

Rivers Bend Outfitters

Fishing & Hunting in the Columbia River Gorge

Getting Started on Blacktails

Whether you're a seasoned pro or a rank amateur, studying the basics of blacktail deer will help make you a better hunter. If you already know everything there is to know about blacktail deer hunting, you may want to turn to the page. Or maybe not.

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With success rates far, far below the 50th percentile range, it's fair to say that a majority of blacktail hunters, regardless of experience, could use some information to help them change their luck. I tend to believe hunters make their own luck, and in that way I've been pretty lucky. In 33 years of hunting blacktails, I have filled at least one, and sometimes three tags a year.

Come along with me getting started (or taking a refresher course) on blacktails. Perhaps by reading about these experiences you'll pick up a tip or two that uncovers the nature of these wily deer.

My first blacktail buck came as the result of a modest little hunt taken after my move to Oregon in the early 1970s. From my home in The Dalles I had traveled over to the west side of the Cascades to the area near Lava Lake. The September weather was salubrious - ideal for camping - with the exception that it had been abnormally dry. The yellow jackets were ravenous.



Photo by Glenn Dee Summers

I soon found a 5-year-old clearcut at the edge of the Sisters Wilderness. Sign in the cut was neck-deep: trails covered with elk, bear and deer tracks, some made by inordinately large blacktails. I was an experienced whitetail and mule deer hunter, so I knew what I was about. Logic told me to get on stand between bedding areas and feed grounds. The clearcut was the feed ground and somewhere back in the timber were the bedding areas. This was simple logic dictated by basic deer behavior.

A knob in the middle of the clearcut provided me an excellent panorama of one edge of that cut and several of the game trails that funneled into and out of it. My position was 250 yards from the edge, which would keep my scent from deer on the trails and still allow a relatively easy shot.

Like all clearcuts, this opening was full of low-growing browse, herbs, forbs, wild strawberries, manzanita, maple, alder, huckleberry, gooseberry and blackberry vines.

The cut's edge effect and all that rich food was the magnet that drew the game from the sterile heavy timber.

On stand I dragged up a small log for a rifle rest, spread a ground cloth behind it and lay down with my rifle covering the edge of the clearcut. Judiciously trimming a couple of manzanita shrubs cleared my lane of fire, and the stand was set. I took my stand early in the afternoon sun and dozed a little as the day wore on. Dusk's coolness came along late in the afternoon, and I was alert for blacktails. These are nocturnal creatures, and if a buck was to show, he would do it in the last moments of daylight, or after dark.

I was about to give it up when I heard some faint noises back in the dark timber. The buck flowed from cover like a wraith and paused in the open, surveying the cut. He swiveled searching ears forward, then back, and tilted his nose out and up. I rested my old Springfield in my gloved hand on the log, put the post of my 23/4-power scope behind his shoulder and sent a 210-grain Nosler on its way.

My custom .338 punched me in recoil as the buck fell into some ferns. I waited a bit to make sure, but he was down and out. It was dusky-dark as I finished walking the 180 steps to where he lay. Lifting his dandy 3x5-point, 16-inch rack, I saw the bullet had left a half-dollar sized exit hole through his ribs. If it had been necessary, that type of wound would have provided a wonderful blood trail. I never had to look for blood or hair when I used the .338.

STAND HUNTING

Hunting from a good stand is the way to get started on blacktails. I would be quick to offer that blacktails share many similarities to their eastern white-tailed cousins. You probably know that the vast majority of whitetails killed each year are killed from stands, elevated or at ground level. The same could be said of blacktails, if more hunters would listen.

A number of hunting writers tend to forget that we all began at the beginning when we knew little or nothing about the deer we were hunting. We often complicate our deer hunting by still-hunting. Beginners should leave the still-hunting for later. For most beginners, trial and error seems to be a universal way to hunt deer. If we don't make too many errors and we learn from the ones we do make, we eventually become good deer hunters.

RIFLES & CARTRIDGE SELECTION

Blacktail deer are not armor-plated, and downing one never requires rifles or cartridges that bellow like a bull and kick like a Missouri mule. And yet there are many rifles and cartridges that will handily take blacktails in either heavy cover or open country.

The rifles and cartridges mentioned below are sold off the shelf light enough to carry all day. They are mild of recoil, light on muzzle blast and lend themselves to fun shooting practice.

Looking for a rifle to use in heavy cover? There is no such animal as a "brush rifle," but a rifle firing a relatively slow round-nosed or flat-nosed bullet gets through the leaf cover best.

Here are my votes for heavy-cover rifles: the ancient and forgotten 7x57 Mauser with 175-grain bullets; the centenarian but unsurpassed .30/30 with 150-grain bullets; the wonderful old .300 Savage with 150- or 180-grain bullets; the venerable .30/06 with 180-grain bullets; the discontinued .358 with 200- or 225-grain bullets; and the classic .35 Whelen with 225s.

Open-country blacktail hunters require long-range cartridges that deliver a bullet to 300 yards with a mid-range trajectory high of about 4 1/2 inches.

Here are my picks for long-range guns, which is by no means an all-inclusive list: The great old .257 Roberts with 100-grain bullets; the sweet .25/06 with 100- or 117-grain bullets; the devastating .257 Weatherby with 100- or 120-grain bullets; the maligned but good .264 Magnum; O'Connor's .270 with 130-grain bullets; the mild and incredible 7x57 Mauser with 139-grain bullets; and the all-around .30/06 with 165-grain bullets. I sight all of these rifles in 3 inches high at 100 yards. These are cartridges developing 2,700 fps. Any similar cartridge will work as well. - Glenn Dee Summers

YOUR SEARCH FOR INFORMATION

First, the hunter interested in hunting blacktail deer should gain as much basic knowledge about the natural lives of blacktails as possible. A lot of hunters fail to do just that. They lope off into the woods without knowing what blacktails eat, how big they get or even what they look like.

The blacktail of the lower United States inhabits the western portions of Oregon, Washington and California. It follows that those states are the major source of information on blacktails. Beginners should contact the resources agency in their respective state for basic information and research findings on blacktail deer. Your quest for knowledge will turn up such basics as what they look like, how their antlers grow, where they live, how they live, what they eat and a host of other facts. The Internet is an excellent information source. Hunting magazines occasionally print stories on blacktail deer hunts that may provide basic information, often all too brief, but sometimes interesting. And the best source of hunting information is an old blacktail hunter.

Keep this in mind: as a rule, blacktails usually spend a majority of their lives in the shadows of heavy cover. Cover so thick - well, you just have to see it to believe it. Old-timers call it black timber. But like all rules, there are exceptions. Blacktails are sometimes found in sparse timber and in open ranges along the east slopes of the Oregon and Washington Cascades and some portions of the west slopes of California's Sierra Nevada Mountains. The terrain and cover in these areas is open grassy balds, valleys with scattered oak and rolling hills with a scant cover of mixed pine-oak complex. To the experienced deer hunter's eye, this open terrain resembles nothing so much as mule deer habitat.

I worked on a fire crew southwest of Roseburg during my first summer in Oregon. We were hunting lightning strikes on Oregon and Canadian Railway Grant lands in some rough, mountainous terrain. There were no roads, and for the most part we were surrounded by virgin timber. For a Missouri hardwood logger's kid, it was pretty darned exciting, as Sitka spruce that measured 6 feet in diameter were as common as hair on a big dog.

We rounded a corner in the trail and I saw the old fire boss's jaw drop as he gazed across the little valley in front of us. On the ridge opposite, right out in the sun-lit middle of a little grassy park, were at least a dozen mature, branch-antlered blacktail bucks in various poses. Here was a lifetime collection of trophy blacktails doing what they never do.

The old fire boss was a dyed-in-the-Filson-wool blacktail hunter; his hands gripping his shovel were trembling and white to the knuckles. His tongue was hanging out of his florid face and he was drooling down his shirtfront. For a moment I thought he was going to have a stroke. He was still mumbling to himself as those bucks drifted into the timbered shadows and we went on down the trail.

Yes, there are exceptions to all rules, even those about habitat, habits and the rut.

PATTERNING BLACKTAILS

The concept of "patterning" a deer is a good one and can lead to a filled tag. I have shot blacktails that defied natural behavior. I have shot swollen-necked blacktails in the rut when the temperatures were in the 80s, bright sunshine was a daylong proposition and it was two months before time for normal rut. Too, I have shot blacktails across mountainside scree slopes feeding in the middle of a bright sunlit afternoon.

Blacktails are as good at lying doggo in the cover as their whitetail cousins, and maybe better. I have had good blacktail bucks erupt out of ferns and blackberries right at my feet just like a pheasant, and my shots went exactly where they jumped last!

One morning I slipped my way down a ridge in the dark and climbed a small fir that grew at the edge of an exposed lava flow. An hour or so after daylight, I had seen no bucks while glassing the far distances of the lava. Resting my eyes, I noticed movement and a deer-like lump under a big-leaf maple shrub about 50 yards slightly downhill from my perch.

My binoculars allowed me to look through the pie-plate-sized leaves, and I realized I was looking at a big blacktail buck.

Concentrating hard now, I pieced the parts together and found that his head and chest were facing toward me. Raising my lightweight 7mm Mauser, I placed the post and crosshair of a Leupold 3-power scope just inside his right shoulder while aiming through his body toward his left hip, and then I stroked the trigger. That 4-point buck just dropped his head and kicked a couple of times. By the time I finished, I found my 140-grain Nosler partition lying just under the hide of his right hip.

That buck had been bedded there before I came down the ridge, heard me climb my tree and was just lying there waiting for me to go on by. He probably learned that trick by accident.

3 RULES FOR BEGINNERS

Three paramount rules for the beginning blacktail hunter:

1. In either open country or dark timber, be on stand well before daylight, and stay until it is too dark to shoot.
2. Go to your stand prepared to spend all day there. Learn to sit still -- really still.
3. Practice shooting from field positions, distances and situations in which you will likely shoot deer. That includes aiming in quickly and slowly, and lots of dry-firing practice from all positions for proper trigger control.

My guess is that in his formative years, a still-hunter had come too close to that buck before he realized the danger, and as he lay trembling the hunter rushed on by without spying him. By accident (we learn a lot that way) he had found that lying still was good. I wish I had a nickel for every hunter that over the years passed by that buck thinking the woods were empty!

PICKING A STAND SITE

There is a good deal more to hunting from a stand than just going out and flopping down beside a stump. The hunter that is looking for a good stand location needs to be able to read deer sign to know where the traffic is congregated, where it moves to and from, if the traffic includes bucks and myriad other pieces of information to know where to place his stand. The beginning hunter needs to spend as much time as possible in the woods observing blacktails and how they live.

A good pair of binoculars is a way to start. Learn to observe from a distance. A hillside blind thrown together in minutes can offer cover for a forward observer or a thinking hunter.

The hunter should start his scouting long before the season starts. Learn to observe and think outside conventional techniques when hunting. Blacktails often live in the suburbs and do not require wilderness trips for observation or study.

I have killed several bucks by moving from a good stand close to the deer activity, feed grounds or bedding cover to a more distant stand to control my scent or noise or increase my vision or shooting angle. Too, I have done just the opposite.

BE FLEXIBLE

One fall I had chosen a stand with much care only to learn later what a poor stand it was. The wind drift was bad, the morning sun was in my eyes, and the bucks were in the brush before I could see the feeding area.

I chose another stand on a basalt cliff farther down in the canyon, but across the ridge from the feeding deer. I built a little hide against an aged windblown cedar to use as a rest to shoot across.

Come daylight the next day I spotted a good buck down in the canyon. It was shadowed, but since I was much closer I could see well enough to shoot. My Ultralight Ruger, in .257 Roberts, rested on my gloved hand across that old cedar skeleton and drove a 100-grain Nosler partition into his ribs. He wheeled to bound downhill and was in cover before I could shoot again.

Crossing the canyon I found him buried in an elderberry shrub. That little 100-grain, .25-caliber bullet driven by 46 grains of 4350 had exited the other side of his chest and left a profuse blood trail I could follow at a walk. He had a nice 3x3 rack about 18 inches wide, and he weighed about 145 pounds.

I'm a believer: The way to get started on blacktails is by hunting from a stand. Considering the dozens of bucks I have shot from stands it may well be the best way to hunt blacktails, even if you're a grizzled-old veteran with nerves of steel and cat-like prowess in the woods.

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