

WHITE-TAILED DEER

Whitetails

Don't have access to huge amounts of forest? No problem—you can successfully hunt big whitetails in small places.

by Patrick Meitin

BIG IS DEFINITELY BETTER, AS IN BIG WHITE-TAILED bucks wearing big antlers.

But is *more* also better, in regard to more acreage, more elbow room and more treestand options? This is an obvious selling point to guided deer hunts.

The good news for those of us who can't afford a guided hunt is you certainly don't need vast amounts of land to score on mature bucks. When I recall the biggest bucks I've taken, with few exceptions they came from small parcels of land—a patch of woods, an undeveloped lot or a strip of stony trees punctuating plowed or open country. Whitetails don't need big woods to grow impressive racks. In fact, it might actually be the small dimensions of such places that allow bucks to grow old because these areas are often overlooked by deer hunters.

Years ago I had the chance to bowhunt in the plush suburbs of Omaha, Nebraska. My friend had a cousin who had a friend, and these guys were killing huge bucks year after year.

My first impressions of hunting in the 'burbs were bad, to put it mildly. The spots they hunted consisted of a backyard, a narrow strip of river-bottom wedged between the Missouri River and a railroad track, and a pie-slice of standing corn behind a shopping center and a trucking company loading dock.

Soon enough I was into the spirit of a metro hunt, though. I quickly discovered where deer had burrowed beneath the chain-link boundary of a 5-acre suburban backyard, and I used the only tree available to cover the spot—a nasty-thorned black locust about thigh thick. I felt like an intruder, easily monitoring neighborhood comings and goings, listening to school buses and pickup basketball games in driveways. But as the air grew cooler and light dwindled with the dying day, interior house lights began blinking on one by one, and that chain-link funnel turned into a different kind of busy thoroughfare. I couldn't believe the number of deer that passed by my treestand.

Patchwork Farmland

A long-time friend had recently retired and bought a small Iowa farm on the Missouri border and invited me for a November bowhunt, perfectly timed to coincide with the whitetail rut. When I arrived, like those years long ago in Nebraska, I had to tell myself to believe. There was more plowed ground than tress, and from what I could see the biggest woodlots available consisted of a scant few acres. In typical fashion, I dove into the middle of the biggest parcel I could find and set up shop. After several days I'd seen numerous bucks and does, but not the kind of bucks Iowa is famous for. It was by sheer coincidence that one morning I was able to observe a distant treeline close to the edge of my buddy's property.

That's when I discovered "The Spot." I'd witnessed four shooter bucks during a single morning hunt, apparently pawing a single swatch of ground at a distant fence gap. I didn't like the looks of the surrounding terrain, but seeing is believing. For starters, the long, thin string of trees was adjacent a well-traveled farm road, not 150 yards removed across open clover. Across the road sat a barn full of

bawling cattle and seemingly the busiest farmer in all of Iowa; coming and going on his noisy tractor, invariably escorted by a wildly barking, tire-nipping Australian shepherd. And 300 yards to the north was a farmhouse with even more yapping dogs.

After lunch I set out to determine what was so attractive about the spot to the four trophy bucks. What I found was possibly the highest concentration of whitetail sign I've ever seen. There were clusters of pickup-hood-sized scrapes, the surrounding vegetation appearing to have been mauled by a chipper/shredder. I immediately hung a treestand, cut a couple shooting lanes and climbed aboard in drizzling rain and stinging wind. A half-hour later I tagged the biggest whitetail buck I'd ever seen alive at that time in my hunting career, a wide-racked 9-pointer that scored 163 Pope and Young Club points.

Wasteland Whitetails

A friend and I had drawn Kansas archery tags in an area he'd hunted previously. Unfortunately, we soon discovered the ranch where he'd tagged his 170-class P&Y buck was now unavailable to us because it had been leased to an outfitter. Another place he knew of, a walk-in area in years past, was now posted heavily—dead end No. 2. Out of options, we knocked on doors near a productive-looking river-bottom, receiving polite apologies but no hunting permission.

We were forced to look farther afield. After another day of knocking on doors we discovered a landowner who invited us to "kill every darned one of 'em." We now had a place to hunt, but it appeared better suited for pronghorns than whitetails. Most of it was covered in knee-high CRP grass, which would be miserable stuff to bowhunt effectively. We discovered whitetail scrapes on a patch of "timber claim" occupying about the same square footage as a suburban lot, so I hacked a path to a squat Osage tree and hung a stand 7 feet off the ground—the only tree in the area that would hold a stand.



BIG

BIGGER

BIGGEST

We also located beat-down deer trails . line of exactly seven cottonwoods ounded by pheasant cover and hung other stand. We stabbed a pop-up and blind into a weed bank near a line ubbed and spindly elms and hackber-prouting from a low spot. Another stand went into a line of cottonwoods ling away from a dead-end road, over- ing a wide-open pasture of sunflow- and native grasses. And we saw deer n every one of those stands—lots of r—but I never got a shot.

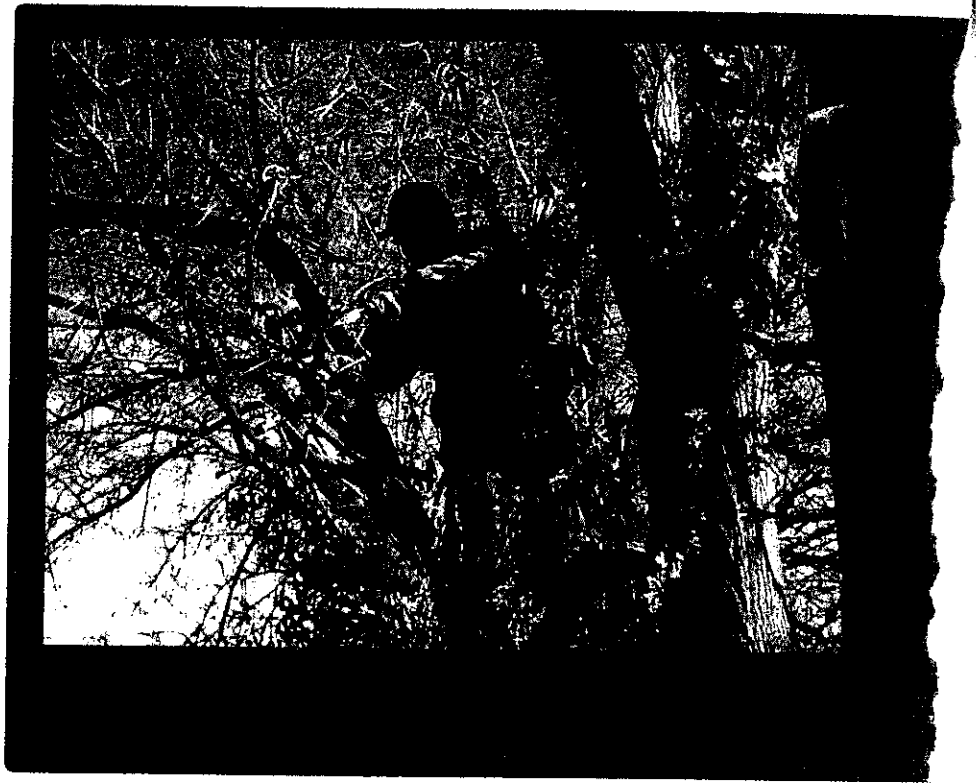
A week into our hunt I spotted a ither-worn rancher feeding cattle r a line of five towering cottonwoods r looking a cut milo field, backed by e-funct gravel pit filled with jungly ds. When asked about the possibili- of hunting those trees, he didn't ce words. "Not only no, but *hell* ' was his reply. But when I told him I bowhunting, not gun hunting, he ckly changed his mind.

I walked out the treeline during un- onable midday heat, picking up the d antler of a behemoth non-typical itetail. When I swung around to ck the opposite side of the treeline, I mbled upon a good-sized and very ve scrape. In no time I'd placed our available treestand.

From this stand I saw a doe and ck traveling together from a mile y, and even at that distance his rack impressive. He was coming, or at t I hoped he was. I prayed and plied ny powers of ESP, coaxing him on. t at dark the pair arrived close ough for me to try a subtle doe bleat . The doe swung my way to invest- e and the buck suddenly remem- ed the scrape. He marched head on, ved at that scrape endlessly as pre- is shooting light quickly dwindled, just when it seemed hopeless for me get a shot, he turned and walked be- th my treestand. Game over. The ck's rack surpassed the 170 P&Y ck with a few inches to spare.

Small-Tract Tactics

Small tracts can produce big reds, but only if approached carefully. Successful whitetail hunting starts with scent control, but in limited cover



this becomes even more critical. Bust a buck in big cover and you're still in the game, but blow it in a small tract and you're likely finished because your options might very well be exhausted.

This especially applies to aspects of the hunt often taken for granted when you have copious options. Use extra stealth when hanging treestands and cutting shooting lanes. Even suburban deer, subjected to seemingly endless outside stimulation, can be extremely sensitive to intrusive activity. When possible, use wire or cord to tie back deflecting limbs instead of cutting shooting lanes. Take advantage of every scent-control option available. Hang treestands while wearing scent-control clothing and especially gloves, even if it's warm and uncomfortable. Eliminator scent-control over-boots ((800) 630-7290) are a huge boon to traversing an area undetected and an especially sound investment when taking advantage of limited hunting ground.

Most importantly, extra attention must be applied to wind direction in relation to stand position, as well as entering/exiting stand sites undetected. If the wind is not perfect on a particular day for a particular stand, don't risk hunting there until all angles are covered 100 per-

cent. Study your stand site and surrounding terrain features carefully and use common sense to avoid spooking deer on your way in and out. If this means a longer walk, so be it. For instance, use dips in terrain or creek beds to conceal movements from deer feeding in open fields while slipping into a morning stand. Remain in your stand when deer are in sight or beneath your position, even if that means sitting an extra hour in the dark until deer clear out.

And decide what you want of a site before you begin. If a particular trophy buck is your main objective, you might have to pass those bonus-tag antlerless deer to keep a stand fresh. Risky ploys such as rattling, grunting to out-of-range bucks or decoying—maneuvers that can give away your position—should be used sparingly or avoided altogether. The basic theme is to keep your movements and hunting activity as low-impact as possible.

Big bucks do come from small places—spots other hunters largely ignore on their way to bigger cover. Don't make that mistake. Keep an open mind, approach small tracts with an eye toward detail, and you, too, just might find the buck of your dreams on postage-stamp-sized property. 🍀