



MEGA BUCKS

ON MICRO PROPERTIES

WANT YOUR TINY PROPERTY TO PRODUCE BIG DEER? READ ON!

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“I would manage my land and deer herd more, but I only have 70 acres.”
As wildlife consultants, we hear that daily. Most of the landowners we deal with own fewer than 100 acres. Our reply is always the same: Just because you own a small parcel does not mean the bucks it produces will also be small. In fact, some of the most successful big-buck hunters we know hunt on so-called “micro properties.”

We believe too many hunters and outdoor writers focus on the erratic travel patterns of whitetails instead of considering that a mature buck only has to walk in front of your stand one time ... at the right time! As wildlife biologists, we closely follow the home-range research on whitetails. And, as private land consultants who get paid for results, we focus on bringing mature bucks in front of our clients when it counts.

In this article, we will provide some tips we have used to maximize our clients' success on small properties.

Give Him What He Wants

One of the most critical elements of producing big bucks on all properties is the diversity of habitat available to the deer herd. A property consisting of a single habitat type, such as pines or hardwoods, will lead to frustration. We have worked with landowners who own property consisting primarily of mature hardwood stands who have a difficult time seeing any deer, let alone a mature buck.

PRODUCING BIG BUCKS ON SMALL PROPERTIES IS NO EASY CHORE, BUT IT CAN BE DONE. KEEPING A POSITIVE OUTLOOK ON THINGS AND SETTING GOALS WILL HELP YOU ALONG THE WAY. TALK WITH YOUR NEIGHBORS AND ASK THEM ABOUT FORMING A COOPERATIVE.

Obviously, owners of larger landholdings increase their odds of having multiple habitat types (greater diversity) on their properties simply because of the larger acreage owned. The fact is, small landowners have less by default and must ramp up habitat diversity accordingly.

The first thing to do as a micro-property owner is identify the habitat types on your property and thoroughly understand how they will change in the coming years. Our clients often provide us with aerial photographs of their properties. Although these maps are typically the first step to getting to know a tract, this is a passive, less effective way to delineate habitat types on a given property. The good news is

the advantage here goes to the small property owner, because nothing beats getting out and walking the land. It is easy to differentiate hardwoods from pines from pastures on a map, but seeing the hardwood forest consists of many undesirable tree species that are not mast producers — or the old pastures have grown up with briars and provide excellent bedding cover — can only be discovered on foot or an all-terrain vehicle.

After the habitat types on your property are identified, the next step is to determine what's missing. This is usually when biologists and consultants come into play. There is no one-size-fits-all mold for habitat diversity. Each property we look at receives its

own unique suggestions based on current habitat types, neighboring landscape, topography, soil characteristics, slope, aspect, positioning of food and water, habitat potential, landowner's objective/budget and the list goes on.

A small property consisting of mainly open, mature hardwoods will most likely not hold or attract many deer on a consistent basis. Depending on the neighboring landscape, there is usually one of two things happening:

1. Most of the deer seen are transients. These deer use the property only as a travel corridor, forcing you to pattern their movements. Rarely will deer bed on this type of property, which makes them more vulnerable to harvest by neighboring landowners.
2. Most deer are only caught on trail camera photos at night. These deer are rarely seen on the property during daylight because they have already fed and moved on to their bedding areas.

Change It Up

Open hardwoods produce mast but usually lack security cover. This is probably one of the harder scenarios to deal with as a landowner. Deer,

especially big bucks, need cover. The ability to hold deer on a small property requires the landowner to provide everything a mature buck needs on a compact scale.

We regularly tell clients our goal is to make mature deer adopt lazy behavior. Accomplishing this requires the presence of food, cover and water, but the positioning of the food, cover and water is as important as its presence.

A lot of deer hunters love the aesthetically pleasing site of big oaks and an open forest floor. However, big bucks want nasty-thick tangles that make them feel secure. A selective cut can remove trees that are undesirable for wildlife and/or timber sales. The opening will allow more light to reach the forest floor, resulting in thick, desirable regeneration and more space for the remaining valuable trees to grow.

If you provide a mature buck everything he needs on your property, you have taken the first and biggest step toward seeing more big bucks during the hunting season.

Controlling Yourself and Others

You check your trail camera and, like clock work, you see a buck is working a trail 20 yards past your favorite stand. The urge to hunt is overwhelming. You're overcome by the pressure to kill him before your neighbors or hunting buddies do.

However, you know a north wind will carry your scent into the bedding area from which he has been coming.

Do you wait and hope he will continue the current movement ritual, or do you hunt in fear that he will not be around long? These are some of the questions that drive small landowners mad. From our experience, producing mature bucks on micro-properties is far easier than teaching clients how and when to seal the deal.

By going against your gut feeling (and the wind), you're risking a lot. If that buck catches your scent, he will be long gone. He might not leave your property permanently, but he will adjust the time and location of his activity. There is also a good chance you might not see him from a stand again.

A deer can detect human scent from a long way off. On micro-properties, the buck is only a hop, skip and a jump from the neighbor's property. There is always the chance he might not return until it's too late.

Patience is a virtue. There's a chance that buck might change his pattern a bit, but if he has been on your property for a few days, there is a good reason for it. A small-property owner's worst nightmare is a pressured deer herd. Sightings plummet and the chance of harvesting a mature buck is slim to none as soon as pressure is applied. Don't fail to consider how your entry activity during the dark, early morning

hours affects nocturnal deer using your property. Often-

times, the sacrifice of missing the first hour of shooting time to delay entry until daylight results in a mature buck sticking close to your property.

A Case Study

As hunters, we understand the pressure to be the first in the stand. There is no better example than the 3½-year-old 10-point on one of our 73-acre properties this past season. We decided to do all we could to add at least another year to this incredible buck, with hopes of finding his sheds in February.

By limiting early morning entry while he fed in food plots and agricultural fields and employing other defensive tactics designed for small properties, the buck survived the heavily pressured Pennsylvania rifle season and has since been photographed on trail cameras. In the process of making him feel comfortable "at home," we believe our odds of finding his sheds are far greater as well.

Sanctuaries, or "refuges" as we prefer to call them, are one way to create a pressure-free area for big bucks. Micro-landowners might laugh at the thought of 10 percent of their property being off-limits, but it could be the difference between harvesting average bucks and harvesting mature monarchs. A refuge is typically established around a known bedding area; this way deer are already familiar with it and might recognize it as a safe haven. Very few of our clients ever venture into their refuges, and their results are incredible.



A big buck will rarely remain confined to a microproperty. A mature buck's home range can cover more than 1,000 acres.



Some of the best hunting memories are made with family and friends. It's easy to bend your rules during one of these hunts. However, if you want to be able to produce big deer, you need to stay the course. Don't be afraid to tell your friends and kin exactly where to sit; that you will pick them up at dark; and that the sanctuary does hold deer, but you are not willing to push them out.

Great memories will continue to be made, and your companions will be much happier when they are seeing bigger bucks.

OBVIOUSLY, OWNERS OF LARGER LANDHOLDINGS INCREASE THEIR ODDS OF HAVING MULTIPLE HABITAT TYPES (GREATER DIVERSITY) ON THEIR PROPERTIES SIMPLY BECAUSE OF THE LARGER ACREAGE OWNED. THE FACT IS, SMALL LANDOWNERS HAVE LESS BY DEFAULT AND MUST RAMP UP HABITAT DIVERSITY ACCORDINGLY.

Herd Monitoring

"What happened to him?"

This question plagues many owners of small properties. Was he shot? Hit by a car? Maybe he made it?

A big buck will rarely remain confined to a micro-property. A mature buck's home range can cover more than 1,000 acres. So how do we keep track of him?

The first thing is to monitor your property efficiently. This is done with trail cameras, hunter observations and incidental sightings, like when he strolls through your yard while you're inside watching a football game (a true story for one of us). The more you keep tabs on him, the more likely you'll be able to answer the above question by yourself.

Next, and just as important, is communication with neighboring landowners. If you own less than 100 acres, that buck is probably seen pretty frequently by your neighbors. Don't hesitate to give them a call and ask what they have shot. No one has to

reveal their "honey holes," but many times they are asking themselves the same thing. Many small property owners are forming land management cooperatives.

These efforts allow landowners to communicate through a moderated network and keep up on the latest sightings and harvests. Often, professionals are sought to help with the communication process as well as creating reports and educational seminars.

Finally, keep good records, even if it is as simple as an estimated age from a

jawbone, the deer's weight and antler measurements. There is no way to tell if deer are improving from management decisions without comparing hard data; visual observations alone just don't cut it.

This is also a good way to get your neighbors involved. Showing them you are taking the time to track the herd's progress might be enough to entice them to start collecting or let you collect data on deer they harvest.

Look at the Glass as Half Full

"Hey, I got him!" your neighbor yells off his porch as you grab the morning paper. "Bigger than I thought." Your heart sinks and a sickening feeling builds in your stomach as you reluctantly cross the street. You feel defeated the moment you lay eyes on him (a true story for both of us). But somehow you manage, "Congratulations, he is nice."

You watched him all season. You knew where he rubbed, you knew where he ate, and you knew where he

slept. You had trail cameras dedicated to him, and you gave him a name. All that time and you don't even get to see him on your own wall.

We know it's frustrating, but think about how close you were. Think about the fact you produced a giant whitetail on your "measly" 75 acres — the same property that rarely held yearling bucks a few years ago. You watched over him, you fed him and you hunted him hard. It is depressing, but there is always next year.

You were able to hold a trophy whitetail on your property. This isn't a coincidence. Your property has all the pieces a big buck is looking for. Now remember the 3-year-old 8-point you let walk because you knew "Big Boy" was roaming nearby. You also provided him with nutritious food plots and safe cover in your sanctuary. He will feel like he can rely on you and your property as a home. Sure, he'll travel around, but your piece of dirt is where he comes back to.

It was by pure luck your neighbor killed that buck, but it doesn't mean luck won't be on your side next year. Plus, because you overcame that sick feeling in your gut and quizzed your neighbor on things like location of kill, what he was doing when he shot him, was he alone or with a female companion, what was the time of harvest, had he seen him around before that, etc., you now have an advantage going into next season.

Conclusion

Producing big bucks on small properties is no easy chore, but it can be done. Keeping a positive outlook on things and setting goals will help you along the way. Talk with your neighbors and ask them about forming a cooperative. The worst they can say to you is no.

It might take a few years to align the stars, but once you begin to see bigger deer, the time and money spent will be well worth it.

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