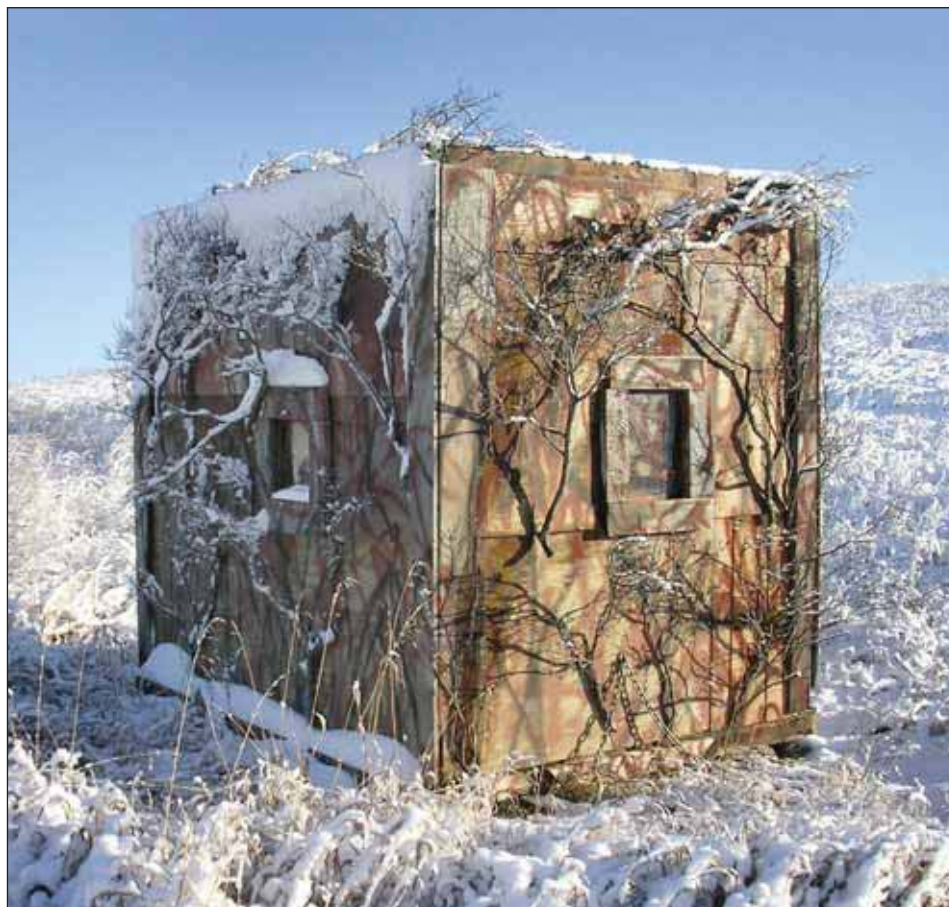


Some Deer Hunters Changing Their Ways

By Ron Wilson



GREG GUILICKSON



CRAIG BIHRLE



Some hunters, for a variety of reasons, are slowing down, applying more patience in their pursuit of deer in North Dakota by employing elevated stands and ground blinds. Like the hunters themselves, construction of these hunter hideaways differ considerably.



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Roughly 100,000 people will hunt deer in North Dakota this fall, but a certain percentage you won't even notice, as more and more hunters nowadays are concealing themselves in elevated stands or ground blinds to help take their deer.

"The long-standing tradition of large deer drives with lines of orange-clad family members and friends still exists in some places, but in other areas has been replaced by more passive approaches," said Randy Kreil, North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife division chief. "Still-hunting, using elevated stands or ground blinds is becoming more commonplace. In addition, another segment of the deer hunting public has gone to the more individual spot and stalk method."

Gary Rankin, Game and Fish Department

game warden in northeastern North Dakota and veteran of more than three decades of deer seasons, said he has seen a growing number of hunters climbing into stands. "Other changes in deer hunting include the number of hunters tripling since I started working with Game and Fish, an increase in the number of deer on the landscape and the arrival of large CRP fields starting in the late 1980s," he said. "CRP has made it more difficult for hunters to walk and push cover. Where there are islands of cover, deer can be pushed into the open, but CRP provides much more cover. Many of the large high stands in my area are associated with CRP. And I do know from talking to hunters and from personal observation that there is baiting near many of the stands."

While hunting from natural blinds – deadfalls,



CRAIG BIRRE



MIKE ANDERSON

There are some safety concerns with elevated stands and ground blinds. The hunter, clad in blaze orange, is often invisible to other hunters pursuing the same game.

thickets and tall vegetation – or tree stands has long been a tactic for deer gun hunters in heavily-wooded states, this approach was not common in North Dakota, except with bowhunters. “Whether it was due to relatively low deer densities, short seasons and/or wide open country, it seemed deer hunters of old in our state were too antsy to sit and wait for deer to come by,” said Greg Link, Department assistant wildlife division chief. “In the last decade or so, more and more hunters I know and visit with have gravitated to elevated stands or ground blinds and other methodical hunting methods because of success experienced while bowhunting from a stand, or because they’re trying to maximize their chances with limited hunting access.”

There is certainly nothing wrong, and actually a lot right, with hunting from a stand or slowly, very slowly, tiptoeing through cover, Link said. “Hunters are more aware and in tune with their surroundings,” he said. “The hunt is more relaxed and less chaotic. Consequently, the assumption is that by doing so, it’s safer and you get better shots at deer.”

It appears, Kreil said, that parties of 10 or more hunters have declined in the last decade, and have been replaced by smaller groups working an area together or meeting up later. “First, this slows down the hunting, making it not seem as frenetic ... People aren’t racing up and down roads and from one side of a section to another, which oftentimes irritates landowners and the nonhunting public,” he said. “Second, it reduces the temptation to party hunt. Instead, you have individual hunters taking rifle in

hand and experiencing big game hunting in a much more personal way.

“I believe a person can get more satisfaction and enjoyment out of being alone with their thoughts and decisions while taking a big game animal,” Kreil added. “It may sound corny, but there truly is a relating-to-nature benefit achieved when a person takes a deer on their own with no one else watching or giving advice. You have to be personally responsible for how you kill an animal. This is a deep-rooted, emotional decision that is at the core of why we hunt.”

While wildlife managers have not detected a difference in deer harvest statewide or in any particular hunting unit due to the evolution in hunting tactics, there are other influences on deer populations. “Part of the changing impact of hunting is due to more restrictive access to private land,” Link said. “Portions of hunting units where access is available or readily obtainable, deer densities are lower. In areas where access is more restrictive, densities are harder to manage.

“We also know that recreational landowners/leases manage their land and the wildlife on it differently. I propose that they hunt differently, too, applying lighter pressure and are selective in what they shoot,” Link added. “This can create pockets with very high localized concentrations of deer, impacting neighboring agriculture producers, ranchers and motorists. This is aggravated to a greater degree when baiting is used by artificially attracting higher numbers of deer and habituating them to feed supplies.”

North Dakota has had a 16.5-day season for more

than 20 years, which has somewhat assuaged the rush for hunters to get their deer. There still is that excitement of opening day, but it may be more due to the tradition of gathering with family and friends than anything. "There will always be some people who want to get the big one before someone else finds him or they feel the need to get their deer in the freezer as soon as possible because they have limited time to hunt or have other things they want to do," Kreil said. "But what we are seeing more and more is a tendency to slow down and enjoy the experience. Some people find that avoiding the rush of opening day enhances their enjoyment of time spent outdoors deer hunting."

Link remembers seeing the first high permanent stands during the drought of the late 1980s and early 1990s in southeastern North Dakota. "I was flying the winter aerial deer census along the Wild Rice River (Sargent and Richland counties) and came

across 2-3 of the tall 'platform on stilts' in large, dry, too-tough-to-hunt cattail sloughs where the big boys were alleged to be hiding," he said. "Within a matter of 2-3 years, the trend took hold and the high towers began showing up all across the landscape."

Hunters may be changing their behavior and approach to deer hunting for all kinds of reasons. "It could be work schedules or their kids are booked with activities, it could be the fact that many of our deer hunters are aging and cannot walk like they use to," Kreil said. "It may be that people find it easier and more enjoyable to sit in a warm blind out of the wind and listen to the football game while they wait for the deer of choice to amble by. The list of possibilities goes on and on."

RON WILSON is editor of North Dakota OUTDOORS.



The North Dakota Game and Fish Department has heard from a number of hunters who feel both elevated stands and ground blinds sometimes blend in too well with their surroundings. This is an obvious safety concern to occupants in the stands during the deer gun season. Using blaze orange outside the stands for all passersby to see is a wise move.

Safety Concerns

Some hunters have expressed safety concerns when it comes to the use of ground blinds and elevated stands (see August-September issue of *North Dakota OUTDOORS*) during the deer gun season.

The concern is that many stands, elevated or not, often blend into the surroundings. Because they are hard to see, the stands often go unnoticed by other hunters who unknowingly might shoot their way.

While North Dakota law requires deer gun hunters to wear blaze or fluorescent orange so they can be easily seen in the field, there is no such rule for marking blinds occupied by hunters. Although the Game and Fish Department doesn't have a standard recommendation at this time, it would be a good idea this deer season to somehow mark your blind so it is visible to other hunters from all directions.