

READY. SET. HUNT.

story by **STEVE FELGENHAUER**

photos by **STEVE STOLTZ**



Steve Stoltz with a Saskatchewan Giant.

Tagging a good buck every once in a while is luck, but tagging a big buck season after season, well, that's a hunter who has the deer figured out. Steve Stoltz of Winchester's Whitetail Revolution knows a thing or two about tagging big bucks. Each season he travels the Midwest and beyond in search of monster bucks.

Stoltz doesn't rely on luck to get a giant to step into range. Instead Stoltz puts in hours observing and learning the habits of the whitetail while planning his next hunt.

Stoltz's strategy can be broken into three main groups: early season, the rut and late season. Like a coach planning his next game, within each of these strategies Stoltz has smaller strategies. So let's take a look at Stoltz's playbook, and break down each play so you can score on a buck of your own.

EARLY SEASON

According to Stoltz, The early archery season is the absolute best time to harvest a specific buck.

Why? "Because at this time of year the deer are slaves to their stomachs," says Stoltz. "Mature bucks are concentrating on building up body fat for the rut, and taking nutrients for antler growth." They arrive during daylight and often stay all night before heading back to the bedding area and they do this with a very predictable pattern. That along with the fact there's been no human pressure for the past eight months, the bucks are at ease and are yours for the taking. Well almost.

STOLTZ'S EARLY SEASON PLAYBOOK: PREPARATION IS THE KEY TO EARLY SEASON BUCKS

"Ninety percent of a hunter's time should be preparing for the hunt in early season. This is a hard thing for many hunters to do," says Stoltz. "This time should be focused on scouting; watching where the deer enters the food source and looking for avenues of approach where a hunter can set up undetected, wind direction. Do this even if it means burning a couple hunting days. Don't set up in a stand unless you know the chances of a good buck coming by the stand is very good."

PLAY ONE: SET UP FOR THE EVENING HUNT

Don't risk alerting a mature buck by hunting him in or near his bedroom in the morning. Chances are he will already be bedded or traveling in that direction when you get to your stand. Stoltz warns, "If he notices your presence, he will immediately change his routine. It doesn't take much. Set up either right on the edge of the food source, or a travel corridor just off the food source."

**PLAY TWO:
CLOSING THE GAP**

Stoltz firmly believes that most mature whitetail get that way by staying close to their core area. “Most mature bucks live within a few football fields distance from food, water and cover and seldom leave this core area unless pressured,” states Stoltz. For this reason, Stoltz stresses using the wind to your favor, not only when hunting, but getting to your stand. “I never hunt a mature early season whitetail without an undetectable approach,” says Stoltz. “Figure this route prior to hanging your stand or building your blind. Getting to your stand or blind without being detected will be your most important factor for success.”

Play Three: Hunt the weather

“Weather fronts affect big buck movement, perhaps even more so in the early season,” claims Stoltz. “When a cold front moves in and temperatures drop, the bucks get up on their feet. It is almost scary how predictable this is. Take advantage of it.”

STOLTZ’S RUT PLAYBOOK

Stoltz confesses the rut is a great time to take a big buck but most important is to realize what is happening during the rut and act on it accordingly.

**PLAY ONE:
THE PRE-RUT**

Whereas early season is 90 percent preparation, during the rut 90 percent of hunting is spending time in your stand.

Much of Stoltz’s preparation is completed in August or September – hanging stands, trimming shooting lanes and picking alternate spots so well used areas can be hunted regardless of wind direction.

Stoltz says the pre-rut won’t look like much and the buck’s main focus will still be on food, but as the days get shorter the buck will begin making scrapes and scent checking them, keeping a close eye on the does and getting ready for the next phase of the rut.

Stoltz recommends hunting the funnels that deliver the does to the food source, travel corridors and pinch points. Where the does are, the bucks won’t be far away.

**PLAY TWO:
PEAK RUT-DOING TIME**

“As the rut shifts into high gear there’s a new set of rules and this small core area of the buck has opened up to a city block or more,” says Stoltz. Though he believes many bucks stay with local does.

Stoltz defends this opinion by experience, taking several bucks during the rut, ones he had passed on as immature bucks, less than 50 yards from the spot he first saw them, years earlier.

**PLAY THREE:
READING AND ADAPTING
TO THE RUT**

Stoltz pronounces one of the keys to hunting the rut is the ability to read the rut.

Stoltz’s strategy is simple. “Doe beds, doe beds, doe beds; that doesn’t mean you have to hunt in them, but you definitely want to hunt connecting corridors between doe beds,” says Stoltz.

Even the peak rut can be broken down into phases, but a hunter has to be able to determine what the deer are doing and adapt to the deer’s breeding activities. For example, during the searching phase, when a buck is looking for a receptive doe, a hunter has to recognize this behavior and hunt travel corridors or funnels leading to a transition area; close to a food source or doe beds.

During lockdown, when a doe stands and accepts the buck, the bucks will not be using corridors because the bucks are with the does and not traveling. This is a waiting game for the buck – waiting for the doe to accept him. The bucks will not seek out other does at this stage. If the doe moves a few hundred feet that is as far as the buck will move.

**PLAY FOUR:
IT’S NOT OVER UNTIL IT’S OVER**

The post rut is often overlooked by many hunters, and Stoltz adds some validity to the reason.

“The post rut phase is a very short window of opportunity, but if you are in the woods at the time, it’s a good time to kill a buck,” says Stoltz. “Many of the post rut activities will mirror the pre-rut; scrape checking and checking on does. Once again food will become a factor.”

This again boils down to knowing where the does are and spending time on stand.



Steve Stoltz with a great Illinois buck taken early season.

LATE SEASON

“The key to late season is scouting and hanging stands for an evening hunt,” says Stoltz. “Concentrate your activities to watch and pattern the bucks as they come to food sources in the evening just before dark.”

Whether you choose to hunt early season, rut or late season put a few of Stoltz’s tactics to work. Prepare and learn the buck’s habits, figure out how to get in and out of your stand undetected and finally, hunt hard. Although, a little luck never hurt. •



Steve Stoltz admires another early season buck taken with his bow.

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