



Stealth

WORDS AND IMAGES BY **Brian Rusk**

How you **enter** and **exit** your hunting area makes all the difference **once you are on stand.**



When you are trying to kill an animal that is built to survive, an animal whose senses are better than anything you can imagine, you need to be more than just quiet in a tree. Approaching your stand can make or break your hunt, and leaving it at the end of a hunt can turn a hotspot cold if you don't watch your step.

It was a cool October morning as I slipped down the riverbank and carefully placed my gear into my kayak. I had staged the kayak the night before, knowing the winds would be perfect for one of my riverbank stands. As I pushed off the bank and the



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current took control, I could only *feel* that I was slowly adrift. It was a very uneasy feeling floating down the pitch-black river. The only thing I could make out were the silhouettes of the treetops on the banks above.

Silently, the current took me downstream until I hit a sharp bend in the darkness. This was my exit. I slid my kayak up onto the riverbank and then quietly pulled it up onto the shore. I grabbed my bow and gear and crept up to a large cedar tree that marked my place, and then I took a few more careful steps to the black ash tree I had prepared a few months prior. Up the steps I went and hung my Lone Wolf stand without a sound. I settled in and waited. I was now deep within the bedding area, and the deer were still a long ways off and just starting to make their way into the riverbottom. I had made the perfect entrance into a very difficult area to approach by land.

It wasn't long before the first visitor of the morning came past my stand. It was a small spike buck that walked almost underneath me and gave me hope that I had picked the right spot. The wind softly carried my scent out across the river and away from the little buck's nose. He wandered by and faded into the tangled river thicket. That morning was a great success, even though I never drew my bow. I passed on six deer, all within 30 yards of me. It was one of those spots I knew I could not walk into without blowing the whole river valley out, but by carefully planning my approach, I was able to sneak in without a sound and silently slip out the same way without any deer being the wiser.



Using my kayak allowed me to quietly access a stand site that would have been nearly impossible to get to entirely on foot.

Shawn Luchtel
Heartland Bowhunter

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This is just one of several creative ways I have used to get into and out of my stands over the years. Obviously, not every stand can be approached by water, but getting in and out of the woods without tipping off the deer that you are hunting is critical, so what do you do? You look at everything from a deer's perspective.

One of my favorite places to hunt over the years has been with Jim Hole Jr. of Classic Outfitters in the Edmonton Bow Zone. Jim has been guiding hunters for 30-plus years in the northern Alberta woods. His methods are simple: Don't let the deer know anything is different around the farms and woods we are hunting.

I first met Jim while running a video camera for *Bowhunter TV*. I was taping then Editor Dwight Schuh. At first I thought Jim's methods were a bit crazy. All his gear was wrapped in hockey tape. His stands, bows...anything metal, right down to your zipper, was covered. When hunting with Jim, everything is done in a stealthy way. He runs his camp in a way that some people would think is over the top, but guys like me, who learned from him, begin to understand his madness and why he does things the way he does. It soon changed the way I hunted. Jim is critical of everything from a hunter's gear to the way he accesses his stand sites. Some people may not think the way he gets hunters into and out of the stands is stealthy, but it is 100-percent effective, and I have had it work for me on many occasions back in my home state of Wisconsin.

Hanging and then removing your stand the morning or evening you hunt prevents deer from catching on to your location.



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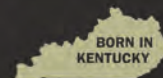
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Most of the properties that Jim has access to see a lot of ATV use. Many farmers use ATVs to do chores around their farms, so for this reason a lot of the drop-offs are done from an ATV. Jim's Polaris Ranger holds two hunters and their gear. There is no talking while being dropped off and picked up. In the darkness, the deer hear the machine, just like they do every day. The drop-off is done quietly. Care is taken not to

bump anything or make any noise that may sound different to the deer. They know the sound of the ATV is harmless. As long as you don't stop, the deer just watch as the Polaris rolls harmlessly by and into the deep timber where the deer will be bedding down not long after sunrise. By not walking across the fields, the hunters are not leaving behind any scent or bumping the deer off the fields.

After the drop-off, deep in the timber, you stand quietly and wait for the ATV to disappear and for the woods to settle down. Then you start moving, not like a



Jim Hole Jr. uses a Polaris Ranger to take hunters to and from stand sites because the local deer are used to the sound of farmers using these vehicles to do chores.

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human, but like an animal. You take a step or two, and then stop. The separation of the ATV and the walking sounds is the stealthy part. To a deer, it sounds like just another animal now moving after the ATV has left. The drop-offs are quick, and are usually made close to the tree, so walking is minimal. Then you climb up the pegs and silently hang your stand.

Several times I've had bucks walk directly to me as I was climbing the tree in the dark. One time I waited 10 minutes for the deer to finally wander off. I just hung out in my climbing belt and watched as the snow-silhouetted buck smelled the ATV tracks and then harmlessly faded into the darkness.

As the morning light began to brighten the Alberta skies, I softly rattled for a few seconds. It wasn't long before that morning's visitor came out of the shadows and back to me. I got the look I needed and identified the buck as a 3½-year-old deer. I decided to pass him up, but I know that had I walked into that location, the deer would have heard me walking across the crunchy, snow-covered field, and he would have been on full alert. The use of the ATV made me sound like a harmless farmer on his way to do early morning chores.

The pickups on Jim's hunts are very much the same. You climb down and wait at the base of the tree until you see the Polaris coming. Then you slowly move out into the open and quietly get on. Again, there is no talking until you are back at the lodge. This tactic is very effective if there are deer in the fields when you are in the tree. You just wait until the ATV stops and clears the deer out of the fields, and the deer are none the wiser to your stand location. I have used this trick back home when hunting with a partner. The worst thing you

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can do is climb down and show every deer around you where your treestand is hanging. It won't be a good spot for long.

Jim's stands are always hung the morning or evening you hunt, and then taken down after the hunt. He has trees strategically located around his properties with pegs in them so the setups are very quiet and effective. This allows a hunter to have multiple locations using

one stand, and is done this way because cold stands full of snow in the northern climates snap and creak. This sound carries for hundreds of yards in the open farm country around Edmonton, and when it's 20 below, you do not want to waste your time freezing in a noisy, creaking, deer-spooking treestand.

Some of Jim's spots do not seem ideal, but the strategy always revolves around where the deer are when you enter the stand, and where he thinks they are bedding or feeding. Sitting on the edge of an isolated island of timber out in

the middle of a huge Alberta farm field may seem like a strange place to be on a snowy November morning. However, when 10 a.m. rolls around and you have had two or three good bucks walk past your stand going from one bedding area to another, checking the does that lay deeper in the little island of timber, Jim's approach makes more sense. These little islands are surprisingly easy to access with an ATV, and even by foot, so long as you are there before the deer come to them to bed.

This same type of system can work on dirt road drop-offs as well. Deer are used to traffic. A car stopping will get them to turn their heads and look in your direction. So if you bang the car and slam the door, you can guess what happens next. The deer are now headed toward the next farm, so care must be taken on all drop-offs, and the same logic applies. The car drives off and the hunter stands on the road in the dark, waiting for the deer to settle down. Then the creak of your crossing the fence or the snap of a twig is just another animal in the dark. Walk like an animal. Stop, wait, and listen. Keep your early morning stands close to your drop-off point. Sometimes the best spots are overlooked areas that people drive right by all day long. Don't be afraid to hunt in thick bedding areas along roads during the rut. Hunting the small woodlots and open-field country in the Bow Zone has opened my eyes to places most hunters overlook all the time back home.

I look at every stand site differently, considering all the possible access routes for a particular stand, and I try to picture what the deer are used to in that area. If I am after a particular deer, I will have multiple pegs set for different winds. I have used Jim's peg system back home on land where it is legal, and where I have the permission of the landowner, because it allows me to use one stand. I hang it and remove it, which saves me from worrying about stand theft and, again, keeps my stands quiet in cold weather.

Some of my favorite spots to hunt are brushy areas near houses in metro areas. Stand theft has been a problem in these spots. I have my pegs pre-placed, and I access my stands based again on what the deer are used to. I have killed several Pope and Young-class animals simply by setting up on trails that are commonly used by people. Even trails where people walk dogs or ride four-wheelers

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and bikes, can offer access to areas that deer use all the time. It doesn't have to be a secluded riverbottom like I described earlier to offer stealthy access.

One particular spot was a brushy aspen and alder-filled swamp with a cleared pipeline running through it. The people living there used the cleared pipeline right-of-way to walk their dogs almost daily, and I began to see a pattern there with a local buck.

The local couple would walk their dogs down the trail almost every night. Shortly after their return trip, a very respectable 10-pointer would start feeding into a small creek bottom behind some houses. I watched this buck several times before a friend of mine told me I needed to take advantage of the buck. I had hunted the creek bottom before, so I already had pegs in place and just needed to access the stand without the buck knowing what was going on.

I simply waited for the right wind and used the trail the couple had been



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walking on to sneak into my stand, which overlooked the spot where the creek and the pipeline trail met. It was along this creek that several heavy trails crossed the pipeline, and I had ambushed deer there in the past.

I was in my stand early, but on this night the couple with the dogs never showed up. The time ticked slowly by, and I started to doubt myself. I wondered if the buck had seen me, but just as the light began to fade from the sky, the buck appeared below me without a sound. I was caught off guard, but I was able to slowly turn and draw my bow. The dark-racked buck stopped five yards from the base of my tree, and I took aim and released my arrow. The deer exploded into the alder brush and crossed the creek into the fading light. Then all was silent.

I had taken advantage of a deer that was used to people using a trail. I climbed off of my platform, removed my stand, and retreated to my truck to call a friend for help. I was sure the hit was good, and it didn't sound like the buck went far.

Upon returning with my friend, the blood trail was obvious, and our flashlights led us a short distance to a

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beautiful 10-point buck. It was a successful hunt because I had studied the approach and used what the deer were accustomed to as my advantage.

Not every big buck you find lends itself to hunting in such an easily accessible area, so don't be afraid to take the long way into or out of an area. If you are on a field edge at the end of the evening and the deer are in the field, take the long way out. Don't push the deer off the field, but rather walk back into the timber and loop around the deer, always keeping the wind in your favor. Use a lakeshore, a dry streambed, an overgrown fence or windrow. Use the knowledge of the local hunters, farmers, and others to determine what the deer are used to, and don't be afraid to take a different approach — the stealthy approach. <<<

The author is a forester from Superior, Wisconsin.

AUTHOR'S NOTES:

My equipment used to kill the buck described at the end of this story included a Mathews Ovation bow, Gold Tip Hunter Expedition arrows, 2-Blade Rage broadheads, Apex sight, Cobra release aid, and a Lone Wolf treestand. When accessing stand sites by water, I do so in a Native Watercraft Ultimate 16 kayak. For more information, or to book a hunt with Classic Outfitters, contact: Jim Hole Jr., Box 124, Seba Beach, Alberta, Canada T0E 2B0; (780) 792-2222; jim@classic-outfitters.com; www.classic-outfitters.com.



This buck was used to people walking their dogs on a cleared pipeline, so I used the same trail to get to my stand tree and it worked like a charm.

An advertisement for Nockturnal Lighted Nocks. On the left, a white light switch is shown with a silver-colored nock inserted into its top slot. To the right of the switch, a single red nock is shown vertically, glowing with a red light. Below this, four more nocks are shown horizontally, each glowing with a different color: red, green, blue, and pink. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

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