

# Getting the most out of your scouting cameras-PART 1

by Dr. Shan Twit

Almost every hunter today has heard about scouting cameras. The hunting industry is full of gadgets designed to make the hunt more comfortable, enjoyable and safer. I personally get just as much excitement out of checking my cameras as I do opening Christmas gifts. Scouting cameras serve as a very fun and productive tool in helping you learn about the habits of the deer which also helps you to become more successful as a deer hunter. It wasn't too long ago when visual confirmation was the only way to know for sure that a buck you'd be willing to shoot was on your property but that has changed thanks to the scouting camera.

There are several benefits of placing these modern hunting marvels in your arsenal but in order to obtain success you must do it right just like any other hunting approach. Scouting cameras are a tool and just like any other tool they must be used correctly.

## Below are some tips to help you get the most out of your scouting cameras:

- 1) **Place your camera in funnels.** They say in business location is everything and when picking a spot to hang your camera it's just as important. Remember a camera is stationary so you can't hang it just anywhere and expect to consistently capture pictures of big bucks. This sounds pretty obvious but remember common sense isn't so common. Whenever I pick a location I want to do so with the goal of capturing the majority of bucks in the area. If you pick the correct spot within a funnel it increases your odds substantially. I've seen scouting cameras on both public and private property in terrible locations. For example I've seen cameras facing towards singular sign like one rub. It's not always a waste of time to hang your camera on singular sign, because an exception is the primary scrape. However, just like it's beneficial to cover as many trails as possible when hanging a stand the same is true when hanging scouting cameras. Speaking of scrapes, most are made at night and although placing a camera over a primary scrape might yield a mug shot of the buck that made it, if he was there at 2:00am it will do you no good. Although you know he's using that area as a part of his route, it won't necessarily be beneficial to hang a stand there because he could bedding a mile away. You want to place a camera where the buck feels comfortable moving during DAYLIGHT hours. You also want to be able to get in quickly, quietly and as scent-free as possible. This is why I like funnels. In a funnel you get a concentrated amount of activity but if you're far enough from the buck's bedding area you won't bump him from his bed while checking the camera. I like placing cameras on the outer edge of a known buck bedding area but I don't check them too often. You might even want to pull the camera once you get pictures of the buck you're after if you think you're pushing the envelope by constantly checking your camera. Of course any location that concentrates deer activity between two larger pieces of real estate is a funnel. Physical barriers that help to funnel deer into smaller areas include creeks, fences, highways, very rocky areas, steep terrain or really thick cover. Hanging a camera along these edges are great locations to capture images of the deer while still keeping the more sensitive areas like bedding areas and scrapes undisturbed.
- 2) **Near a water source.** Putting up a camera overlooking a water source is a good idea for much of the season but again it must be in the right spot. We all know that every mammal requires water for survival especially in warm weather. Most hunters forget that during the rut bucks need a lot of water despite the colder temperature because they're always on the move. Not all water sources are created equal and some get more than the lion's share of attention but I love where multiple trails converge to cross a creek. I also like scouting small ponds surrounded by thick cover, especially on the southern edge. The thick cover encourages daylight activity and if I notice a shooter visiting that water source I'll hang a stand nearby. The beauty of a camera is that it doesn't lie so you'll know when he's coming in which allows you to plan accordingly. The nice thing about the Reconyx cameras is they not only show the date and time but temperature and even moon

phase so this really helps for planning your hunt. In my personal opinion I think hunting pressure and weather fronts influence deer activity more than moon phase but if that's important to you the Reconyx stamps the moon phase on every image.

- 3) **Use a good quality camera.** Because free time is a valuable asset you want to make the most of it while hunting and scouting. The last thing you want is to hang a camera in a really good spot only to check it after a few weeks and find dead batteries or you're getting pictures of the deer's hind end because of slow trigger speed. By the way, **I don't get paid to recommend any product and only mention it because I've had success with it.** With a Reconyx you truly '*see what you've been missing*' just like their slogan says. This camera is amazingly durable, has a mind-blowing battery life and takes good quality pictures. I truly think the Reconyx brand is the "Cadillac" of scouting cameras. With a .2 second trigger speed and the ability to customize delay periods in between pictures you simply never miss anything. Although I love the durability and reliability of the Reconyx, sometimes the night images will come out a bit blurry if there's any movement. To combat this I'll set the camera on 'trail' mode. In trail mode the camera will take several images of the deer so even if a couple are blurry there will be enough that turn out just fine so it evens out. By comparison the image quality of each night picture the Cuddeback takes is phenomenal and they always seem to be perfectly centered. This is the benefit of also using traditional flash cameras. I place my Cuddebacks near field edges because by the time a mature buck shows up to a field it's usually dark but you'll know the Cuddeback will take awesome images of that deer even if it's running! There are pro's and con's to both style of cameras which is why I have several of both. Ultimately what it comes down to is personal preference and how much you feel comfortable spending.
- 4) **Get creative.** I used to think that bucks made scrapes only to mark their territorial boundaries but I'm starting to think otherwise. Some literature says they're only made for marking their territory while others say it's a place where deer meet like at a "single's bar". I think it's probably a combination of the two but I do notice that certain scrapes are much better than others. If you find the ultimate primary scrape but it would be difficult to hunt effectively because of its location then by creating a mock scrape you can steer the bucks closer to your stand. Here's an example of how I accomplished that by hanging a **mock licking branch**:



In the fall of 2012 I hung an early season observation stand to watch the bed to feed pattern of the deer in the area. From my vantage point I could cover 3 trail intersections to the west and I could shoot deer in the field to the east. I could only hunt the stand a couple times before the deer caught on because I had a difficult time exiting the stand without detection. I first began hunting the property since 2010 and I would always notice the bucks stop to work this one licking branch along the field edge 300 yards to the north. In the summer of 2013 I decided to try and pull the deer closer to my stand I had much deeper in



the woods. I wanted to condition the deer to using my stand location as a part of their normal bed to feed route. So with rubber gloves on I cut the branch down and tossed it in my truck. I then brought in my portable drill and 3/4" screws and screwed it a large tree 25 yards upwind of my stand, hung my Reconyx camera and didn't come back until early October. The first time I walked into my stand I couldn't believe my eyes. To the right of the camera was 9 scrapes under a small red oak. From August to October I had over 3,500 pictures taken on the Reconyx and most of them were visiting the scrape during daylight! I love when a plan comes together.

I instantly recognized one of the bucks because the previous year I passed on him several times when he was only 2.5 years old. I actually never laid eyes on him last fall while on stand but that's ok because I might have shot him and he needs one more year to really show his potential. As a 4.5 yr. old he'll be an awesome buck and worth a trip to the taxidermist. Here he is below at both 2.5 and 3.5 yrs. old. Had I been able to acquire permission on the neighbor's property where "Newcomer" was bedding I'm convinced I would have had a better chance to harvest him. This year he'll need to watch out because I'll be after him like a beagle on a rabbit!

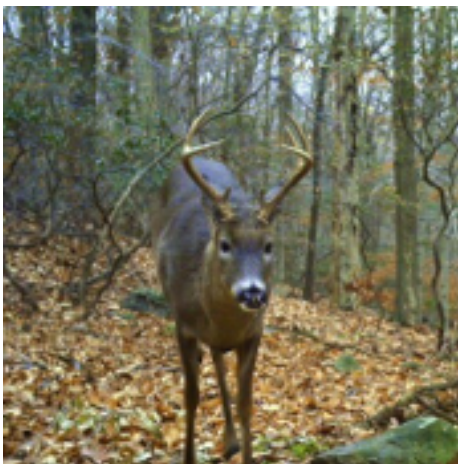


- 5) **Do I use an IR or incandescent (flash) camera?** There are a lot of variables that determine whether or not a buck becomes nervous when encountering a camera. It's been my experience that the flash itself doesn't really bother a deer too much. I think ***what bothers deer more is the scent we leave behind and the noise of the camera itself.*** Every deer is an individual and each one reacts differently to disturbance. It's interesting how one buck will be very active during daylight while the next one is practically born with the "nocturnal gene". One deer will tolerate the sound and flash of a camera while the next will run like they were poked with a hot cattle prod. I have literally hundreds of pictures showing both reactions to prove this. Having said that, I like to place

my flash cameras near field edges, buildings and/or roads, etc. where deer are more accustomed to seeing car headlights, lightning, home security lights, etc. I think it's just to make me feel better to be honest because I've never seen deer leave the area just because of a flash camera. However, when a mature buck comes across a random flash deep in a thicket far from any human activity he might get nervous. I also know that IR cameras aren't 100% "invisible" to deer because some deer at times will face the camera. It could be the sound the camera makes, the electromagnetic energy or even the heat emitted from the camera which alerts the deer, but who knows. Regardless, I know that even the most silent of IR cameras are picked off by deer on occasions but it's been my experience that this doesn't cause enough disturbance for them alter their travel routes. Below is a picture of my two favorite scouting cameras:



- 6) **Use cameras to pattern a specific buck.** There was a buck that captured my attention I nicknamed the "Shed Buck" after I found his left side in March of 2012 while looking for shed antlers. Below are some pictures of him at age 2.5, as a 3.5 year old and finally with me kneeling next to him on the day after Christmas. I love how many inches he put on from 2.5 to 3.5 and the fact that I was able to keep tabs on him pretty consistently from July until December of 2012. With the help of the scouting cameras I figured out where he bedded and the location of his preferred travel routes on the property. I ended up having 7 encounters with him from October through December. I finally decided to harvest him because before the end of season I found out there was a good chance I wasn't going to be able to hunt the property the following season. In one of the coolest pictures I've ever been lucky enough to capture, you can actually see me standing in the top right corner of the frame about ready to take a shot at Mr. "Shed Buck" on 12/26:







As a result of the information my scouting cameras revealed, I was able to introduce another buck I nicknamed "Beamer" to my 3-bladed 100 grain Muzzy. I first encountered "Beamer" in late 2011 while still hunting and I almost put an arrow through him the first time we crossed paths. Despite stalking within 35 yards while he was preoccupied by trailing 4 does, a small ridge between us kept him alive for another day. Two months later I put him down for good while he fed along a creek with 6 other bucks in one of the most exciting evening hunts of my life. If you look behind his left front leg you can actually see where another hunter's broadhead sliced his underside but he obviously survived and my Cuddeback caught him in the act of trailing this doe. I also had a picture of "Beamer" making a scrape where the doe is standing in the background a few seconds later. I ultimately shot "Beamer" right before dark so I decided to leave him overnight because I thought the shot wasn't good. It turns out I punched the arrow through both lungs but because it wasn't on camera I couldn't review the shot, so I left him until morning. Unfortunately the coyotes consumed 70% of his body from the shoulders down. He got his nickname because his beams were so long. When I measured his beams they taped out a just under 25". His right G2 was 11 7/8" and his left G2 was just under 11" so I was very proud of him. I actually lost sight of this buck for several weeks but the cameras reminded me that he was still around. Using cameras properly helps you to keep tabs on the buck you're after so you stay in the game.

In part II of this article I'll continue with some additional tips on the proper use of scouting cameras.



