

# SEEK THE EDGES FOR BETTER HUNTING

By **Scott Bestul**

Photos by the Author

**I**faced the whitetail hunter's version of the bottom of the 9th inning. There was one day left of the early archery season. I was hunting a farm I barely knew, in a state where I didn't live. And I knew if I didn't fill my tag on this trip, a return visit to the state was probably not in the cards.

Fortunately, I had walked just enough of this farm — which had just been purchased by a buddy that spring — to know the basic layout and property lines. Actually, this was also a good thing. With one day left, I didn't have time to agonize about a dozen setups where a monster buck might run into me. I needed one or two basic ambush sites that would funnel as much deer movement as possible. From there, I'd just pray that a good deer would happen to be in the neighborhood. Happily, the wind direction narrowed my choices to two spots, and the reason I chose the spot I did was pretty simple: it contained the most edge cover of any place on the farm.

Of course, whitetail hunters know all about edges. I've been hearing that deer are creatures of the edge since my gun was longer than I was tall. And naturally, when I thought of edges, the most obvious came to mind: the break formed where a woodlot gives way to a field, a lakeshore or creek bank — any hard line that marked an obvious transition. But the longer I spent in

the deer woods, the better I became at spotting more subtle edges. Indeed, when I analyze habitat on any property these days, I find my eyes taking inventory of all the edges on the place — and where I can create more.

With that in mind, here are some tips for identifying or creating edges — from the obvious to the subtle — on your property and how to use them to improve your hunting.

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## FOOD SOURCE EDGES

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Perhaps the most obvious edge is one you create when you construct a food plot or cultivate a field. Obviously, anyone who's hunted a green field or hails from farm country recognizes the attraction these areas hold for whitetails. From a sprawling Alfa-Rack Plus, corn or soybean field to a small Imperial Whitetail Clover plot, field edges are sure to be full of feeding sign and breeding spoor such as rubs and scrapes.



The trouble with field edges is that they can be frustrating spots to hunt. Because whitetails are reluctant to expose themselves in open areas during daylight, the chances for killing a mature buck that's received any hunting pressure in such spots is often remote. The only exception to this rule is when extreme or extenuating circumstances (peak rut or intense cold and deep snow) force bucks to visit these areas.

There are, fortunately, ways to make such potentially frustrating sites produce. One is to create a smaller staging-type food plot just off of a main field edge. I tried this last summer with excellent results. I had a friend bush-hog a small semi-circular space from a section of my woods this past spring. I tilled and sprayed this quarter-acre clearing, and then planted it with Imperial Clover. The L-shaped plot lay less than 100 yards from the destination food source, but that distance made all the difference. I enjoyed several hunts in a stand hung on the edge of my tiny food plot, and I rarely got skunked. Deer felt completely comfortable feeding in this small and secluded field. I'd created a huntable edge.

#### SECURITY COVER EDGES

It's common for hunters to associate edges with whitetail food sources, but they're also an important source of security for deer. Anytime I need a reminder of this, I think back to hunting my family's property in central Wisconsin. The Bestul homestead is home to several stands of aspen (we call them popple) trees, and the standard method for harvesting mature aspen is a clearcut.

Though any clearcut looks pretty pathetic immedi-



Some hunters plant strips of switchgrass, corn or other tall-growing plants for screening cover as they access stand sites.

ately after the saws are done, any deer hunter can spot the positive results within months. The sterile, trackless monoculture of large-trunked trees is soon replaced with hundreds of slim "suckers." This dense new growth provides deer with not only the security cover they crave, but also a source of browse for several years. Scouting the edges of popple clearcuts is one of my favorite activities, as I know I'll discover an explosion of sign in the form of rubs, scrapes, trails and feeding sign.

So a logging operation is one way to create the edge habitat whitetails love so much. But don't think you need to have a forester arrange a pulp or hardwood lumber cut to create/improve deer habitat. Some of the best deer managers I know create their own security cover by taking a chainsaw to low-value stands of trees and creating their own mini clearcut. In the Midwest, species like aspen, box elder, ash and some species of elm are perfect candidates for this type of cut.

Most guys I know who practice this technique select an area that is already difficult to hunt (a hollow or ravine notorious for fickle wind direction, for example).

Then they fell or hinge-cut every tree in the prescribed area. Hinge-cutting is a technique where the tree trunk is cut deep enough to topple the tree but not completely through. This allows nutrients to continue to flow from the roots to the tree top, thus allowing leaf growth for a while. But since the tree has been removed from the canopy, sunlight is allowed on the ground, which encourages new plant growth.

The key to these mini-clearcuts is to treat them as sanctuaries. My friend Tim Walmsley, an Illinois bowhunter who manages his own farm, never enters these small cutovers unless he has to trail a deer. His success on big bucks proves he has this technique nailed down well.

#### TRAVEL ROUTE EDGES

Hunt whitetails long enough, and you'll recognize two things about how they travel. First, given the choice, deer will select travel routes with some sort of security cover nearby. Second, whitetails prefer to take the path of least resistance. If you can create an edge that offers deer both of these traits, you'll have made a significant improvement in deer habitat — as well as opened up some hunting opportunities.

One of the simplest ways to create an edge travel route is to clear a path or lane through extremely dense cover. We've used this technique on our Minnesota hunting lease with great success, and we discovered it by accident. One section of the property features an extremely dense apple orchard. Because it's so thick, the orchard is very difficult to hunt, so out of frustration, we took a skid loader and simply pushed a path around the outside edge of the apple trees. The path

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connected several good stand sites and would also serve as our exit/entry route. Well, surprise – the deer liked our path even better than we did. They cruise the orchard easily and silently, and they were never more than one hop away from security cover. In the years since, we've used this technique to improve habitat in several areas of the property.

As this example illustrates, creating edge cover not only enhances whitetail travel, it can help you. One of the greatest challenges of hunting destination food plots such as Imperial Clover or other short-growing plants is that deer often spot hunters as they enter and exit stands near these plots. Several of my friends have experimented with planting strips of switchgrass, corn or other tall-growing plants for screening cover as they access stand sites. Planting trees or shrubs is another method for accomplishing this goal. Though it will obviously take a while for tree seedlings to reach a height suitable for hiding your comings and goings, planting a line of quick-growing shrubs will keep you covered until the trees catch up. Plantings like these are extremely effective in areas with Conservation Reserve Program grasses, and old farm fields and pastures.

### CONCLUSION

Back to my last-day whitetail deer hunt on my friend's farm. As noted earlier, I'd decided to hunt a corner of the farm where the wind direction was in my favor and there was the greatest amount of edge cover possible. So I hung my stand in a big walnut tree and settled in. In front of me was a tangled creek bottom that bisected a standing cornfield. To one side was an overgrown pasture full of hedge trees and multiflora

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rose. And at my back was a huge CRP planting pock-marked with small patches of timber and brush. I was so surrounded by edge I honestly had no idea where deer would come from.

The old pasture ground produced. I had just checked my watch to see how much legal shooting time I had (40 minutes) when I looked up to see a doe running, tail-up, across the creek. Behind her was an adult 8-point buck I'd have been proud to tag on the season's first day, not to mention the last. He was headed away from me with a determined stride when I cracked my rattling antlers together. His response was swift and certain; never have I seen a buck so ready to tangle. He crossed the creek and three fence lines before I had time to get nervous, and I'd barely grabbed my bow and clipped my release to the string before I was grunting him to a stop.

I found the buck barely 100 yards from my walnut stand tree. It took about all I had to get him loaded in my truck, which I'd parked on a scenic knob in the CRP. When I was done, I sat on the tailgate, resting and taking in the scenery. I wouldn't be hunting this place for a while, but my buddy certainly would, and he'd be looking for some good spots to hang stands. I knew at least one place where he'd have an edge. 

## Habitat Work on Uncle Sam's Dollar

Want to give a skeptic some ammunition? Announce, "I'm from the government, and I'm here to help."

But if you're a conservation-minded landowner, Uncle Sam might be one of your greatest allies. The Natural Resources Conservation Service, a division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is an agency charged with "providing technical and financial assistance for the establishment of fish and wildlife habitat development." Armed with money from the 2002 Farm Bill, the NRCS is able to assist private landowners with habitat work. (A new Farm Bill is currently being debated by Congress, but is expected to offer similarly funded programs).

It works like this: A technician from the NRCS office in your county (there is one office/county across the country) visits your property after you contact him. This is critical, as participation is voluntary. You walk your land with your technician and discuss some of your goals for improving the land. Then he makes recommendations about specific programs that might meet your needs. Nothing is forced upon you, and it is up to you to apply for the various programs recommended.

Among the programs the NRCS oversees is the Conservation Reserve Program, which pays farmers to retire highly erodible soil from crop production or pasturing. Less well known is the Wetlands Reserve Program, which pays up to 100 percent for the restoration and maintenance of a former wetland; the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program, which pays up to 75 percent of the costs for creating or restoring wildlife habitat; and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, which pays up to 75 percent of the costs for constructing, restoring conservation or environmental-quality practices on crop land, grass land, pasture land or non-industrial forest land.

My friend Roger Deets, who purchased a 250-acre Minnesota property a few years ago, has worked extensively with the NRCS to turn a degraded farm into a wildlife haven. EQIP and WHIP dollars were used to construct a large, erosion-controlling pond, plant trees and plant food plots nearby. Once-tilled — and highly abused — soil was retired into native grasses, shrubs and food plots using CRP money. Finally, WHIP money was used to create a variety of wildlife openings (planted to annual and perennial food plot mixes) and also selectively harvest mature trees as part of a timber-stand improvement cut that will improve habitat for deer and turkeys and put money into Deets' pocket.

What's the catch? There are two, actually. The money allocated to various regions for each program can vary according to year, and — predictably — in some cases you might have to wait to accomplish projects. But if you're a landowner with big plans that you can't afford, or you're looking for technical and financial assistance, the NRCS might be there to help.

"My impression has been that if a project makes sense for the environment and wildlife, they've been able to help me," Deets said. "The thing that excites me the most is that, although I've seen immediate results, the most important ones are down the road. My greatest pleasure will come when I walk this place in 20 or 30 years and be able to say, 'Wow, we really did something special here.'" For information, contact the NRCS office in your area by looking in the "Government" section of your phone book or by visiting [www.nrcs.usda.gov](http://www.nrcs.usda.gov).