



Big Bucks on Small Property? You Bet!

By Steven Bridges

The Goldthwaite Eagle

Good Mills County hunting properties are often selling for well over \$2,500 an acre and leasing for over \$20 per acre per year. Unless you have some seriously deep pockets in your camo pants, chances of owning or leasing a large ranch in or around Mills County are slim.

But a small ranch managed and hunted correctly can produce large, mature bucks year after year. Many of the trophy bucks in each edition of The Mills County Hunting Guide each year are taken on these smaller ranches.

Over the years, I have taken hundreds of trophy photos of hunters with a buck taken from a small ranch. I invariably ask the hunters how they find success on small ranches in Mills County. I have boiled down the answers to what I call my Tiny Ranch Tips & Tricks.

Food, Water, and Cover.

If a buck has food, water and cover he won't go anywhere. On a small place, this will probably mean supplemental feeding year-round combined with one or more food plots. To keep deer close, keep the feeder full.

Another necessity is water. Deer need water every day in the summer and about every other day in winter. So keep an open water source on your small property at all times. If a buck has to travel off your place every day or so to get a drink, he's fair game for the neighbors.

The last basic necessity that deer in general, but especially bucks, require is a thick cover sanctuary near the food sources. Place your feeders and food plots as close to bedding areas as possible on a small property. If the deer only have to travel a short distance to their feeding area, they will feel safer and stay put. Having cover close to the food source also improves the chances of seeing that mature buck in daylight hours when hunting season begins.

Remember, though, you must stay out of those deer sanctuaries! Bucks especially need to know they can come to your property, enter a sanctuary, and be totally safe. No shed hunting in the spring, no scouting and no ATV riding at all except to retrieve a dead buck or follow a wounded one.

The Ladies.

Why do they let ladies into a bar free and charge the guys a \$20 cov-

er? It is the same reason that you should take great care to keep the does healthy and happy on your tiny ranch. Hunting near does during the rut will bring the big bucks out of the cover. So, keep your does as comfortable as possible.

DO NOT DISTURB.

I have seen places as small as 15 acres produce massive bucks. But it takes a little stealth. On large properties, disturbed deer have plenty of other places to move and feel secure. Not so on small areas. If you disturb a buck on a small property, he will leave and he might not be back for months, if ever.

Don't set up an RV and a big camp on a tiny ranch. Every deer within a mile knows you are there to hunt. True, a few does and immature bucks might still show up at the feeder in the morning, but not the big guy. He took off when you unlocked the gate. My advice is to stay in town. Don't let the deer know you are coming. When you drive to your hunting area, approach your property from down wind if possible. Ease your truck door closed and be in hunting mode the second you step out of the truck.

If you have a year-round lease and use the property for summer picnics, fishing or ATV riding, etc., then you are lowering your ability to hold big bucks. The idea is to create a property where the bigger bucks feel safe all year round. The bucks then will come there in the hunting season from neighboring area properties, because it is on your land where they feel totally secure. This might not fit your family needs, but it's a must if you want to hold big bucks.

When scouting, stay on the fringe of the property as much as possible. Erect some "observation stands" on the perimeter of your property and

work from the perimeter in. Never drive any vehicles or ATVs on the property. You can do so on the perimeter, but never the interior (except for work on food plots, and even then, keep it reduced as much as possible). Do not place any tree stands within 100 yards of the sanctuaries you have created. Hunt the fringe of your property, and only travel into the interior of your property to blood-trail your trophy.

NEIGHBORS.

If hunters on neighboring properties harvest any buck that moves, your bucks just aren't going to be able to grow up. Is there anything you can do to get and keep good bucks on your property? The best thing you can do to keep your bucks alive a few more years is to call around and find out who hunts the areas around your small lease or a ranch you own.

The Mills Central Appraisal District (325) 648-2253 has contact information for landowners' neighbors. Honestly discuss your hunting goals and preferences with your neighbors. I have often seen neighbors come together and agree on harvest standards. I have even seen neighbors agree not to harvest specific bucks that roam between two places.

Some of these agreements even formalize into Wildlife Management Associations. One very successful local program is the Simms Creek Wildlife Association in Mills County. Learn more by going to www.simmscreekwma.org.

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Small properties offer some special challenges for the deer hunter, but trophies are taken each year by the hunters who take a little extra time to follow some basic trophy deer management principles. Good luck this season!

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