


# Successful Whitetail Management Varies Region By Region

By **Scott Bestul**

Photos by the Author



If all hunting land were created equal, growing food plots, creating habitat and managing deer would be as simple as reading a recipe. What worked perfectly in Alabama would shine in Minnesota, and a man in New York could tell his friend in Arkansas exactly what to do and not look the fool. Whitetails are whitetails, dirt is dirt, and trees and brush look pretty much the same no matter where you hang your stand.

None of that is true, of course, and that's one reason the process is challenging and fun. Whitetail management is science and art, with a healthy dose of by-gosh-and-by-golly gumption thrown in for good measure. With that in mind, I talked to four men — all loyal Whitetail Institute customers — from widely different regions and asked them to share their stories. Though the men are hardcore hunters and time-tested deer managers, their situations are unique. Perhaps their successes and mistakes will help you as you manage your property.

## *Lyle Stine: Heartland Haven*

Central Illinois is also Whitetail Central — a place

known for monster bucks and some of the richest farmland on Earth. But Lyle Stine, who co-owns and manages a 320-acre tract there, knows that managing deer property is a challenge — even in a region some hunters consider paradise.

“It took us a few years to realize that one of the most important things to do is keep the deer in good shape through the winter,” he said. “There is food everywhere when the crops are up, but after the harvest it can get tough for deer. A while back, the alfalfa fields on an adjoining tract were idled when a new owner took over. The deer on that property just flocked to our food plots.”

Stine's property includes woods, tillable acres, Conservation Reserve Program land and a brushy 10-acre tract that he cleared so that he could plant Whitetail Institute products.

“I've been a field tester since 1989 and have planted

just about everything,” he said. “It takes a lot of experimenting to find out what grows best and what the deer like. You can read all you want to about this stuff, but the only way to know what works and how to grow it is to get out there and do it yourself. I help Whitetail Institute with research by testing products for them before they are made available to the public. I’ve tried several [Whitetail Institute] products that failed, and I told them. Those products never saw a store shelf.”

Late spring finds Stine and his family getting seed in the ground.

“We’ve found that if it’s not planted by June 1 here, it’s very tough to get good germination, unless I’m planting a specific fall mixture,” he said. “And it’s important to match the type of seed you plant to the kind of soil you have. On our 10-acre plot, the western half is good, flat bottom soil. I plant Imperial Whitetail Clover there, along with strips of other things I’m experimenting with. The eastern half is sloped and drains well; there I put out Alfa-Rack Plus.”

In addition to his wooded ground, Stine finds that CRP fields provide excellent bedding cover and an important food source.

“We’re able to mow our CRP after August 1,” he said. “So I mow a strip around the edge, right up against the woods. There must be enough alfalfa or clover growing in there because that small strip really attracts deer in the first weeks of archery season. That’s an excellent time for us to shoot does, and we try to take 25 to 30 of them each year.”

Stine emphasizes antlerless harvest for two principal reasons.

“I’ve gotten to the point where I’m more concerned

with the health of the herd than I am with shooting a big buck,” he said. “I want the deer to be healthy and the herd to be in tune with the habitat. But shooting does means better buck hunting, too. The harder mature bucks have to work to breed, the more visible and active they’ll be. When you see a 180-inch buck trotting through a food plot in the middle of the day during the peak of the rut — which happened to us just last fall — it’s pretty exciting stuff.”

## Dave McGlone: North Woods Magic

Northern Michigan can be a harsh, unforgiving place for a whitetail. But that hasn’t stopped Dave McGlone from doing all he can to help his deer herd live up to its potential.

“There are a lot of challenges up here,” he said. “Weather is one; we’ve had years when the winter was so tough it nearly wiped out our herd. And local hunting pressure is intense. There’s still a strong shoot-any-buck mentality that has been hard to change, and it is made tougher by the fact that there are a lot of small parcels of land. People are reluctant to pass on a buck, knowing that it could get shot on the next property.”

McGlone said hunting attitudes are changing. In the meantime, his management practices have already improved hunting for him and his son, Nathan.

“One of the first things I did that showed immediate results was using 30-06 Plus Protein mineral,” he said. “I start putting it down early, as soon as the snow goes

away. I want it down there as soon as the deer need it. If I can’t find a natural lick, I’ll create one in an area without any vegetation and sprinkle two-thirds of a bag on the ground. Then I really rake it in, so that you can’t see the mineral anymore. To finish, I pour the rest of the bag out on the ground. One thing I’ve learned is that the deer dictate where the lick is. If they don’t hit one I make, I just move over 50 feet and start again. I think something in the soil sometimes just doesn’t taste right to them because moving slightly can make a big difference.”

Food plots also perform an important function in attracting deer to and holding them on the properties McGlone manages.

“Basically, Imperial Clover and No-Plow are what grows best here, and I time my plantings according to the recommendations,” he said. “But after that, I go a little crazy. We also have some very poor, sandy, acidic soil here; you can lime the heck out of it and be back to low pH in two years. So I lime it as well as I can — it’s tough to get in my spots because they’re so remote — and disc it all in. A lot of locals, some of them farmers, see what I’m doing and laugh. But when they come back and see a beautiful, ankle-deep clover field full of deer, they ask me for advice.”

Because of the heavily-wooded terrain, most of McGlone’s food plots are small.

“I have 20 plots to work each year, and my biggest is just under four acres,” he said. “Most are in that 1/2- to one-acre range. We hire a dozer guy to just carve them out of the woods. It would be nice to have a nice, flat, straight field where you could bring in a big tractor, but I have a New Holland 30-horsepower and a heavy disc. You could do some of the work with an ATV, but you’d

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have to make a million passes. And some of this ground is just wet and nasty. You need heavier gear to get the job done."

## Gary Chamlee: Southern Style

Northern Alabama is textbook, Deep South whitetail country full of timbered ridges, gnarly sidehills and bottom fields that can grow a bumper crop ... or go bust as fast as you can break a sweat in August. That's where Gary Chamlee manages a deer herd on 700 acres containing 50 food plots.

"I'm like most hunters; I'll try any gimmick at least once," Chamlee said with a laugh. "I've tried all the other food plot brands, but Whitetail Institute is what works here. It's the buck-drawingest stuff I've ever seen. But like everything else, you have to do the right things to be successful."

And it should be noted Chamlee knows how to make seeds grow. Raised on a farm, he's intimately familiar with the challenges of soil types and weather.

"We can go four to six weeks in late summer without a drop of rain," he said. "That's why they recommend you not plant Imperial Whitetail Clover here in Alabama until early fall. But I can't wait that long; I want those bachelor groups to find my place in early summer and stay there. I plant in late spring, so when those bucks find me, that clover is 10 to 12 inches tall. I've watched 22 bucks on one field during summer, so I guess it's working."

Like most successful food plotters, Chamlee is



Food plots perform an important function in attracting deer, like this fine buck, and holding them on properties.



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meticulous about soil testing and preparation.

"Growing up on a farm taught me the importance of lime," he said. "It just makes plants sweeter. Right after that, I fertilize, then use a disc harrow to work that into the soil, and then level the field. I do have to mow weeds to keep them down. But I've learned to be careful and wait until right after a rain. I ruined a beautiful clover field once because I mowed it when it was hot and dry. Now I don't care if the weeds get knee-high on me. I just wait for the rain, then go right out and mow, and that clover is just beautiful."

Hunting over greenfields is a popular tactic in Chamlee's area, but he takes a different tack on the technique.

"As soon as the guns go off, my neighbors complain that they don't see deer on their food plots," he said. "I don't have that problem. I set up my greenfields next to dense cover and keep them skinny and 300 yards or longer. I set up my shooting houses so I can sneak in and out of them undetected, and I always hunt with the wind. Also, when my friends hunt here, they hunt with me; there's no one just wandering around. That's made a huge difference."

Chamlee's results have been impressive. He's placed at least six bucks in the state record books, and Alabama's liberal limits have let him shoot many mature bucks. But the amiable deer manager is just as proud of the health of his deer herd.

"I'll shoot 10 deer a year that weigh more than 200 pounds, and that's saying something around here," he said. "It's been a lot of fun for me, and I look forward to sharing it with my grandchildren. One of them killed his first deer with me last year, and that was special."



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Scott Bestul, the author, smiles as he looks at this great bow-kill buck.

## Mark Rutledge: Keystone Capers

Most hunters create food plots to feed deer or shoot them. Mark Rutledge had a much simpler goal when he started the practice on 320 acres in southwestern Pennsylvania.

"I just wanted to see deer," he said. "Our timber was so thick that I couldn't assess our deer population. We cut an eight-acre field in the middle of the woods, more for observation than hunting purposes."

The food plot helped Rutledge realize that things needed to change.

"We figured out our doe-to-buck ratio was about 20-to-1," he said. "It was just out of control. We got into the DMAP (Deer Management Assistance Program) so we could get more antlerless tags, and then we hammered the does. We try to harvest every mature doe we see, and the meat we can't eat goes straight to a donation program. It's made a world of difference. The ratio is down to close to 2-to-1 now, and we've been able to get a lot of bucks into the 3-1/2-year-old age class. Some of those bucks are pretty impressive."

Aggressive food plotting and timber management have improved nutrition and natural habitat, as well.


"We do regular TSI (timber stand improvement) cuts, and that's a huge benefit, both to the deer cover and as an income-generator," Rutledge said. "The cornerstone of our food plot program is Imperial Whitetail Clover. It took a while to get the soil right, though. When we cleared the timber, the pH was in the low 5s, and it took a lot of lime to get it up to the mid 6s. I plant

it in April or August. We've tried frost-seeding, but the timing here has to be perfect. I used to mow to control weeds, but it could only do so much. Now we use Arrest or Slay, and it's been perfect. I wait until the grasses and weeds get about four to six inches tall and then hit them. It just knocks them out and there's no affect on the clover at all."

In addition to clover, Rutledge plants strips of other forages to supplement the whitetail diet.

"I've had good success with Chicory Plus, which is really drought-tolerant, as well as PowerPlant," he said. "And last year, I put in Winter-Greens, which also did well. A lot of people say you need long, skinny food plots in order to see deer during the day on them, but I think location is much more important. If the field can't be observed from a road and is near thick cover, bucks will continue to feed during daylight hours. Human disturbance is responsible for bucks getting shy around food plots."

Despite the tremendous success his family has enjoyed, Rutledge has learned that deer management requires realistic expectations.

"We've been able to produce really good 3-1/2-year-old bucks, but getting them beyond that level is very difficult," he said. "There's a tremendous amount of pressure on neighboring properties, and trespassing is an ongoing and frustrating problem. We had a really nice bunch of those bucks running around last fall, and they just got hammered. I've learned that it's important to have realistic expectations in line with your property, not only where it exists but the size of it. That's the only way to make sure you're having fun." 



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