

Tracking a Wounded Deer

By Tom Remington

You've made the shot! Now what? Many times when we take a calculated shot at a deer, it falls nearly in its tracks. Other times we are not so fortunate.

I have heard hunters talk about a shot they made and never found the deer. As conscientious and ethical hunters, the last thing we want to do is leave a wounded or dead deer in the woods someplace because we couldn't find it.

Sometimes when we make a shot it may not have the results we were hoping for - even what we would consider an easy shot. We are all human and at times shots get deflected or more often than not, our adrenaline rush forced a bad shot - or a not perfect shot.

After making your last shot and the deer did not drop where you can clearly see it, I would strongly recommend flagging the spot where you are standing. If you fired more than one shot and you moved in between shots, try to go back and flag the location of each shot. If you don't carry flagging tape, I suggest you pick some up and put it in your pack.

Flagging the spot where you shot could be advantageous before the search is over. Many times when we are recounting the events that led up to the shot, the shot itself and finding your trophy, we realize we can't remember the EXACT location of where you stood when you fired.

Knowing exactly where you stood when you fired your gun can be of great help in determining where a bullet may have gone, if not into a deer. Which brings me to the second thing you should do.

Locate the specific spot the deer was when you fired your shot or each shot to include them all. This is not always the easiest thing to do but I would suggest spending the time. Once you have marked the locations of where you fired from and where the deer was each time you fired, it can help you to determine several things.

Wounding a deer does not always provide telltale signs. I have killed deer before that never bled a drop of blood externally nor was there any visible hair at the site of the shooting. Other times, the blood trail is very obvious and easy to track. There is one thing I can guarantee you. Each and every time you shoot and hit a deer the blood trail or any other signs will never be the same.

If you can't easily find a blood trail or any other signs that you have wounded the deer, take some time to align the location you were at when you shot with the spot where you think the deer stood. Look from all angles and directions and search carefully for broken small branches where a bullet may have hit and deflected. Also look for large trees you may have hit. Yes, we have all done it at one time or another. You need also to search for places where a bullet may have hit the ground and furrowed up the soil. If you find any of these, mark them with your flagging tape. Try to determine the outcome of each bullet that you fired.

Following a big trail of blood is easy. It's the tiny specks that present a challenge but one that you have to undertake. Look for blood, hair and bone. All of these can give you clues as to where you may have hit the deer. Bright red blood often indicates a hit in the leg. Dark red blood may have come from the main body of the deer. Look at any hair closely. White hair comes mainly from the belly but there is white hair on many parts of the deer. Brown and grey hair comes mostly from the main torso area. A combination of blood color and hair color could help you to determine the location of a hit. Lastly, look for any bone fragments. Sometimes when a bullet enters a deer it hits a bone or bones and will shatter it. Sometimes pieces of the bone exit the deer and are found on the ground. This occurs mostly with a leg shot but not always. We all know there are exceptions to every rule.

When you find any of these indicators, mark them for future reference. You should know the general direction a deer ran when you fired at it. From the location of the first drops of blood and/or hair and bone, slowly and methodically work in the direction you think the deer went looking for any more signs. As you find them continue

to mark them. Try not to disturb the area you are searching in. It is easy to cover up signs by flipping over a single leaf or stepping on a branch.

Don't forget also in your search to look for blood and hair on bushes, shrubs or small trees. Sometimes a wounded deer, if running, will pump blood out and it will land on leaves and branches on brush, bushes, thickets, anything that is adjacent.

One of the mistakes young and inexperienced hunters will make is to get too excited and hurry off looking for the deer thinking they need to catch up to it. Deer will not run long distances even when completely healthy. They certainly are not going to run far if they have been wounded. Sometimes just sitting down and taking a break for 15 or 20 minutes will give the deer a chance to lay down and die. So, relax and do all the right things so you can go home at night knowing you did not leave a wounded or dying deer in the woods.

If you continue to mark each sign you have found and continue following the trail, you will eventually find your deer. This doesn't always happen but more times than not it will. Don't give up simply because there is no blood or hair or bones. Attempt to track the deer by following where it dug up leaves or earth when it ran away. If there is no blood trail, slowly follow these tracks and keep looking. Very often deer will not start bleeding until sometime after they have been hit.

The worst case scenario is when you have looked and looked and you can't find any sign whatsoever that you have hit the deer. You have marked from where you fired to the location the deer was in when you fired. If all you have found is some tracks running away and you have marked those spots as well, continue trying to follow the tracks until the deer stops running. If you can do that, often a deer will run for a while, slow to a trot and eventually a walk and then stop. If you are adept enough to follow the tracks to where a deer stopped and stood, you may find some blood there. A deer may be bleeding so little that the only time it shows up is after it has stood in one spot for a while.

Scour an area thoroughly before giving up. Mark all the areas you have searched and only after you have exhausted every attempt at finding this deer, do you give up. I can relate a story that happened to a friend of mine while hunting together.

It was a foggy day when my buddy fired at a deer. He felt confident that he had hit the deer yet in his initial search he found no signs of the deer being hit. Still feeling as though he must have hit the deer, he continued his search with help from another fellow hunter. The search lasted long into the afternoon until just before dark, somehow a speck of blood no bigger than half the size of an eraser on a pencil was found on a brown leaf.

He marked that spot and began a methodical search that took hours. It was getting dark. I can say most people would have given it up - at least until the morning but he was determined to go to bed that night feeling he had done all he could.

We returned to our hunting camp only long enough to get flashlights, a Coleman lantern and a roll of toilet paper. With the Coleman lantern, a small piece of white tissue paper no larger than a dime shows up like a beacon.

With flashlights and lanterns we continued the search. A second drop of blood about the same size as the first was found about thirty feet away. We marked it and continued on. The search became somewhat easier in that we got a general idea of the direction the deer seemed to be headed - walking at this time by the way.

When we had gotten to the point where we were ready to give up the search, my friend suggested that me and another fellow hunter remain on the deer trail and he was going to take a flashlight and make a small circle around the edge of a small swale. Within five minutes, he yelled over that he had found the deer. A nice buck and he laid dead just on the other side of the swale.

In all my years of hunting, I have never seen anything quite like that. I learned a lot that day and night in our search for a wounded deer and we all went home knowing we had done everything we could.