



A LOT OF ARCHERS break out their inlines for the early antlerless deer muzzleloader season and head out to their favorite bowhunting spots hoping to drop a flat-top with a rifle that covers double or triple their bow's range. It's supposed to be a slam-dunk. Meat for the freezer. But it often is not.

Granted, an inline muzzleloader with a 3-9x scope in the hands of a bowhunter can be a deadly combination, especially for an archer who spends a lot of time afield. But plenty of other factors influence whether you drag or cart an antlerless deer home, as many hunters have learned. Recognizing and employing—or playing off of—those conditional considerations often sways your hunt's outcome. Sometimes it's extra fieldwork, or showing patience. Sometimes it's a modification in your technique, or

simply trusting your "spidey sense" or gut. But those *seasonal* adjustments matter in the early muzzleloader season. So, if your recent early muzzleloader seasons haven't been going according to plan, maybe it's time to modify your approach. Unless, of course, you're just out there to be one with nature. Me? I love being in the woods, but I prefer to drag some company home with me!

One of the great things about the early season is that there's rarely a lot of other hunters out there with us. That translates into plenty of flexibility in your decision-making, and usually lots of elbow-room wherever you go. So the first thing on your agenda is to line up at least five to 10 general hunting locations in September. That ensures you'll have some direction and choices when the season kicks in. Missing this work leaves you high and dry in a one-week

SEPTEMBER 2013 19



season, when you really need to spend your free mornings and evenings hunting, not looking for deer.

So, the objective is to scout for areas with deer sign and vegetative cover, in or near areas with ample supplies of fall foods in late September. Look for oak stands—with whites oaks, if possible—that are littering the forest floor with plenty of mast. Confirm where deer are feeding: look for where they've hoof-scraped leaf litter to uncover food, and for droppings and pieces of acorn caps on the forest floor. It's also always worthwhile to scout woodlands adjacent to farm fields. They're often hotspots.

Catching deer as they pass through bottlenecks or funnels that separate feeding from bedding areas also is a great way to score in the early muzzle-loader season. These corridors often are defined by features such as vegetative cover to hide their movements, and passages around or along fenced pastures, lakes, large rivers, highways and occupied buildings. Creek crossings and solid ground trails in swamps also serve as great places to investigate.

As you scout locations, make sure you're not trespassing on private property and keep your scent and sign to a minimum in the area. Avoid touching and brushing against vegetation (good way to limit your tick encounters, too). Use a cover scent on the bottoms of your boots. Raccoon or fox urine works just fine. Avoid leaving tracks in muddy areas. Look for salt/mineral blocks to ensure you're not unknowingly hunting over an illegal attractant. This happens more often than you'd think. If you bump into a trail camera or a ladder stand, it's probably a good idea to look elsewhere.

If you're scouting on private property with permission or on state land, and you encounter bait, or an illegal tree stand, report your findings to the Game Commission. Hunting gets better everywhere whenever someone gets involved.

When you've concluded that an area has plenty of deer activity, the next step is to figure out from where you'll hunt. I prefer to hunt out of trees with a portable tree stand. I keep several, in case I'm hunting remote locations and I need to stash one. I'm willing to climb a mountainside every night to hunt for two hours so long as I don't haul that stand every night! They hide well in a garbage bag with leaf litter spread over it.

When selecting your location, pick a tree that will help hide your form, preferably a tree right next to a pine or hemlock, or hardwood holding onto its leaves yet. Multi-trunked trees also are a good bet. Don't choose something that really doesn't offer some cover to hide you. Also, be sure to use a live hardwood with rough bark to climb.

Try to pick a position that takes into account a prevailing northwesterly or southern wind. Both are common in the inline season. Winds from the north are common when temperatures are seasonable. South winds force warmer—and unwelcomed—air into our hunting plans. Since the one-week season is short, I hunt under almost all conditions. So when setting up to hunt a location, I take into consideration a prevailing northwesterly or southern wind to guide me in selecting my ambush area. I want the wind to be blowing to me from where I expect to see deer.

Of course, sometimes the trees in

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20



the ideal location aren't big enough to climb, or there's insufficient cover the hide me. If I'm hunting with an inline, I can back off the deer activity area 75 yards or so—40 to 50 yards is ideal—and still cover well. But every year, there are times I walk away from good locations because things won't work out.

In selecting your tree, don't think for a second that if you're high enough up a tree deer won't see you. They look up.

They recognize movement anywhere in front of them, but especially in poplars and other trees that are branchless for the first 30 feet.

Last archery season, I was busted by a buck that picked me out looking over my shoulder. It was 30 yards behind me. I was up 20 feet. Only my head moved; and then the buck when he saw it. I gave the animal credit; it mooned me in fifth gear as it left the area!

Once you've picked a tree, climb it and mark your hunting position. What works for me is placing a reflective trail tack in the trunk at eye level for when I'm standing on my tree stand. When I climb, I know that when my eyes are level with that tack, it's time to anchor the tree stand and get ready to hunt. It takes all the guesswork out of climbing in the dark. It's also a great way to mark your climbing tree. Rarely will someone remove this elevated tack in an attempt to mess you up. They may get those leading to the tree, if you use them that way, but they won't get the "stop-climbing here" tack!

Okay, so we've picked our spots, giving wind direction, fall foods, deer activity and stand invisibility all high priorities. Now, it's time to hunt. Before any decision is made, check the wind direction to ensure your scent isn't blowing from you to the deer. Select a stand from your rotation that gives you the advantage you're looking for. Next, approach the stand in the quietest, shortest way possible. Spray fox or raccoon urine on the bottoms

of your boots for the last 200 yards to your stand. Don't touch or brush against any vegetation. Use a small flashlight held as close to the ground as possible in the dark. Don't use a headlamp to walk in and avoid scanning up the trail with your flashlight. Placing trail tacks closer together and lower than eye level on trees helps you keep on the trail to your stand with minimal disturbance.

When you hit your tree, climb as quietly as possible. I prefer stands with rubber parts that limit climbing noises. I ascend with a headlamp, keeping the beam on the trunk. I like to be sitting on stand in the dark about 30 minutes before daylight, gun or bow on my lap. My face is camo-painted. I wear camogloves. My tree stand has a no-slip mat. I spray raccoon urine on the tree trunk behind me. I sit still. There's no cell phone, or any of that other electronic gear some tech-savvy hunters insist you need. The rest is up to the woods. If you're not being surprised occasionally by deer, your scent's blowing to the deer, you move too much, or deer

SEPTEMBER 2013 21



patterns have changed. Do the math. Only by being honest with yourself, can you improve.

Every minute spent in a tree stand is a learning experience, if you're interested in growing as a hunter and woodsman. Study your surroundings. Look for deer scrapes and rubs. Listen for acorns falling. Pay attention to tractor noises, hunters on the move, slamming car doors, scolding squirrels, flashlight beams, every rustle in the leaves and snapping stick or twig, changes in the wind. All of these sideshows and incidentals can influence your hunt. But if you're daydreaming, messing with your cell phone or half asleep, chances are you'll miss out. That's why focus matters; it keeps you tuned in to what's happening around your position.

Every location I use in the inline season is a stand from which I haven't hunted until the inline season. I'm not a big fan of permanent or ladder stands, because they're so immobile, and leave a presence, which can alert deer and other hunters. I prefer to leave no more than a tack in my hunting areas, so when I show up, with the wind in my favor, I have the best chance possible to bump into deer and not other hunters. I don't necessarily have a "no stand left behind" rule; I can see their attractiveness on private property. But they simply get in my way and serve as unmanned squatter's claims on public lands, which is what I hunt mostly.

Getting back to leaving stuff behind, I prefer to keep disturbances to a minimum in any area I hunt in the inline season. If deer keep detecting human odor in a more remote hunting area, there's a good chance they'll stop using it for a while, particularly if you chase them from it while coming or going;

22

this includes managing your trail cam. So stay away until you're ready to hunt and hope you time it right.

After hunting this way for a few years, you'll have scores of locations to check for deer activity prior to or during the inline season. Most usually are good for a season, maybe two. Then they go cold for a while for whatever reason. So roll through your stand locations annually and hunt from the best. And be sure to do some in-season scouting on the season's only Sunday and after morning hunts. Many times I've scouted out a hot area right before lunch and came back later that afternoon to kill a deer.

Another thing you'll learn about stands if you rotate through enough of them over time is some places are for morning hunts and others evening hunts. There's often no obvious reason for it, just a pattern that develops over time. So when you start noticing it, make sure you adjust, because seizing opportunity and leaning on your experience are the name of the game in this one-week season.

Finally, there's this misunderstanding that exists among some hunters that antlerless deer aren't very bright. These folks seem to think that any antlered buck is more of a trophy than a doe. But that doe is often a couple years older than most bucks and a survivor of more hunting seasons. She's bright. Bank on it. If you don't, this season will be over for you before it starts.



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