

Whitetail Deer Hunting & Land Management Plan

Prepared by – Don Higgins



Prepared for –
Greg Reynolds
9471 Rend City rd
Benton, IL 62812

December 2021

Dear Landowner,

This land management and deer hunting plan was prepared with the idea that your primary objective with your property is to consistently harvest mature whitetail bucks. Some of the ideas that I have outlined here may seem extreme but in my experience those hunters who are willing to go to extreme measures are the ones that consistently tag trophy bucks.

When I walked your property and put together this plan, I did so with the same mind-set as if I owned it and would be hunting it myself. **What I have outlined here is exactly what I would do if I owned the land.** As the real landowner, you will have to decide how far you wish to take this project and which (if any) of my recommendations you will implement. Rest assured that nobody wants you to succeed more than I do as there is no better advertisement for my services than a landowner who is pleased with the results.

The first part of this plan will deal with the specifics of your property. The aerial photo of your property will be marked to reflect habitat improvement suggestions and stand locations. Don't consider this endeavor to be a short term "fix-it-all-now" project with instant magical results. With these habitat improvement projects implemented, each season should see improvements in the quality of the deer you see and harvest from your land. I tell most landowners to not expect a major improvement the very first year but to look 5 years into the future. By this time your stands should all be fine tuned to the exact tree they need to be in and the habitat improvement projects should have had time to develop into major improvements to the property.

The latter pages of this plan will outline various land management projects and offer advice on implementing them. Some of these may not apply to your property at this time but may help you at some point in the future. I have completed habitat improvement projects on tens of thousands of acres of land, thus the advice that I am giving you here has been learned through many years of trial and error. By listening to this advice you can save yourself time and money as well as frustration.

Finally, I suggest that you keep this plan and read through it a couple of times a year. It will keep you on track and validate your efforts as you wait for them to pay off.

Please keep me advised of your success. I want to share in your success stories and hopefully use you as a reference. Thank you.

Good Hunting,
Don Higgins

Property Specifics
Greg Reynolds – Benton, IL

Initial Observations

This property sits within a great looking area in southern Illinois. There certainly should be some nice bucks in the area. This property offers a tremendous opportunity for multiple hunters to work together to grow and hunt giants,

On this property I would like to see more food offered in bigger plots, diverse food sources and stop mowing the interior trails to create bigger sanctuary areas that are extremely thick and totally free of human intrusion. The sanctuary areas will encourage mature bucks to bed on the property and the significant and diverse food sources will create some good travel patterns for hunting. I would expect the late season hunting to be very good once the property is totally developed.

Habitat Improvement Recommendations –

A. Access Paths –

I would like to see all of the interior paths eliminated and also stop mowing the powerline and gasline right-of-ways. This will create bigger blocks of thick cover that is free of human intrusion and make mature bucks more likely to utilize the property. I would continue to have perimeter paths around the property to access stands and do habitat projects.

B. Logging –

I have marked some areas on the property that could benefit from being logged. I would tell the logger to cut these areas very hard. This will create some very thick bedding cover that is different from other cover offered on the property.

C. Miscanthus plantings –

I have marked some places that would benefit from planting strips of miscanthus for screening. To plant miscanthus, start by spraying the area to kill all weeds. Then till a 5'-6' strip right where the miscanthus is to be planted. Plant miscanthus rhizomes in 3 rows spaced 18-24" apart. The rhizomes should be 12-18" apart within each row. Right after planting spray the tilled area with either atrazine or simazine herbicide to help prevent weeds. If broadleaf weeds become an issue they can be sprayed with 2-4D. If grass-weeds such as foxtail becomes a problem it can be sprayed with quinclorac. In either case spray before the weeds are 12" tall.

D. Food Plots –

There are several food plots on the property that should be planted to a very diverse mix of different crops. Remember the key is to try to have food on the property during the entire year so do everything possible to keep a variety of different foods on the property. When it comes to foodplots remember that a bigger plot has more drawing power.

E. Fruit/Mast Trees –

Around the edges of the foodplots I would plant pear, apple, persimmon and chestnut trees. Do not scatter these trees about the property but instead keep them near the food plots. We don't want the deer wandering around to various food sources but instead have those various foods concentrated at smaller areas. This will create easier to hunt deer patterns. We are in a sense creating a buffet restaurant for the deer in a few locations to really concentrate their movements rather than scatter them all over the property.

F TSI tree thinning –

There are some areas on the property that were planted to CRP trees several years ago. These trees are now crowded and need thinned ASAP to give the better ones room to grow. An aggressive TSI (timber stand improvement) cut needs to be done. At least 2/3 of the trees need cut down to allow the other 1/3 space to flourish. There are a number of contractors who will do this work and the USDA will sometimes cost-share the expense to have this done. This project will not only help the trees but allow sunlight to hit the ground and create better deer cover.

G. Super Plot –

On the aerial I marked #5, I am going to call this the super plot which is the big plot area just across the railroad tracks. On the aerial you can see where I created 2 V-shaped area with miscanthus to allow access to blinds placed out in the plots. Right where each blind is located, 3 different food plot crops come together. There should be a lot of deer activity right in front of these blinds.

Tree-Stand Locations

I marked several stand locations on the attached aerial photo. Some of these are already in place and others are suggested places for new stands. I also noted wind directions for each stand on the aerial and I think the access to each stand is obvious.

I realize that this section is very brief as many hunters seem to think that their lack of success is due to stand location and if the right person would come to their property and just show them where to hang their stands they would magically start shooting bigger bucks. This is seldom the case. First you need to get those bucks staying on your property and moving comfortably. Once that is accomplished, most hunters can pick stand sites to get those bucks killed.

Once the habitat projects outlined here are implemented, travel routes on the property may change to some degree and more good stand locations will become obvious. Use my stand locations as a starting point but do not become married to them. After hunting them for a couple of seasons if you notice the stand needs to be moved a bit, by all means MOVE IT! I am confident that most of the stands we marked will produce but it could be that some of them may need to be fine-tuned a short distance.

Summary

This property is in an area with great deer habitat that could easily produce giant bucks. The biggest challenge that I see is the neighbors as they will to some degree affect the size and age of the bucks on this property. We need to turn this negative into a positive as much as possible. That means we need to use the surrounding hunting pressure to set this property apart in the eyes of the local bucks. That makes the creation of the sanctuary areas so important. Below is a list of the things we need to do to make this property the best it can be -

1. It is important that we provide enough high-quality and diverse food 365 days a year so that a deer never has to leave for food.
2. We have to totally eliminate human intrusion into the sanctuary areas so that this becomes the place that deer in the area go to when pressured. Instead of pushing deer off the property with too much human intrusion in all parts of the property, we want to encourage them to come onto the property and stay.
3. We are going to have to grow bigger bucks by letting smaller ones live to older age classes. As this property matures and more deer are living on it, the limiting factor will become the will-power of the hunters to let good bucks walk to grow older and become great bucks

Note that all 3 of the items listed above help to make this property different (better) than all the properties surrounding it. I honestly think we should easily be able to increase the number of deer on the property by at least 2x current levels within 2-3 years and the size/age of the top bucks should improve noticeably as well.

This is really a simple approach to managing this property but one that will definitely work better than any other option. If followed, I am confident that this plan will increase the number and size of the bucks on the property and look forward to hearing a report from Greg a couple of years from now.

Decisions

By this point you have seen the overall plan that I have designed for your property and you are at a point where you will soon need to make a major decision – “How much of this plan (if any) will you implement?” That is a question that only you can answer but I want to throw out an observation for you to consider.

I have now visited and designed plans for somewhere between 200-300 properties. This means that I have over 200 consulting clients with varying opinions about of my service. I can tell you this with absolute certainty – Those clients who stick closest to the plan I design for their property are the most satisfied. The further one deviates from the plan, it seems the less satisfied they are. I strongly urge you to stick as close to this plan as possible as you work to take your property to the next level. Many of my clients have killed the biggest bucks of their lives soon after implementing the plans I designed for them. I sincerely hope the same happens for you.

Forget the “Internet Experts”

I feel that this topic needs to be addressed because almost every client I visit has seen something on the internet that they have bought into and want to incorporate into the management of their property. It seems that there are more and more “experts” appearing on the internet with their own websites, social media pages, videos, etc where they throw out advice on anything and everything related to deer hunting and land management. Some of this is good information but much of it is not and is thrown out there by people who have never killed mature bucks consistently. I disagree with a lot of this information and some of it I **strongly** disagree with. What I am sharing with you here in this plan is proven advice. I have seen my plans work on numerous properties. You are inevitably going to come to a situation where you see something on the internet that is totally opposite of something I shared with you. When that happens, please give the guy a chance that you paid to come walk your property (me) before jumping on the bandwagon of some internet expert. **A lot of good properties have been ruined by following bad advice!**

Setting YOUR Property Apart from Others

One huge key to making your property the very best it can be for deer hunting is to have it stand apart from other properties in the area in the eyes of the local deer herd by offering something different that cannot be found elsewhere in the area. I often tell landowners to think of their property as one small square on a giant checkerboard. What can you do to make your “square” stand out from all the other “squares” (properties) around it?

There are basically two things you can do to have a positive influence on how and how many deer utilize your property. First, you can improve the quality of the habitat on your property. It is obvious that deer, or any other wildlife, prefer to utilize habitat that best meets their needs. By making your property the best it can be in terms of quality habitat and by also introducing food-sources and cover-types not commonly found in your area, you can really make it stand out from the other properties around it.

A couple of examples are planting species of mast-producing trees not commonly found in your area or planting native grasses for bedding cover if this is not found in your area. If deer want to utilize either of these (and they will), they will have to do so on YOUR property. These examples may not apply to your specific property but there ARE examples of things that can be done to set your property apart from other properties in the area in terms of food sources and cover.

The second thing you can do is not as obvious but in my opinion **is the most important**. That is, limit human intrusion on much of your property to create a property that deer feel comfortable staying on. You don't just want deer to **"use"** your property; you want them to **"STAY"** on your property. You can have the very best habitat in the entire state but if you put too much pressure on it, the deer will simply spend their daylight hours elsewhere and primarily utilize it at night. Think of those off-limit areas you know of such as a park where hunting is not allowed and deer seem to congregate. In most cases nothing has been done in those areas to improve the habitat but yet the deer flock there because of the security it offers. It is that freedom from human intrusion that attracts and holds them there. You should try to replicate this kind of situation on your property, and then by adding the influence of the best habitat and food in the area, the deer herd on your property will grow. Keep in mind that this feeling of security and quality habitat takes time to create and be recognized by the deer. Be patient, if you create it, they will find it.

Sanctuaries

I fully believe that **every mature buck alive today has a sanctuary**. If he didn't, he would be dead and would never have made it to "mature" status. He may even have more than one sanctuary but rest assured, he has a place to go when the pressure is on. Some hunters mistakenly believe that extreme hunting pressure can drive a buck from his home area. Research has shown that this is not the case, especially with mature bucks. They have learned how to survive within their home range, not by running to places which they are not familiar.

If you are fortunate enough to own or completely control the land you hunt on, you have an opportunity to increase your success on mature bucks many times over by simply creating a sanctuary. The size and location of the sanctuary will depend on a number of factors but when talking about sanctuaries, I am fully convinced that bigger is better. Some "experts" promote the idea of having multiple smaller sanctuaries with the idea that bucks will travel between them as they search for does. I don't buy into this line of thinking whatsoever except on larger properties with specific layouts. It is almost always better to have a single larger sanctuary.

A sanctuary needs 2 things. First, it must be free of **ALL** human intrusion, especially during the hunting season and preferably for the entire year. There are only 2 times when I will go into the sanctuary on my land; (1) when I shoot a deer and it runs into the sanctuary I will go in to retrieve it and (2) I will make a single trip through my sanctuary during the late winter/early spring to look for shed antlers and to do habitat work. I do not carry on with shed antler hunting or habitat projects in these areas for a number of days. I get in and get it done and then get out and stay out. Remember, a

sanctuary is only a sanctuary as long as you allow it to be. Hunt it once and it is no longer a sanctuary. Allow dogs to travel through and it is no longer a sanctuary. Allow mushroom hunting or small game hunting and you no longer have a sanctuary.

Secondly, a sanctuary needs thick cover for bucks to routinely utilize it and feel safe. Do whatever it takes to create thick cover; log it HEAVILY, kill bigger trees with no timber value to allow sunlight to reach the ground and thus promote the growth of ground cover, plant tree seedlings and bushes or tall native grasses in open areas or whatever it takes.

The most important thing that you can do on your property is create a sanctuary. You don't want bucks to just be using your property, you want them staying there and this requires a sanctuary. If you build it, they will come!

One Plan at a Time

I have seen a situation with a few landowners that I feel obligated to address in order to offer you the best advice possible. I am going to try to do so as respectfully as possible without stepping on anyone's toes. What I am offering here is simply what I consider "good advice" to help you get the very most from your property. Please take it as it is intended and don't get offended.

I have visited some properties where the property owner also had other consultants come in and offer their advice and plans as well. I am not at all offended by this. Sometimes I have arrived after other consultants and offered an alternative plan and in some cases other consultants came after my visit on a property. I fully respect a landowner's right to do as he wishes on his own property but I am simply trying to caution you from making a mistake that I have seen happen more than once.

The mistake I am talking about is trying to take little bits and pieces of multiple plans and mold them together into something better than any of them on their own. Every time I have seen this happen, in my opinion the result was worse than if the landowner had simply looked at all the plans offered and then chose 1 to work with.

Think of it like this; say you are going to buy a new truck and you really like Fords but your wife likes Chevys and your son is a big fan of Dodge. Do you try to come up with a unique compromise plan and use parts of each to create your own truck? How would it work (or look) if you took the bed off a Dodge, the cab off a Chevy and the engine off a Ford and tried to combine them? From what I have seen, that is what you get when you try to combine different plans for a property. Various pieces of a plan fit together with other pieces of the same plan to get you the best end result.

I use this analogy with the trucks with a bit of reservation as I do believe that some plans will work a lot better than others on a particular property. That is why I am selective about the properties that I will consult on. I have a way of doing things that has proven to be very successful on multiple properties and I believe it will work on your property or I would have never agreed to do it. Details may need to be tweaked to fit each situation but the basics of my plan will be similar on most properties I visit.

Shooting Does

I often get asked my opinion on shooting does. It is important to keep the deer herd at levels that will prevent them from over-browsing native vegetation. On most properties this means shooting some does. On properties that I own and manage, I typically try to make sure at least 2 does are shot for every buck. I must also mention that there are locations where the deer population is low and does do not need to be shot.

My best advice on this topic is to determine how many does you think should be harvested on your property and then do so in such a way that it does not have a negative impact on your buck hunting success. This means shooting them in a location or at a time of the season when impact on your buck hunting is minimal.

If you live in a state where baiting is legal, then I suggest setting feeders in locations on the property as far as possible from where you intend to do your buck hunting. Areas close to houses or a cabin are great for this. If baiting is not legal in your state then plant small food plots in these same locations for doe hunting.

The timing of the doe harvest is also a way to minimize the damage done to buck hunting opportunities. I have never shot does during the rut. I either do it very early in the season away from my prime hunting spots or preferably during the late season.

One more very important thing to keep in mind regarding doe harvest, I try to shoot does that have button buck fawns with them. Research has shown that yearling bucks typically disperse from the area where they were born and relocate several miles away. This typically happens in the spring and summer months and is Mother Natures way of preventing inbreeding. This same research also shows that if a mother doe is killed, her buck fawns are far less likely to disperse and most will remain in the area where they were born.

By shooting does that have buck fawns with them, you are increasing the odds that those buck fawns remain on or near your property for the rest of their lives. This becomes very important when a land manager seeks to maximize the potential of the bucks on his land. Later in this plan we will talk about “fetal programming” which gets more in depth into this subject and makes it even more obvious why we want to target those does that have bucks fawns.

Pulling Bucks onto Your Property

There is a misconception among many land managers that they can improve their property to the point where they can attract mature bucks from surrounding properties to begin living on their property. From my experiences this rarely happens. I have found that a land manager has an opportunity to grow his own bucks and allow them to mature but the ability to draw in new mature bucks is very limited. It is extremely rare for a mature buck to pick up and move to a new property. In fact, as a buck matures his home range often shrinks. Research has shown that even with substantial hunting pressure a buck does not leave his home.

There is also the fallacy that when a mature buck is killed on a property another mature buck will move in and take his place. I don't buy this theory at all. Where does the new buck come from? How would he know a particular buck was killed if he was not there in the area to begin with? I don't think a new buck moves in when a mature buck is killed but instead the next buck in the pecking order becomes the dominant one and often becomes much more visible as the new top dog.

Many hunters also believe that during the rut new bucks will show up and cruise their property looking for does. I have rarely seen this on my own property and do not believe this happens as often as we have been led to believe. It is extremely rare for me to even get a trail camera photo of a new buck during the rut although it does occasionally happen. Instead I think that bucks start searching their entire home range for does when outside of the rut they are utilizing only a portion of their range most of the time. Again, mature bucks do not throw caution to the wind and go on random searches to new areas. In most cases when a hunter sees or gets photos of a "new" buck during the rut, that buck was there all along but was just not as visible or was not frequently utilizing that portion of his range.

The one time of the hunting season when I do see the most "new" bucks show up on a property is during the late season when weather is bad and prime food sources are scarce. Even then the movement of new bucks onto a property is limited. My theory is that when conditions get really tough and food is scarce causing a new buck to move onto a property it is probably a buck that has been there before. I believe many of these bucks spent their first winter there with their mothers as button buck fawns. Later they naturally disperse to new areas where they eventually settle into a new home range. When their need for food and/or protection from the elements dictates, they remember where they spent that first winter and return.

Many of these theories I have developed from years of extensive trail camera usage and photo databases. I have followed the growth and travels of numerous wild bucks and it has been a real eye opener. A lot of ideas that I had a decade or more ago have been changed as I continually learn more.

So what does all of this mean to the serious land manager? Simply that **a property should be managed to grow mature bucks, not to attract them** in from neighboring properties. If your goal is to harvest a 150" buck but you harvest all the bucks that are a year away from reaching that mark, it will be a very difficult goal to achieve. That dream buck you have in mind is likely on your property right now but has just not had time to reach the size you seek and desire. As a land manager you have more control over your own success than anyone else including your neighbors. Don't pick the fruit before it is ripe.

The Best Time to Kill a Buck – Mornings or Evenings

I often get asked if I prefer hunting mornings or evenings and this is a question that I have very strong opinions about. I will break down the entire season and share my opinion for each part. Keep in mind that like every other topic covered in this plan, I am talking about hunting mature bucks here.

October – In the early season I almost never hunt mornings. I strongly believe that in October mature bucks are already back in their beds by daybreak. Hunting in the mornings is a good way to burn out good stands and put unnecessary pressure on your hunting property. Evening hunts are the ticket for the early season.

November – This is the time of season that deer hunters wait all year for because the rut gets a lot of bucks on their feet during daylight hours making them more vulnerable. I start hunting mornings in early November and in fact I prefer mornings over evenings during the November rut. However, I hunt every minute that I can in November as you never know when a giant buck will be on the prowl looking for a girlfriend.

If I were to pick the very best week to hunt and see the most bucks it would be November 5-12 every year. To narrow it down even further, more Boone & Crockett bucks are killed November 7 than any other date. I have killed several mature bucks on November 7th and 8th. These are my 2 favorite dates for the entire season and this is when I will hunt all day if possible. Basically the bucks are fired up but the does are not yet coming into heat. Around November 9th the mature bucks start hooking up with hot does and become a lot harder to kill.

Another great time to hunt is Thanksgiving weekend. At this time the hot does are becoming harder to find and mature bucks must spend more time on their feet looking for each one. There was a period of time about 15 years ago when the biggest buck I saw from a stand each season for 5 consecutive years was seen during Thanksgiving weekend. None of those bucks was with a doe but were alone searching. Many deer hunters get burned out or quit hunting hard towards the end of November but the last few days of the month can be the very best time to kill a real giant.

Late Season – Once December rolls around I go back to hunting evenings only. Bucks will get back on a feeding pattern and will hit prime food sources. Most days it will be at the very end of good shooting light or even after dark when they reach a food source. The real key to late season success is the weather; the worse the weather, the better the hunting. I like brutal cold temps and some snow makes it even better. Under these conditions even the most nocturnal buck will be on his feet feeding before dark.

“When and Where”

Successful hunting can really be summed up by being in the right spot at the right time. Often I see deer hunters who can pick out good spots (the “where”) but hunt them at the wrong time (the “when”). Both of these factors, the “when” and the “where”, need to come together for success. In the section above I have helped narrow down the “when” in this equation as it changes throughout the season.

Trail Cameras and Rope Scrapes



I often get asked about my use of trail cameras. I typically use trail cameras to inventory bucks on a property. One of the best ways to do this is with “rope scrapes”. I make rope scrapes by hanging a large hemp or manilla rope from a tree so that it is about 3’ off the ground. I fray the end of the rope but first put a hog-ring or zip-tie around it to keep the whole rope from unraveling. I hang these ropes in locations where I would expect to find natural scrapes and do so in the early spring so they have time to weather before hunting season. I have tried to hang new ropes in the fall and the results have been extremely poor. I think it is important for the ropes to have some time to weather and get rid of any odors that they may carry.

I return in the summer with a small spray bottle of Round-Up herbicide and spray a 4’ diameter circle under the rope to kill any vegetation growing there. I then come back in early to mid-October and use a garden rake to rake away the dead vegetation under the rope and pour scent onto it. I also hang a trail camera overlooking the rope at that time.

I prefer Smokeys Deer Scents (www.smokeysdeerlure.com) (tell Smokey I sent you!) I have used all of the different Smokey gland lures and they all worked great. I only scent the rope one time. If it is in a good spot the bucks will take over and you won’t need to scent it again. Within a week or two you should have photos of every buck on the property. It is important to hang the ropes early, be mindful of your scent (wear rubber boots) and don’t check the camera too often. I use the same ropes year after year and after a while the bucks often open the scrapes before I get there to do it.

To see a video on making rope-scrapes be sure to visit my YouTube channel!

Deer Nutrition

When it comes to growing big antlers we all know that there are 3 key ingredients – age, genetics and nutrition. Nutrition is something that a land manager can address in a variety of ways including food plots, mast, minerals and supplemental feeding. I am convinced that a land manager can add inches to bucks antlers with an advanced nutrition program. Here are some tips for maximizing the nutrition program on your property.

Fetal Programing

Let's start with the research-proven fact that the nutrition an animal gets as a fetus inside its mother will set it up for life. Once an animal has been born, nothing can be done to make up for any nutritional shortcomings that animal did not get as a fetus. This is why when a woman becomes pregnant her doctor will immediately get her on pre-natal vitamins. So to maximize the genetic potential of the bucks on your property you need to start by making sure the does on your property get the best nutrition possible so that the buck fawns they raise can reach their genetic potential.

This leads us to another issue - buck dispersal. If we are feeding the does on our property the maximum nutrition so that they can raise buck fawns which are set to excel in terms of antler production, we don't want those fawns leaving when they get older. This is where we go back to the research showing that shooting those does with buck fawns will result in most of these bucks remaining in the area where they were born. (see the section on shooting does in this plan) In summary, shoot does with buck fawns and those buck fawns are much more likely to remain in the area where they were born instead of dispersing.

Supplemental Feeding

In states where feeding deer is legal, many hunters put out corn, apples and other "bait" for deer. What I am talking about here is not "baiting" but instead is feeding deer a high-quality feed to help keep them healthy, productive and maximize their potential. Putting out straight corn for deer can actually have adverse affects and cause health issues such as acidosis.

Be mindful that a whitetails nutritional requirements change throughout the year, so you will need to adjust feed ration accordingly. In the spring and summer shoot for a feed ration that is 16-18% protein and 8% fat while also being high in fiber. In the fall and winter feed a ration that is 14-16% protein while maintaining the 8% fat and high fiber. Your local feed mill can design a feed ration using these figures.

You can also use a high quality commercial feed such as Real Worlds Maximizer Pro-Formula Plus. The advantage to this is that this feed includes every nutrient, vitamin and mineral that deer need to stay healthy and productive.

Here is a very simple recipe for 1-ton of feed that deer love and also provides them with the key nutrients that they need –

1400# whole corn
350# roasted soybeans

200# Real World Maximizer feed concentrate
50# soy oil

Deer Mineral

This is another subject that I get asked about a lot. I highly recommend providing the deer on your property a high quality mineral if it is legal to do so in your state. I would recommend at least 1 mineral site for every 40-80 acres and I suggest putting the mineral within the cover and close to water or food sources in locations that deer frequent.

In the livestock industry minerals have proven to have multiple benefits such as increased growth rates, better feed conversion, higher conception rates, health benefits, etc etc etc. These same benefits apply to deer.

The real issue here is that most mineral products marketed to deer hunters are salt-based with few other nutrients. In some products the salt content is over 90%. This applies to the most popular products on the market, some that hunters swear help them grow bigger racks. This is simply not true and in fact is impossible. Deer readily consume these products because of the high salt content but they do the deer very little good, no different than you and I being attracted to ice cream.

Select a high quality mineral product to use on your property. I recommend Real Worlds "Maximizer" deer mineral and challenge you to find anything on the market that compares. For more detailed info on deer minerals there is a video on my YouTube channel titled "**Do Minerals Really Grow Bigger Bucks?**"

Foodplots

Most hunters do not utilize food plots to their full potential. They seem to want to use the foodplot as a bait pile to bring deer near their tree stands. While this will work to some extent and especially on lesser deer, I believe that there are better ways to use food plots on your property when hunting mature bucks.

I primarily use food plots to hold deer on my land and create huntable travel patterns. This does not mean I never hunt over food plots but I prefer to hunt back closer to the bedding areas or in the transition zone between bedding areas and feeding areas. Again, this is especially important when hunting mature bucks. **There will be very few days during the hunting season when a mature buck will actually be in a foodplot during hunting hours. The odds of you being there during those rare occasions are slim.**

It is often better to let the does and young bucks have the run of the foodplots on your land rather than spooking them off by hunting right where they feed. As these deer utilize your property comfortably, they will attract and/or calm the mature bucks which you can then hunt more successfully near the edges of your sanctuary.

Now I say all of this with an exception; during the late season when brutal cold weather hits, mature bucks can be killed over food plots and I have done so many times. It is critical to have that brutal cold weather for this to work consistently however. Brutal late season cold-spells will get even the most nocturnal buck on his feet and in the food during daylight hours.

One more note in regards to foodplots; **I am a huge proponent of fewer but bigger plots.** The more plots you have on your property the more choices a buck has and the less the odds he will move past your stand.

Plot Diversity

When planning a food plot program for any property it is critical that the plan include a wide variety of crop species that include both “greens” and “grains”. During warmer periods of the season deer will focus more on greens with grains being a smaller portion of their diet. The opposite is true during colder periods when grain becomes a prime food source.

My Preferred foodplot crops

My preferred food plot program is really very simple. Here is what I do on my own property. To begin I want some clover and/or alfalfa on the property. These nutrient dense legumes are some of the first plants to green up in the spring and get the deer off to a good start for the antler growing season and raising fawns. These crops will also be attractive during much of the hunting season.

To compliment my clover/alfalfa plantings and expand my “greens”, I like to plant a fall planted blend of cereal grains and brassicas. My favorite blend to address this is Real Worlds Deadly Dozen. This blend contains 12 plant species and the deer will be hammering something in the blend from the time it sprouts clear through the winter and into the next spring.

The final ingredient in my food plot program is grains; corn and soybeans. Soybeans are highly nutritious from the time they sprout until the last grain is consumed. In the winter months when deer need a quality food source the most, soybeans are the ticket. I also plant a special variety of corn marketed by Real World Wildlife Products called Nutri-Crave corn. It has significantly higher nutrient levels than regular corn and deer love it! Each year the majority of my food plot acreage is planted in soybeans/corn.

Mast Crops

A good way to help set your property apart from other properties in the area is by planting trees and shrubs that produce mast, either soft mast such as apples, pears and persimmons or hard mast such as acorns and chestnuts. The key here is “diversity”. Plant as many different species and varieties within each species as possible. **Look especially for species that are not common in your area.**

Another factor to consider is the timing of the mast drop or “when” the mast is ripe. Many apple trees for example, ripen before hunting season is open. Having a few of these trees is fine to help hold deer on your property but having later ripening varieties is even more important as you need the deer to be there during hunting season. Here are some species and varieties to consider –

Apple – Liberty, Freedom, Enterprise, Arkansas Black, Yates (*when planting apples be mindful of possible disease issues such as “cedar/apple rust, fire blight, apple scab and mildew*) the varieties I listed here are later ripening and more disease resistant. Also keep in mind that it is a good idea to mix as many varieties as possible in a planting for cross-pollination and to lengthen the window of time when apples are available.

Pear – Kieffer is self-pollinating and produces fruit at a young age and drops fruit later in the season than other varieties. Pears are generally more maintenance free than apples.

Persimmon – My best experience with persimmons has been with the native persimmon rather than some of the oriental varieties. I have planted several of the oriental cultivars but have yet to see the first fruit from any of them. Persimmon trees are either male or female. Only the female will produce fruit and you can buy grafted female persimmon trees from some nurseries. Plant persimmons in groves of 6-8 trees.

Chestnuts – The current rage amongst whitetail habitat enthusiasts is the Dunstan Chestnut. My personal experience and opinion is that Chinese chestnuts are every bit as good as Dunstans and certainly less costly. Chestnuts are claimed to be more desired by deer than any variety of acorn and I agree with this. **Chestnuts do not like wet areas or soils with higher pH** but seem to thrive in well-drained soils with a low pH.

Native oaks – all native oaks produce acorns. Some species produce a lot faster than others and some species are more palatable to deer. I often include a few native oaks on most projects that I design. My favorite native oak is the swamp white oak as it produces acorns at a young age that deer like.

Planting Trees for Cover

Some properties can benefit from tree plantings for cover as well as food. I have planted literally millions of trees on thousands of acres on various conservation projects across the Midwest as a tree planting contractor. This experience has taught me many valuable lessons that can save you time and money. I will share many of these lessons with you here so that you can improve the habitat on your property with the least amount of frustration.

Some tree species are much better suited for wildlife plantings for a variety of reasons. In most situations it is best to diversify your tree planting with different species. This will ensure your planting will still be a success if a pest or disease wipes out one species at some point down the road.

In regards to planting trees to create cover, I have used 3 species of conifers (evergreens) on wildlife plantings; white pine, Norway spruce and red cedar. Today I use red cedars almost exclusively.

In my region, Norway spruce are slow growing and very particular about the sites they will do well on. They also require extra care to survive making them impractical in most situations. Again, I am talking about my region.

White pines can provide good cover but getting them established can be a real problem as whitetails love to eat the tops out of them when they are small, thus ruining them. Bucks also like to rub them and will ruin several more even after you get a stand tall enough that they cannot eat the tops.

Red cedars on the other hand have several advantages. Even though bucks will rub them, red cedars are able to develop a new leader on young trees that have been damaged significantly by rubbing. Thus a severely rubbed red cedar is not necessarily ruined forever. Also, deer do not typically eat red cedars. Finally red cedars are very tolerant of drought and tough growing conditions. In fact they will grow in rocks and gravel. If you get young red cedars to make it through their first summer, which is easy to do, they will almost always survive on most sites. I have found that planting potted red cedars in the fall will result in nearly 100% survival and they will experience superior growth rates due to a better root system than bare-root seedlings planted in spring.

I like to mix other species with red cedars to create excellent bedding cover. Oak species which hold their leaves through the winter are good choices – swamp white oak, pin oak, and shingle oak. In my opinion, creating the perfect bedding area is best done with a mixture of red cedars and an oak species or two that holds its leaves in the winter.

Trees Planting Tips

- Plant bare-root seedlings as early in the spring as possible. This gives them more time to get established before the stress of summer drought sets in
- When possible, use potted trees and shrubs instead of bare-root. They have a better survival rate, establish quicker and will set your project ahead about 5 years over bare-root stock
- Plant mast producing trees such as persimmons in groves near your foodplots rather than scattering them about your property. This will concentrate the feeding activity on your property in smaller areas and create more huntable travel patterns with the deer
- On smaller tree planting projects consider using plastic tree tube shelters on all of your trees and seedlings even if it means planting fewer trees. Using tube shelters will result in better survival and faster growth rates.
- Use herbicides to cut down on weed competition around your trees and seedlings. Grass is especially tough on young trees as it has a dense root system that competes for moisture. Plastic tree tube shelters will make it easier to keep the herbicide off of the trees
- Use trees and seedlings that are grown from a seed source suitable to your area. Many seedling nurseries sell seedlings that are grown from seed sources too far south for much of the Midwest

- Keep in mind that the small trees you are planting will someday become huge trees. Give them plenty of space
- The more sunlight and root space that your tree seedlings get, the faster they will grow. Do not plant them in shaded areas or close to bigger established trees which will out-compete them for moisture
- do **NOT** fertilize your seedlings/trees the year they are planted. Fertilizer will promote new top growth and the seedlings need to get their roots established and growing again before they put on much new top growth

Timber Logging

While many people mistakenly look at logging in a negative light, it is actually a good thing for the forests and woodlands. It is no different than harvesting a crop. A farmer would not think of letting his mature corn crop sit in the field and rot so why would you allow your valuable timber to remain past it's prime to eventually die and turn to waste? One of the best ways to create whitetail bedding cover on your land is to log it heavily. The downed tree-tops that remain are favorite places for deer to bed and as sunlight is then allowed to reach the ground, a thick cover of weeds and saplings will take over and improve the attractiveness of your property significantly to whitetails. Make no mistake, logging makes your property better for whitetails while also putting money in your pocket that you can use for other projects.

Native Grasses

There is probably nothing that you can do to create quality bedding cover faster than to plant some acreage in tall warm season native grasses, also known as prairie grasses. Whitetails absolutely love to bed in native grass fields. Whitetail does actually prefer to fawn in these grassy fields over wooded areas. Fawn survival is also better in these areas. As an added bonus it is often possible to sign up tillable acreage for various CRP programs that will not only pay you to establish native grasses.

While I have long understood that whitetails utilized native grass fields, I was not able to fully appreciate just how good they are as quality whitetail habitat until I planted several acres on my own property. These tall grass fields are not just for birds and upland game. Monster whitetail bucks will readily utilize a native grass field as a sanctuary.

Keep in mind that not all native grasses are created equal. Besides growing to different heights, some varieties of some species will not stand up well to snow and high winds. I was instrumental in developing a blend of native grasses designed for whitetail bedding cover. This mix will stand up well through most winter weather and is tall enough to easily hide bedded deer. To learn more about this blend called "Bedding in a Bag", go to www.realworldwildlifeproducts.com Real World also has a very specific variety of switchgrass that gets taller and stands better than other switchgrass varieties. I prefer the Bedding-in-a-bag for CRP projects and switchgrass for all other plantings.

Stop Mowing Trails!

One very common issue I see on most properties I visit is too many mowed trails. Sure, deer will follow these mowed paths but I am here to tell you with absolute certainty that many mature bucks DO NOT like mowed paths and will not use them like the rest of the deer herd does.

I have found that instead of mowing paths where I want deer to travel I can get better results with mature bucks by using a garden sprayer to spray a narrow path through weeds and other vegetation. I do this in the late spring or early summer and by mixing glyphosate and a residual herbicide such as Oust, the paths stay open for the rest of the year. You can even direct deer to travel right where you want them to by spraying a path right past your treestands.



I sprayed this path through the weeds in June and by fall it had become a beat-down deer path!

Treestand Tips

- Hang your stands in the late winter/early spring months, then stay away until the day you hunt them. Hanging stands at this time allows you to get in there with a chainsaw and clear substantial shooting lanes which should remain clear for a few years with a minimal amount of additional trimming
- ALWAYS consider wind directions and entrance/exit routes when hanging stands.
- I prefer stands that are all metal and that chain to a tree rather than use straps. Leaving stands in place for long periods will rot and deteriorate straps, cloth seats and other parts made of materials less durable than steel
- Make sure your stand is well hidden within the cover. The height of a stand is not near as important as the fact that the stand is hidden within the cover.
- Always pay attention to deer that you observe while hunting and be ready to **adjust your stand locations accordingly**. Sometimes moving your stand a short distance can mean the difference between killing nice bucks and watching them. Don't get married to a particular tree.
- In most instances **when hunting mature bucks**, you are better off placing your stands closer to the bedding areas than to foodplots or feeding areas, with the exception of some late season situations.
- The more stands you have in place and the more properties you have to hunt the better off you will be. Wind direction will automatically eliminate 75% of your stand sites on any given hunt
- Do not over-hunt your stands. I recommend no more than 2 consecutive hunts and no more than 3 hunts in any week from a single stand. Even this will burn-out most stands in time.
- make sure your stands are comfortable so that you can endure long hours in them. The best way to not kill a good buck is to not put in the required time.
- NEVER hunt a stand when the wind is wrong!



A Word About Real World Wildlife Products

Creating quality whitetail habitat and making my own property as attractive as possible to the local whitetails has been a passion of mine for decades. A big part of this passion has involved various habitat projects and planting food plots. About 20 years ago I realized that the commercially available food plot seed blends that I was planting did not attract deer with the results that I desired and expected.

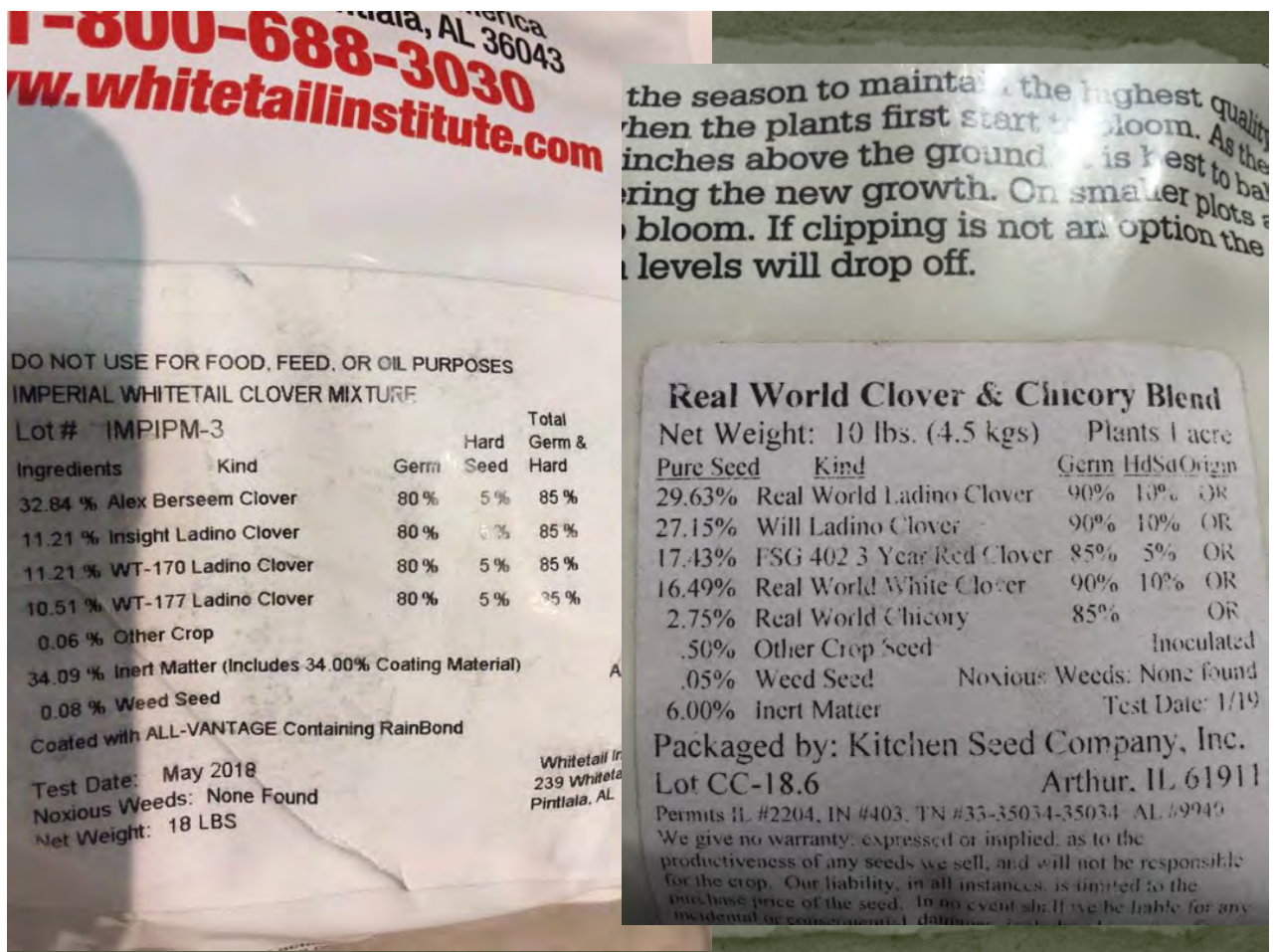
Eventually I began experimenting in an effort to have the very best food plots possible on my own land. At the time I had no desire or inclination to start a new seed company; I was simply trying to make my property the best it could be. I soon began having way more success with my own blends than with what was on the market and thus the idea was born to begin marketing these blends. That is a very brief account of how Real World Wildlife Products was started.

I share this with you because within the pages of this plan I have mentioned Real World Wildlife Products multiple times. I do this because I want you to be successful and have the very best foodplots on your property but I also do it with great reservation. The last thing I want you to think is that I am “using” the trust you have placed in me to try to sell you seed, mineral or other products. That is not the case at all. If you are happy with another product then by all means continue to use it. I am not at all offended if you are planting another company’s seed products or using another brand of mineral.

My consulting service is a totally separate business entity than my partnership in Real World Wildlife Products. You trusted me to offer you the very best advice that I can to help you reach your whitetail hunting goals and/or improve the habitat on your property. That is what I am doing and Real World seed products simply happen to be products that I believe in. No matter what you decide to plant on your land or what brand of deer mineral you use, I want you to be successful.

With this said, please do not feel obligated to buy Real World products or think that I am trying to somehow work in a sales pitch. I mention them because that is what I use and because I want your property to be the best it can be.

These actual seed tags show the difference between Real World products and others marketed to deer hunters.



Whitetail Institute Clover VS. Real World Clover & Chicory

Whitetail Institute clover - 1-acre bag = **9#** - **34% inert matter** = **5.94# seed**
 5.94# seed X 80% germination = **4.752# good seed**
 ½ of this seed is an annual (1 year) and ½ perennial
 (Note – this tag is from a 2-acre 18# bag)

Real World clover - 1-acre bag = **10#** - **6% inert matter** = **9.4# seed**
 9.4# seed X 90% germination = **8.46# good seed**
 100% of this seed is perennial

(photos of these actual product labels were taken at the Scheels store in Springfield, Illinois in April 2019. Learn to read product analysis tags!)



Whitetail Master Course

In 2019 I started offering a Whitetail Master Course on my property. These classes were very well received and sold out of the limited spaces offered. This class is completely different than any other class, course, boot-camp, etc being offered by anyone.

As part of this course attendees will tour my property as well as another property that I hunt and see the very tree-stands where I have killed multiple Boone & Crockett bucks. This is not a class of unproven theories but instead I show video footage and photos of the very bucks I killed from these stands and then we go right to the stands where it happened. I explain how I enter the stands, playing the wind, deer movement, turning good stands into great stands, etc.

I offer my Whitetail Master Course at a discount to my consulting clients. Past attendees have told me that seeing these properties and stand sites firsthand was the final piece of the puzzle for them. Please check out my website for dates and details.

Product Discounts

My involvement in the hunting industry has allowed me to develop some relationships with companies whose products I use and endorse. As my way of providing you with a little more value here is a brief rundown of these discounts. If you have questions please email me – don@higginsoutdoors.com

Real World Wildlife Products – I am offering consulting clients a 15% discount on all Real World products off internet pricing. Simply enter the code “**consult22**” when ordering on the website www.realworldwildlifeproducts.com or call in your order to the Real World office @ (217) 994-3721

NOTE- on larger orders please call in to order. This will save you money on shipping charges versus ordering online. **This offer is only good when buying direct and is not honored by Real world dealers.**

360 Hunting Blinds – I have sat in a lot of different brands of hunting blinds but 360 Blinds are by far my favorite. I was so impressed that I tried to buy the company. I am a distributor for 360 Blinds and offer my consulting clients a \$100 discount on any 360 blind that is purchased through Higgins Outdoors. Regular pricing can be found on my website – www.higginsoutdoors.com Please email me personally about these orders – don@higginsoutdoors.com

Reconyx Cameras – Higgins Outdoors sells Reconyx cameras online at higginsoutdoors.com. Enter the coupon code “**higginsreconyx22**” to receive \$25 off per camera.

Quiet-Kat

Novix treestands – I have secured discount pricing for my clients with Novix treestands. Please use discount code “**Higgins22**” when ordering.

Asio camo – I have arranged for consulting clients to get free shipping and a 10% discount by using the code “**higgins10**” when ordering

Magazine Article Re-Prints

The final part of this plan is a series of 3 articles which I authored and which were published in the Quality Deer Management Association’s “Quality Whitetails” magazine. I have included copies of these articles because I feel they may contain some very relevant information to your project. Please take the time to read them.

Final Thoughts

I sincerely hope that my visit to your property and the plan that I have outlined here will take your hunting success to a new level. My goal is that each of my clients will kill the biggest buck of their life within a few years following my visit.

If you have any interest in hiring outside help to implement some of your habitat projects, I may be able to help. I have trusted contacts for many types of work that you may need.

Please keep me posted of your success and let me know if you have any questions. I keep a copy of your plan as well as your aerial photo on file to refer back to when needed.

Thank you for trusting me to offer advice for your property and please let me know if you have any ideas that would help me improve my services to future clients. Thanks again and God Bless!

Be sure to follow all Higgins Outdoors social media platforms to stay up to date on my travels, events, hunts and information on whitetail deer



Chasing Giants podcast can be heard on all major podcast platforms



Follow and “like” Higgins Outdoors / Don Higgins on Facebook and Instagram



Subscribe to Higgins Outdoors You-Tube channel to see our videos