

# DEER SEA



# SON PRIMER

## A LONGTIME HUNTER AND CONSERVATION OFFICER GIVES ADVICE ON DEER HUNTING IN NEW HAMPSHIRE

by

JOHN WIMSATT

I will admit it, writing a deer scouting and hunting article is a first for me. I am generally not interested in predictable annual fall hunting preparation pieces. The measure of a hunt is many things to different people, but after reading these types of articles, I was often left with the feeling that I could never measure up to the standard of the author who appeared to hunt for a living. Meanwhile, I was spending most of my time working on being a husband and father to a busy family, as well as a full-time Conservation Officer. So my goal is to omit the fluff and share some insights on hunting and scouting that have worked for me and my family.

I offer up the following practical, simple tips, things that stand out as important to me when I think about how I have prepared for and spent time in the deer woods of New Hampshire over the last four decades. I owe my deepest gratitude to my father and our longtime family friend, the late Conservation Officer Captain James Jones, for instilling in me a passion for hunting and great respect for the outdoors...and for reminding me of the importance of sometimes having a full bacon and eggs breakfast first before hitting the woods, even if it means missing first light!

### Timing Is Everything

Get started by doing some scouting from home studying topographical maps, Google Earth, or the maps on the Fish and Game website at [www.huntnh.com/hunting/where-hunt.html](http://www.huntnh.com/hunting/where-hunt.html). This can really cut down your scouting time and increase your odds of success.

Next, unless you are hunting public land or have plenty of private land (with permission in hand), you'll need to spend a good deal of your scouting time visiting landowners and respectfully asking permission. Be prepared for plenty of rejection, but like deer hunting, timing is everything. Be patient and keep trying. Don't go knocking wearing camo and face paint; dress in a clean and respectable manner, and respect the

© DUNE CROSS

landowner's privacy and personal views on land use and hunting. Also, be sure to thank them at the end of the season (in writing is best) and perhaps offer them some fresh venison.

A lifetime hunter and friend once told me to remember to scout during all four seasons if you can. You will gather many clues that will help when hunting season arrives. Spend time figuring out the when, not just the where. It's easy to get excited about seeing lots of deer grazing lazily in green meadows during daylight hours in late summer or game cameras loaded with pictures of passing deer with big racks. Deer can leave a lot of sign, but keep in mind that the vast majority is laid down at night. Focus on sign that tells you when and where the deer are moving between bedding and feeding areas. Keep in mind that what the deer are doing while you scout in August and September will surely change as the fall progresses. It took me a while to realize I needed to adjust my hunting locations on a weekly basis as deer patterns changed.

Here's a tip you may not want to hear: when in doubt, scout and hunt the nastiest, thickest, most remote part of the piece you

are hunting. Any amount of pressure will change deer patterns and send them to the thickets and swamps.

And don't be in a rush. Slow, slow, slow down! We live in a fast-paced world and tend to do everything quickly. This can translate to how you scout and hunt. I recognize this even more as I age, and as my distance eyesight requires spectacle reinforcement. There is so much to see in the woods – it requires a snail's pace to decipher every bit of sign and detail in the landscape. We walk by and miss seeing far more deer and good sign than we would if we took the time to really focus in. Watch not just for patterns and movement, but rubs, scrapes, hair, scat, deer trails, food sources, and other evidence of deer activity.

### Easy on the Technology

I'm a bit skeptical of high-tech products that claim to make scouting more efficient. I have tried scouting with game cameras, and sure, it's exciting to capture a picture of a nice racked buck. After a while though, I found that technology got consuming, costly, and often didn't help that much. In fact, the additional time spent going in and

out of an area checking the camera every few days can be a real detriment and may cause deer to change their habits, making them even more elusive.

Smartphones, however, we have to keep with us whether we want to or not, and they can be pretty useful tools. When data service is adequate, they can pull up topo maps and provide GPS-quality terrain information and details. While not a substitute for a good paper map and a compass, they have helped me out of the woods when I've been caught by darkness or was looking for an easy exit while dragging out a deer. The camera features are a big plus, too. The big downside is that you are connected to your emails, texts, and social media, but let's face it, some of those are a necessity for the average hunter trying to manage life and work, and get his or her deer!

By the way, you don't need to spend a lot of money on gadgets to hunt deer successfully. I have been guilty of this in the past. My wife would raise her eyebrows at the daily arrival of the UPS delivery truck. Learn from my expensive experiences and keep it simple.

## A WORD ABOUT BAITING

Let's talk a moment about the four-letter word BAIT, as related to deer hunting. My recommendation is to not bait deer. I fully respect those who choose to do so in compliance with our baiting regulations, and I recognize that things vary widely from one side of the state to the other. However, during my career at Fish and Game, my experiences have shown me that baiting is negatively impacting the quality of our deer hunt. It unnaturally alters deer movement and behavioral patterns. In my view, the potential benefits are far outweighed by the detrimental effects.



© ROGER IRWIN



© FROCKMAN / ISTOCKPHOTO.COM



© ROGER IRWIN

When scouting for deer, slow down and take in all of the details. Deer rubs and hair can be important signs that help determine the animal's movement patterns.

---

For many of us, just seeing one deer in the woods may take all the time and energy we have available... a deer is a deer is a deer.

---



© JAMIE ROACH / DREAMSTIME.COM

### On the Hunt

Once the season rolls around, get out and enjoy it. One of my dad's favorite sayings was, "If you want to get a deer, you've got to be in the woods!" Logical enough, but this translates to a commitment to get out there. If you only have an hour to hunt before or after work, just go! Don't worry about having every little detail in order. Just get into the woods. Sometimes blue jeans, sneakers, and a blaze orange vest will do the trick. As long as you are doing it safely and responsibly, it is okay to just wing it sometimes.

However, don't stink up the place! While scent-control clothing and products are helpful, don't overthink this. Keep your hunting clothes aired out and away from household odors, wear rubber-bottomed boots or shoes, and don't touch a lot of stuff in the woods.

When you're in the field, I urge you to keep safety at the top of the list, particularly when setting up tree stands. Accidents while climbing, descending, and on stand

are alarmingly common. I have a couple of friends – skilled deer hunters – who have sustained life-threatening falls. Tree stands are great tools, but treat them as carefully as you would a running chain saw. WEAR and USE climbing harnesses and tree straps!

And remember, a successful hunt doesn't necessarily mean bagging a trophy buck. Many years ago, while on patrol as a warden, an old-timer I stopped to check on told me, "A deer is a deer is a deer." He was right. Most deer articles focus on stories and pursuits of mature bucks with big racks. For many of us, just seeing one deer in the woods may take all the time and energy we have available. When we are fortunate enough to get them, my family will eat a few deer a year. We've learned a lot about what makes venison taste good. Deer under 100 pounds taste the best, period. No fancy recipes, just grill them slowly and, most importantly, don't overcook them. Whether you harvest a 50-pound deer or a 200-pound trophy

buck, a deer is a deer is a deer.

The main thing is, don't try too hard. Keep scouting and hunting fun and try not to oversaturate an area. The deer will know you have been there, so do your best to minimize your presence. Our lives are packed with responsibilities and busy schedules, so simply scout and hunt when you can fit it in.

Good luck this season. Keep safety as your first priority. Be sure to double check the hunting laws before you head out, and always remember that the landowner is king. And take your kids with you—teaching and spending time in the woods with my four children has been my most rewarding hunting experience of all.



---

*Major John Wimsatt retired in 2017 from the N.H. Fish and Game Department after serving 25 years as a Conservation Officer. He lives in Northwood with his wife, Cathy. They have four children who all love to hunt and fish.*