Few hunters know, use vital deer information

By RAY SASSER
Knight-Ridder Newspapers

When deer seasons begin in October around the South, millions of hunters take to fields in pursuit of the world's most popular big game animal—a quarry they know little about.

"The average deer hunter is like a riverbank fisherman," said Dr. James Kroll, a Stephen F. Austin University professor and one of the nation's leading authorities on white-tailed deer. Kroll is also an observer of human nature.

"That fisherman sits on the riverbank and waits for the river to bring a fish to him. The average deer hunter sits in a permanent stand and waits for a deer to accidentally stroll past."

To learn something about the animals they hunt, Kroll recommends that hunters spend as much time as possible in the field. He has little patience with hunters who look forward to deer season all year, sit for two hours in their stand on opening morning, then head back to the deer camp.

"Our radio telemetry studies convince me that mature bucks pattern their movements much better than hunters pattern their movements," Kroll said. "In heavily hunted woods, one of my favorite times to hunt is midday—10 a.m. to 2 p.m."

"The mature deer have learned that hunters are in the woods early and late in the day. That's usually the peaks times for deer movement. It's also the peak time for hunter movement, so the smart deer (the ones most hunters are after) lay low early and late."

On East Texas hunting club outings managed by Kroll, few really big bucks are taken on out fields around permanent stands. Telemetry studies have proved that mature bucks use those food plats at night.

Kroll looks for thick cover used as sanctuary by the deer and scouts rubs and scrapes, both visible signs left by bucks. He sets up temporary stands, usually elevated tripods, near a travel lane and often removes the stand when he leaves the woods.

Rather than decide prior to a hunting day where he will hunt and hunting that stand location regardless of weather, Kroll lets the weather conditions tell him where and how to hunt. He pays special attention to wind direction, since a keen nose is the whitetail's first line of defense.

"Too many deer hunters are searching for some silver bullet that will enable them to easily shoot the deer of their dreams," Kroll said. "That silver bullet does not exist, nor should it exist."

"The emphasis in deer hunting should be placed on a quality experience. A great buck means much more if you had to work hard for him than if you killed him in a random, drive-by shooting, which is how many of them are taken."

Kroll believes that most hunters do not properly use the tools available to them because they don't fully understand whitetail behavior. Take the grunt call, for instance, a deer call that simulates vocalizations made by a buck chasing an estrus doe.

Kroll said most hunters now carry a grunt call. They sit in their stand until they are bored, then pull the call out of their pocket, grunt several times and, when no deer shows up within 15 minutes, assume the call doesn't work.

"It may take a buck a long time to respond to a call," Kroll said. "There are so many calls being used now that deer are accustomed to them and tend to ignore them. It's like rattling horns. If the deer have been fooled by rattling, it's harder to fool them a second time."

In a recent season, Kroll set up to hunt a mature buck in the deer's brushy sanctuary. At daylight, Kroll began to grunt and the deer grunted back but would not come out of the brush.

With nothing to lose, Kroll jumped down from his stand and began to run a circular route through the brush, prunting with each step like a buck chasing an estrus doe. This mobile sound convinced the target deer that another buck was chasing a doe in his territory and Kroll finally shot the buck charging toward him at 20 feet.

"As hunters become more sophisticated, so do the deer, particularly mature bucks," Kroll said. "When you rattle now, it's important to make as much noise as possible—the same kind of noise that two bucks engaged in a savage battle would make."

"It takes at least two people to accurately simulate a buck fight. That's the challenge to deer hunting. If the river doesn't bring a fish past your spot, it's time to try something different."

Ray Sasser is the outdoors writer for the Dallas Morning News.

Whitetail deer

Odocoileus virginianus

America's whitetail deer population has grown from 500,000 in 1900 to more than 16,000,000 today—one of the greatest success stories of the 60-year-old Pittman-Robertson Aid to Wildlife Restoration Act. However, Louisiana's deer herd has almost doubled in size over the last 20 years, and wildlife biologists estimate there are as many as 1.1 million whitetails in the state.

In states like Kansas, Iowa, Missouri, Michigan, Minnesota and Pennsylvania, the whitetail populations have exceeded the carrying capacity of the available habitat, resulting in thousands of deer-vehicle accidents and complaints from landowners about crop depredation.

Whitetail deer vary from 4 to 6 feet long, and depending on food supplies and habitat conditions, can weigh from 125 to 300-plus pounds.

Whitetails are found in a variety of habitats ranging from the open high plains to deciduous forests. Whitetail doe generally produce two fawns each breeding season and in many cases can have three.

Whitetails have a white neck patch and are white underneath, including the bottom side of the tail, which stands straight up, or flaga, when the deer is alarmed.

The age of a buck cannot be determined by the size of its antlers or the number of times it has been damaged. Antler development is determined by nutrition, not age. Biologists estimate a whitetail's age by an examination of its jawbone, molar growth, and wearing on the molars. The back teeth a deer uses to grind its food.