

# Bowhunter Poker

Big game hunters shouldn't gamble foolishly and depend on luck alone.

by Chuck Adams

I CRAWLED AHEAD AND EASED ONE eyeball above a knob. There was the mule deer buck, bedded exactly where he'd been when I started the stalk. His smaller compadres were all bedded farther down-slope, the wind was still perfect and the shot was reasonably short. I drew my bow low, rose to my knees and filled my 2006 Montana deer tag with one arrow through both lungs. It was one of those rare bowhunting moments when everything goes right.

As we photographed the buck, I couldn't help but think how similar to a card game this bowhunt had been. Texas Hold 'Em Poker is all the rage these days, with online tournaments galore and widespread TV coverage. Even if you're not a gambler, it can be fascinating to watch experts compete, and once you understand the game, you realize how complicated it can be.

You also begin to notice that the same select group of players wins most tournaments. Those who lose at poker are often quick to accuse the winners of being "lucky," but good poker players beat the odds on a regular basis. They *make* their luck by using strategy, playing percentages and correctly reading their opponents. Sure, there's always an element of luck, but professional gamblers don't really "gamble" all that much.

In archery hunting, pure "gambling" is racing around like a headless chicken and hoping things turn out right. It's putting a stand in the first tree you stumble across and hoping a whitetail walks by, or spotting a distant mule deer and making a beeline for the animal even if wind or terrain are wrong.

Once in a while, pure gambling works. The casual poker player bets on low-odds cards and gets a lucky draw. The haphazard bowhunter sits in the right tree by accident, or stumbles headlong into a buck or bull with its head buried deep in a bush. But consistently successful poker players and bowhunters both succeed by carefully playing the game. Luck might influence individual poker hands or sits on stand, but ability overshadows luck in the long run.

## Five Keys To Winning Big

1. **Evaluate Your Hand.** After every deal, a poker player peeks at both of his hole cards. Based on the strength of the hand, he folds or decides to bet and play. Bowhunting is similar. When you scout for a stand site, you accept or reject setup options. The strength of each "hand" you consider is based on many things, but it all boils down to odds. A treestand 20 yards downwind from two converging trails tattooed with fresh

whitetail tracks is a strong hand. Another tree upwind from the same trails is a no-brainer fold, because animals are apt to smell you every time.

2. **Read Your Opponent.** At the card table, players scrutinize their opponents and look for clues (tells) about what's likely to happen. In the woods, an archer reads animals to predict a likely bowhunting outcome. For example, I watched my Montana mule deer feed for more than 2 hours as cold rain drizzled down. Then the buck bedded in a sheltered nook on the downwind side of a rock. His belly was full, his eyelids drooping and his location shielded from the storm. I was certain he'd stay put for several hours because there was no reason to move.

When hunting white-tailed deer, I consider the time of year and lay of the land before I place a stand. In early October, before the rut, animals are apt to move directly from bedding cover to feeding fields. Wise old bucks will dawdle in security cover until darn near dark, so I set up as deep in the woods as I dare to along well-traveled trails.

After the rut kicks in, my white-tailed opponents operate with different motives. Big-racked bucks are cruising for a doe-in-heat downwind from bedding thickets on a lateral line to feeding trails. Rubs and scrapes mark these travel routes

Keeping the odds in his favor, the author made an aggressive play on this Montana muley in September 2006, and won. The buck's rack green-scored approximately 175 Pope and Young Club points.



were fitted with standard Garmin Foretrex 201 GPS navigators with automatic track logs that plotted each dog's course and distance. Handlers carried a GPS receiver and recorded their own ground coverage, so the tracks of hunter and dog could be compared. I'm most familiar with the study carried out during a grouse hunt in northeastern Minnesota, but the Garmin staff says similar results were achieved during hunts in Kansas, Nebraska, South Dakota and Texas.

When all GPS information was plotted, the results showed the pointer traveled 2.5 miles for each hunter-mile traveled. The Labrador traveled just 1.8 miles for each hunter-mile walked. Garmin reported that though speed and ground covered varied according to terrain, the hunter-dog ratio remained the same.

Granted, this is by no means the definitive answer to your question, but I suspect additional studies would show ratios roughly similar to the Garmin numbers. That is, given expected variation between breeds and individual animals, most dogs would run 1.5-3 miles for each mile a hunter walks.

### De-Skunking Rover

**Q:** A short time ago, my pointer was sprayed by a skunk. I washed him with tomato juice, which I think helped with the odor, but friends say he still smells like a skunk. Any suggestions on how to really eliminate skunk odor?

**A:** Tomato juice has long been a folk remedy for removing skunk odor. However, according to chemists who have analyzed the makeup of skunk "juice," it doesn't work. They say tomatoes only mask the skunky odor at the same time that our noses suffer from "olfactory fatigue," a condition in which nasal receptors are overwhelmed and no longer detect particular smells—perhaps that's why you can't smell your dog, but others can.

Without getting into the complex chemistry of skunk spray, de-skunking requires a product that neutralizes the smelly compounds. Fortunately, there is such a concoction (invented by a chemist) that you can make from readily available ingredients. In a bucket, mix 1 quart of 3 percent hydrogen peroxide, ¼-cup of baking soda and 1 teaspoon of liq-



Skunk spray odor can be neutralized by using a home remedy of hydrogen peroxide, baking soda and liquid soap.

uid soap or detergent. Soak your dog with water, work the mixture into its fur (keep it away from its eyes), leave it on for 5 minutes and then rinse thoroughly. Don't try to store the de-skunking mixture; the combination of hydrogen peroxide and baking soda can blow the lids off containers. Note that skunk spray won't permanently damage a dog's eyes, but they might be red and painful. If inflammation persists, see your veterinarian.

### Bird Flu Virus Concerns

**Q:** During the past several years, we've been bombarded with news of the rapid spread of bird flu in Asia. Some reports link the spread to migratory birds, waterfowl in particular. I handle wild birds with care, but I'm concerned my Labradors might be exposed to the bird flu virus through the ducks they retrieve. Should I be worried?

The threat of avian influenza invading North America by way of migratory birds has some waterfowlers worried about the health of their retrievers. At this point, common-sense precautions should keep both hunters and their retrievers out of harm's way.



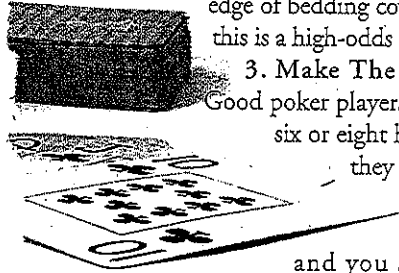
JOE ARNETTE

**A:** Although most avian biologists and influenza experts agree wild birds play a role in the spread of bird flu (the H5N1 strain), many have reached consensus that a primary means of H5N1 transmission is via the commercial poultry trade. Although avian flu has been found in other animals, including a few humans, it's normally confined to birds.

As of this writing, just one dog—a stray in Azerbaijan in the spring of 2006—has been verified as having died of bird flu. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report that the H5N1 virus has been documented in carnivores such as domestic cats, ferrets, tigers and leopards. According to the CDC, one study showed "that dogs could be infected with the virus, but no associated disease was detected." This references work in Thailand that found 25 percent of a sample of stray dogs were carrying antibodies for the virus—likely from eating dead poultry—but didn't become ill. By the way, don't confuse H5N1 bird flu with a different strain of flu found in racing greyhounds. At this point, there has been no documentation of the H5N1 virus in any animal in North America.

In sum, you shouldn't be overly worried about bird flu. Currently, there's no evidence that North American hunters and their dogs are at risk of exposure through normal contact with wild waterfowl. Nonetheless, common-sense precautions should prevail: Keep your dogs away from sick or dead birds found afield, and never allow them to consume raw body parts. ■

where a bedded estrous doe might wait for a buck. I place my stands near scrapes and rubs on the downwind edge of bedding cover, because this is a high-odds bet.



**3. Make The Decision.** Good poker players often fold six or eight hands while they wait for the right one,

and you should do the same and decide on a high-odds hunting plan. Given six or eight whitetail stands in your hunting area, you can sit in only one each morning or afternoon. You reject the others because of wind direction, numbers of deer or the animal behavior you've witnessed the past few days.

The same applies to still-hunting or spot-and-stalk sneaking. Is the bull elk in a high-odds stalkable position, or should you back away because the wind or terrain is wrong? It's better to try another day than spook the animal into the next county. Is the forest floor damp

from a recent rain so you can pussyfoot through your favorite whitetail woodlot, or do all those cornflake-dry leaves from a week of hot weather make a tree-stand the only silent bet?

**4. Watch The Hand Unfold.** In Hold 'Em poker, you play two hole cards and hope the remaining five about to be dealt will strengthen your hand. Anytime during the hand, you can back out (fold) if luck is running against you. As a bowhunter, you have the same option.

Several years ago, I stalked a big Arizona Coues' deer. I crawled inside 50 yards, but couldn't get a shot. I backed off, circled a half-mile and eased in from another angle. Two hours later, I discovered I still couldn't get a shot. Nearly a half-day after I'd started, I finished my third stalk on that buck. This time, my crosswind approach was magic. The deer was broadside and looking straight away. I side-stepped to the left, drew my bow and nailed the handsome 4x4 from 45 yards.

**5. Going All In.** At some point, you

must commit to final action. Timid poker players and timid bowhunters wait for a perfect chance that seldom comes. Aggressive action wins more games—and takes more animals. Crawl the last 30 feet with a risk of being seen, or take the first decent shot from your tree-stand because you aren't sure you'll get a better one.

In the final stage, bowhunting is all about risk. You evaluate your chances and then commit to a series of steps. Don't wait for a perfect chance—instead, act on a reasonably good chance. This is what poker players call “going all in.” You stick your neck out and take your best shot at winning. You might lose it all because you've calculated incorrectly, read your opponent wrong or simply gotten unlucky. But week in and week out, intelligent poker pros win most all-in plays, and so do careful but aggressive bowhunters. They strike when everything seems to be in their favor, and more often than not, the result is a pinpoint shot and nice antlers on the wall. ■

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