

BOWHUNTING

the Experienced

Lessons from Alberta's Edmonton Bow Zone

By Jim Hole Jr.

It was another day of guiding during mid-November in Edmonton's Bow Zone. The weather was cold and crisp, bowhunters were placed in their treestands and the air was filled with anticipation of what might follow.

As the rest of my clients enjoyed the afternoon hunt, I sat with Idaho's Mike Larson at the kitchen table back at camp. Mike was no longer hunting, as he had finally accomplished what took him years to do in "the zone" and taken a fine, mature whitetail that morning.

Idaho's Mike Larson believes the key to success in Alberta's Bow Zone is persistent attention to detail and careful execution of the hunt plan.



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North Carolina's Lesley Parks, a 30-year veteran of the Bow Zone, has tagged numerous mature bucks by controlling as many variables as possible and minimizing his impact in the field.

Mike's journey had been unique. He had learned the basics of bowhunting in our camp some 20 years prior and had gone on to successfully hunt various mature animals in many places. His skill set was fine, but Alberta's mature and seasoned whitetail bucks had still evaded him, at least until this day. We reflected on one of his previous hunts with us years back, where he had whitetail bucks in bow range on 11 or 12 of his

sits. Something just always seemed to be missing; we just couldn't quite put our finger on exactly what it was.

Mike was elated, as he should have been. The first good whitetail taken on honest ground with a bow is a special thing in a bowhunter's career. Some bowhunters say that if you can bowhunt mature whitetails with consistent success, you can bowhunt pretty much anything successfully, and I can't disagree. It's an advanced

Extremely cold, calm days are common when hunting in Alberta's Bow Zone. In such conditions, sound travels great distances and archers must be extra careful not to spook wary bucks as they get into their stands and hunt.

training ground for certain.

Mike is a talented and driven kind of guy. During our discussion, Mike looked toward his bowhunting future and asked what skill or technique he should work on. What, in my opinion, should he focus on honing? Now, the thing that was unusual for me is I wasn't quite sure. Normally, it's quite easy to tell from the sidelines what a bowhunter should work on, but Mike's game is solid. He's dedicated and disciplined. He's a good shooter, he sticks to the hunt plan and he hunts and calls accordingly. He's an athlete and can get to, in and from stand sites smoothly and quietly. He's patient and just seemed pretty much to have it all going on. The answer simply wasn't clear. Or at least until I thought more about it.

Eventually, after a long consideration, I said to Mike, "To not exist." Work on your gear and your

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technique to not exist in every way you can. In other words, become invisible, silent and scentless to the best of your ability.

The Devil in The Details

The Bow Zone is a place only a few bowhunters understand. After years of being in the game, a good guide can recognize whether a bowhunter is an effective predator. Being



Although it can seem counterintuitive, sometimes the stealthiest way of accessing a stand site is simply to do the most obvious thing. Deer become conditioned to sounds from vehicles such as trucks and side-by-sides, so getting dropped off at your stand in a UTV can bother the deer less than trying to sneak in on foot.

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on top of the details is what makes a bowhunter effective in getting close to mature, experienced animals year in and year out. Also, a bowhunter is only as good as his last presence in the field. So, never think that just because you've done it, you're still doing it. Upon some further thought, I said to Mike, "To not exist, but if you're going to exist, you have to exist the right way when it comes to the experienced."

In other words, you must study the conditions to see what sight, smell and sound you can get away with on particular hunts and get to and from stand sites and to sit stands accordingly. Treestand hunting is a dynamic game with constantly changing conditions, such as the amount of daylight, the temperature, wind speed and direction, precipitation, ground cover, etc. You must take all of it into account and figure out what you can and can't get away with on a daily — or even hourly — basis.

You also must study what naturally happens in a given hunting area in terms of animal movement, vehicle traffic and other human activity to see what the proactive hunter can get away with. When my hunters are successful, I often joke that it was all "by design," because that's where most of the success comes from — a planned strategy that considers the conditions, timing and vulnerability of game, followed by solid execution.

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And when it comes to seasoned whitetail bucks, you really have to respect the nature of the beast. They've put their time in, and they know what's normal, right, consistent or wrong. They don't need to know exactly what's *wrong*; they just need to know it's *not right*. This, in my opinion, is what a consistently successful whitetail bowhunter must build his world around. It's a beautiful and very honest game to bowhunt an animal that has zero tolerance towards a potential predator.

I went on to discuss with Mike that there are some elements you can control and others you can't. But you can be sensitive to what's happening in the field. If the deer can't see, smell or hear you, you're in business. But that's just not the reality most of the time. With respect to sight, be selective on how, when or where you access your stand sites. With respect to scent, stick with the ABCs of hunting but be selective on where to hunt based on current weather and wind conditions. With respect to sound, pay attention to ground noise and use well-planned access routes that will allow you to get in and out undetected by the deer. The trick is to access an area without changing what the deer are already used to seeing, smelling and hearing.

Some inexperienced hunters make the mistake of considering a deer a deer. Nothing could be further from the truth. Fooling a young buck or doe is like fooling a child. They just don't have the maturity or experience needed for their defensive system to be finely tuned. This is one thing the serious whitetail bowhunter must take to heart. I can't tell you how many times I've seen bowhunters believe that being close to any deer is all the same on a hunt. It's not. The experienced animals live on another plane of existence, with another set of rules. An experienced animal is its own being — arguably a more advanced species — and a seasoned bowhunter recognizes that and plans accordingly.

Another key element the advanced bowhunter needs is relentless discipline. Simply put, this means doing

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what *should* be done versus doing what you would *like* to do. *Do what you should do. Not what you want to do.* This, in my opinion, should be written in stone in any serious whitetail hunter's diary. Having a rock-solid hunting plan, and staying on task with respect to every detail, is the only way to consistently get within bow range of mature bucks.

Years back, I guided a hunter from

Pennsylvania, Kevin Barthen. Kevin made the other hunters in camp question him, as he was so particular about his preparations and technique. He set a fine example of how things should be done. He wasn't the average hunter planning to take an average buck. He knew what it took to get close to the experienced whitetails. I'd take a guy like Kevin on my big buck team any day.



In addition to being the owner of Classic Outfitters in Alberta, author Jim Hole Jr. is a highly accomplished bowhunter in his own right. Decades of experience have convinced Hole that consistent success on mature whitetails requires meticulous preparation and razor-sharp hunt execution.



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Solving the Puzzle

Bowhunting big whitetails is like a puzzle. Each piece, examined individually, seems simple enough. Yet collectively, as you try to figure out how all those pieces fit together, things can get confusing.

Sight, sound and smell are the three big puzzle pieces when it comes to whitetail hunting. In any given area, the animals are used to certain day in and day out conditions when it comes to how much they see, hear or smell humans. The trick is to hunt within the confines of these conditions as best one can. It's not a perfect world, but the plan is to strive to keep things as close to normal as possible for an effective assault. Sometimes, when hunters arrive in camp, I kid that conditions were perfect until they showed up! The point is that a deer's world has a natural balance until we show up and start to contaminate it. Let's take a closer look at each piece of the puzzle.

Sight: The deer are used to seeing things a certain way. So, one must try to keep it that way. They see tractors, trucks, ATVs, etc. So, one should try to hunt consistently using the vehicles the animals are used to. In some cases, it's not possible. So, the animals might need to get conditioned to new vehicle traffic at the new times as the hunting begins. This can take some



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Florida bowhunter Travis Fryman, a five-time Major League all-star who played 13 seasons with the Detroit Tigers and Cleveland Indians, shows off a nice Bow Zone trophy. Fryman credits pre-hunt training for helping him deal with Alberta's challenging conditions and getting consistent opportunities at mature bucks.

time for the animals to accept.

In the case of a bowhunter going in on foot, access must be planned where the hunter goes to and from the stand without being detected, also taking into account what will be left behind in residual human scent. Every trip in and out makes it that much harder to get close to a mature animal at that location. So, hunt sensitively and selectively!

Sound: Effective bowhunters know they must be stealthy, but sometimes doing the obvious can be the stealthiest. In other words, rather than walking and alerting deer by foot, use a vehicle to access stand sites and park as close as possible without the game knowing the vehicle is there. Also, the scent a vehicle leaves is generally acceptable, while the ground scent a bowhunter leaves is not. Many deer will stand or lay relaxed as the truck or ATV drives past, whereas they will run from a bowhunter passing on foot.

Scent: Needless to say, less is best here. There are times, however, where game is conditioned to the scent of a person passing by or being in the area. As a young bowhunter, I didn't differentiate between a hunter and someone else who was casually on the properties. I eventually learned I could walk right by deer that had been conditioned to other people if I walked as they did and scented the area the same way going to and from. Once in place, however,

there is no substitute for being as scent-free as possible.

When I'm looking at a hunt plan, the first thing I ask myself is, "What are these animals used to, and what kind of hunting pressure have they been facing?" The way you should hunt must be predicated on what has already happened in your hunting area to that point in the season. If you are fortunate enough to control the hunting pressure in your area, your hunt plans should be progressive and paced, aggression wise, from the start of the season to the end so the area hunts productively throughout. The rookie jumps in the middle of things early in the game, resulting in deer that are well educated and difficult to hunt, while the veteran works at a calculated pace.

Needless to say, it's never a perfect world when a bowhunter sets foot on any bowhunting ground. But if you pay careful attention to how things are done, it will result in more effective hunting for mature whitetails. *By design*, I say. You've got to pay attention to the details if you plan to bowhunt an animal that is very selective in how it chooses to live and survive.

Jim Hole Jr. is one of North America's most accomplished whitetail bowhunters and owner of Classic Outfitters in Alberta, Canada. For more information about trophy whitetail hunts in the Edmonton Bow Zone, visit www.classic-outfitters.com or call Jim at 780-991-4004. ➔