

# Following up your shot: FIND & RECOVER that animal

Deer Search tracker offers advice to lead to a successful ending

By Dennis Jensen  
Contributing Writer

**So**, this hunting pal of mine shoots this buck, a real nice 8-pointer, during the muzzleloader season two years ago. He climbs down from his treestand and finds the deer, kicking – really kicking – on the ground.

He has been hunting long enough to know that this deer may not be mortally wounded so he reaches into his bag to deliver a killing shot, only to find powder and caps but no bullets.

He races back to his vehicle, about a quarter mile away to get more ammo and when he returns that buck is gone – long gone.

What happened? Just ask Tim Nichols, who has seen this show all too many times.

“This happens two dozen or more times a year,” Nichols said. “Some guys are crying when they call me. They’ve seen too many damn shows on TV. They shoot the deer; it drops instantly. They’re high-fiving it with their buddy. They’re taking a sandwich out of their backpack.”

Nichols said that if the bullet passes anywhere near the vertebrae, the shock of the bullet will drop that deer immediately. It would be like you getting hit square in the back with a 2 by 4.

“If those feet are moving, all you’ve done is numbed him. But once that deer gets feeling back, once he gets his bearings, he’s up and running; he’s gone,” Nichols said. “You will never see that deer again.”

What to do? “If that deer goes down and he’s still kicking, you want to keep on firing,” he said.

Nichols said that time and again he will ask the hunter, even veteran hunters who have shot 40 or more deer, why they didn’t put another bullet in the animal kicking on the ground.

“They tell me, ‘I didn’t want to waste the meat.’ So, you know what I tell them? You know what? Now there is no meat to waste.”

Nichols has seen and heard just about every kind of bad shot one could imagine. And he knows a thing or two about tracking wounded deer.

The 56-year-old Nichols, who lives in Granville, N.Y., is one of about 65 volunteers

who belong to Deer Search, a dedicated group of trackers who, with their talented dogs, search for wounded deer and bear. The organization does not charge a fee but accepts donations.

Since he started in the program 22 years ago, Nichols has found, by his count, 388 deer, 12 bears and one moose in both New York and Vermont.

And Nichols is one of the best, if not the best. For 17 years running, Nichols has been the recipient of the Lore Schlectingen Award, a pewter plate that goes to the person who has taken more calls than anyone else in the Deer Search organization.

Nichols says he first got interested in deer tracking with dogs after he wounded two deer in his younger years and failed to recover either one.

So, what are the biggest errors a hunter makes when taking that shot with a bow or gun?

“One of the biggest mistakes is probably taking the shot at a quartering-away deer,” he said. “People have a tendency to put it right behind the front shoulder. You are taking (missing) all of the vitals out at that point. You should aim for the last rib or just ahead of the hind quarter so the arrow or bullet has a full path through the vital areas of the deer.”

If a hunter has the ideal shot, the broadside shot, he or she should aim approximately five or six inches behind the front shoulder, right in the middle of the body.

“If you shoot high you’re going to catch lung. Shoot low and you will catch lung or the heart. A little bit to the right, you get the liver or kidneys, a little to the left you get lungs. What you don’t want to do is hit anywhere in the front shoulder. You’re going to get a lot of blood. That deer is going to bleed a lot, but a healthy deer has about eight pints of blood,” he said.

### Calm down, take a breath

Is there any reaction on the part of a deer where one can be certain that the shot is a lethal one? What about how the deer reacts when shot or if the deer’s tail is tight against its body as it runs off?

“Personally, I don’t believe there is any way that you can tell for sure,” he said. “You can never tell by the action

of the tail. I’ve had people tell me they shot and that tail was down. They tell me, ‘I hit that deer hard.’ Then they get out of the tree and find they missed it completely.”

Nichols said that there are several critical factors a hunter must consider after taking a shot that finds its mark.

“The first thing is, calm down. Take a deep breath. Keep focused on where you saw the deer go before it goes out of sight because there is a good chance you’re going to get screwed up after you climb down out of your stand,” he said. “Go and find the arrow.”

Bowhunters have one big advantage over gun hunters, Nichols said, and that is the arrow.

“If you’ve got the arrow, all the evidence will be on that arrow,” he said. “That’s the ballgame.”

If it is a paunch shot, pick up the arrow and smell it and look for evidence of intestinal damage.

“Unfortunately, with a bullet you don’t have that option. You have to find your own evidence on the ground,” he said.

If you have made a paunch shot with a bow or a gun, you will very likely catch that deer lying down and then jump it, perhaps only 100 to 150 yards away.

That deer is “very recoverable” but only if you back off, Nichols said. “Stop right there and come back two, three or four hours later.” But if you wait too long, Nichols cautioned, there is always the possibility these days that coyotes will get to your deer before you do.

When it comes to a blood trail, the first 300 yards usually tell the story, Nichols said.

“A deer that is only nicked is going to hightail it out of there,” he said.

If the trail continues and you don’t have a dead deer, it’s a good idea to find a hunting pal to help out. The lead man stays on the blood trail while the person behind marks the last blood found. That way if you lose the trail – and this happens all too often – you have a place to go back to and to start over again, Nichols said.

“We always have one person behind, taping the last blood with biodegradable tape. The

guy behind me is marking blood. Hunters should have one guy taping, one guy tracking. If you’ve walked 100, 150 yards and you lose the blood trail, mark the last spot, then go 100 yards straight out, 100 yards to the left and 100 yards to the right. You should pick up blood,” Nichols says.

Then there is the deer that is bleeding well but on the move.

“Track a little and if you see bright, red blood, you have to get on it and stay on it. Keep the blood trail going. You have to keep the deer moving. If you’ve made a muscle shot, the only way you’re going to get that deer is to keep pushing it. As long as it’s moving, it’s pumping blood,” he said.

A hunter who finds hair everywhere and no blood means that “you shaved that deer. That deer will keep going. The more hair you find, the less chance you will find it. But don’t give up yet, Nichols said. “Still, go after it. Anything you hit, you always track it and give every effort. That is the ethical thing to do. You owe it to the deer.”

If you are on a deer that beds down repeatedly and the blood trail is still there, Nichols said, “that deer is really hurt so keep right after it.”

Wounded deer do some strange things, Nichols said.

“Nothing is etched in stone when it comes to a wounded deer. They’ll circle you, they will do a figure eight on you, they will backtrack. They’ll lay down and you will just about step on them until they jump up and move. The same thing with a bear,” he said.


He also cautioned hunters about an old wife’s tale, the one about where a deer won’t go when mortally wounded.

“Even the most wounded deer will do the most ungodly stuff,” Nichols said. “And how many times have you heard a wounded deer will not go uphill. I hear it from old-timers. That’s baloney. Those deer will go up on a hill and lay down to see what’s following them.”

When it comes to a wounded deer, Nichols said, “There are no rules. They do stuff that makes me shake my head.”

Tim Nichols, tracking dog and hunter at the conclusion of another successful recovery.  
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