because approaching deer may trigger the shutter while they are still a good distance from the camera. At an angle of 45 degrees, deer trip the motion sensor at the right time and are still contained in the picture frame, whether they are coming or going. For scrapes, Todd tries to avoid hanging the camera on the same tree that the scrape is under, because this is usually too close, and parts of deer using the scrape may be out of the frame. No matter what the location, if there is not a suitable tree in the best location for hanging the camera, Todd plants a fence post right where he wants it. Short pieces of boards nailed in a crossed pattern to the base of the fencepost can serve as an anchor when this end of the post is buried, and pulling the fencepost out of the ground will not be easy. A hole can then be drilled through the fencepost for the camera’s security cable. Todd tries to tackle fencepost installation well outside of hunting season, giving himself plenty of options when it’s time to hang cameras. When hanging a camera, Todd also sets the top of the camera housing 3 feet high.

Photo Quality

Camera positioning can be critical to photo quality, Todd said. “I have learned to always have equal light where the camera is and where the subject is,” Todd said. “Don’t put the camera out in the sun so that it is taking pictures of things in the shadows, or vice versa. If the subject is going to be in shade, place the camera so it will be in shade also.” No matter what light conditions the subject is in, avoid a bright background behind the subject. This “backlighting” will cause the subject to be dark. “Even if your camera is in the shadows and the deer is in the shadows as well, if there is a bright background like an open skyline it will throw the meter of the camera off, and that will cause

problems. Everything in the foreground will be dark. You'll have nice, beautiful pictures of the open area, but the deer will be black. I've got whole rolls of pictures to prove my point."

Given a choice, Todd also tries to point his cameras north to avoid sun flare, or shooting pictures into direct sunlight. You can get away with shooting into other compass points if you are in heavy cover and the background won't admit direct sunlight.

Hunting with a Camera

Overall, Todd attributes his ability to photograph mature bucks, especially in daylight, to his "hunting" mindset. "I approach taking these pictures the same way I approach hunting," he said. "I watch my scent, and I try to figure out where the deer will be. This to me is just another form of hunting. When I'm scouting, I'm looking for deer stands and camera sites at the same time, and often they are in the same areas. I'm always looking for new trails, looking for tracks that indicate a travel pattern I didn't know about, and wondering if I could do better trying a new place.

"Cameras have made me a better hunter," he added. "The last three or four years I've seen more big bucks while hunting than all the years we've been practicing QDM combined."

