

Antler Rattling

The single greatest addition to an arsenal of productive tactics is deer calling--most important, antler rattling. Of the many big bucks taken, more than one-third are harvested because they "came to the horns." That total doesn't include the many that could, or should, have been on that list, but somehow got away.

Here are some valuable lessons about antler rattling. First, keep rattle sequences to 20 to 30 seconds. Even with short sequences, a buck may burst in before you are ready for a shot. When first rattling, try bucks that are clearly going to pass by out of range. Gauging their response builds confidence.

The single most important ingredient for antler-rattling success lies in a deer herd with a well-rounded age structure. Ideally, there will be a good buck to doe ratio, with a good percentage of the bucks being mature. In healthy herds, competition among bucks--both in establishing a pecking order and in breeding rituals--is very much a part of the animals' yearly tradition. From early season sparring bouts to full-blown breeding-season fights, bucks are acclimated to the sound of "horns." With the sound of antler rattling a regular part of their environment, attraction to these sounds is a "normal" response.

The sound of rattling antlers means different things to different deer, and there are many variables that determine how individual deer interpret and react to the sound. Does, yearlings and small bucks may run away from the sound of a full-blown breeding fight between mature bucks, yet the same deer may come to the sound of the gentle "ticking" of antlers related to an early-autumn sparring match between youngsters. A mature buck in the peak of the rut may walk right past the sound of a couple of small bucks sparring, yet aggressively charge into the sound of crashing antlers worn by two big bucks fighting over a hot doe. Every situation is unique to itself and only by picking up a set of antlers and starting along the learning curve can you hope to become efficient in interpreting the right place, time and type of call to use.

Antler rattling is effective from early October through late December. Since the November rut is "the big dance," and mature bucks know this, the build-up period to peak-breeding time is intense. With each passing day leading up to the time when most of the does will come into heat in mid-November, mature bucks begin to gradually increase their daytime activity. They start "trolling" for hot does and begin to encounter other bucks doing the same. Territories are defended, orders of dominance become confused and chaos and pandemonium rule in the deer world.

When scouting for big bucks, big rubs don't lie. Small bucks sometimes rub big trees, but they don't make big rubs. A concentration of big rubs in an area is a sure sign that a monster is present. The sound of an antler-rattling challenge may bring him in.

At this time, antler rattling is at its peak effectiveness. Bucks are looking for a fight or sex, and the distant sound of clashing antlers means one, or both, to them. Everything is set for some awesome responses to the sound of "horns" during this time of maximum frustration and excitement.

When it comes to mastering the art of antler rattling, one of the biggest obstacles to overcome is the gray matter between your ears. The old saying "you'll never ride if you don't get in the saddle"

lends itself well to this undertaking. If you've taken care of the first part of the equation--place and time--then "get some horns and let 'er fly!" Be determined, have an open mind and let the learning process begin.