

BROS Or DOES?

When to pull the trigger
on the ladies,
and when to wait for
Mr. Right.



By Russ Gabel

I don't know how they do it, but it happened again. One minute the small field in front of me was empty and all was quiet in the tree stand. I swear my mind wandered briefly, but the next minute there were two massive does standing right in front of me. My bow was lying across my lap. My release was not clipped to my string. I might as well have had my pants draped around my ankles. I was totally caught by surprise. Even worse, these two wary does knew that there was something fishy about that human-shaped cluster of leafy camo sitting at the top of the ladder stand. I wanted desperately to give one of these two ladies the shaft, but this obviously wasn't their first encounter with a bow hunter. While one doe would work on my bait pile, the other one would keep her large, watchful eyes locked intently on me. I was trapped. Any effort to raise my bow or shift my position to prepare for a shot was met with raised tails, alert eyes, and no chance of success. On any other day, I would have took my shot and the hunt would have been done. This day, however, I was forced to wait them out. Twelve agonizing minutes passed with these two does taking turns grinding away my pile of apples and giving me the stink-eye. Suddenly, they both looked toward the top of the field. I couldn't see this area clearly due to a row of pine trees, but their body language clearly communicated that another deer was coming into the field. Soon, a 5-inch spike joined the tag-team bait pile raid going on in front of me. At this point, the spike is presenting me with a perfect shot, but the does were eyeing me again. I decided that if I was shooting something with antlers, a spike buck was not worth the verbal abuse that I would receive from my hunting buddies. I kept my focus on the does and waited for them to take their eyes off of me one more time. After another five minutes, they did, looking up toward the top of the field again. Now I'm not the sharpest broadhead in the pack, but I was fairly sure that another deer was about to join the party. Before this new deer even came into view, I had my bow up and at full draw. Either this new deer would be worth shooting, or one of the distracted does was going down hard. As this deer came into view, I could see a large body, a thick neck, and finally...antlers. He took about three more steps and I let my arrow fly. After an amazing flip in the air, he scrambled back the way he came. The other deer scattered too. An hour later, I was posing for pictures with a nice 7-point buck.

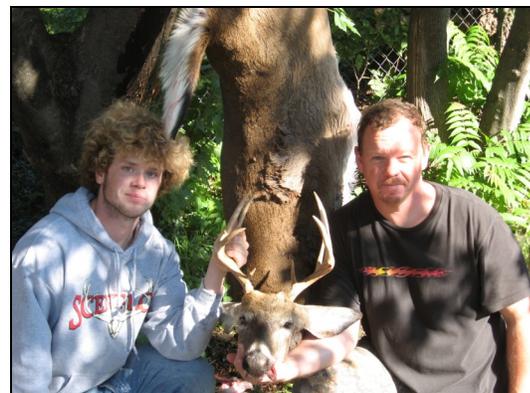
As I've reflected on that hunting experience several years ago, I've recognized what a significant lesson I learned that day. If that hunt had unfolded the way I planned, I would have taken an early shot at one of those does that entered my field on that late October morning. What I now understood was that if I had shot one of the does, I would have never seen the spike or the 7-point that was following them. I would have been walking around in the field following a blood trail or dragging my doe, and would have certainly spooked these two bucks. This forced lesson has since changed the way that I approach my bow hunting season each fall. Like any hunter, I want to hang some serious deer head-gear on my wall. But I also want a freezer-full of venison to keep me warm and happy long after my tags expire. This dilemma has forced me to come up with an overall strategy for my hunting season that accomplishes both of these goals. This strategy breaks the hunting season down into five specific periods, with different hunting goals for each one.

Early Doe Season

Michigan has set aside one weekend in September as Early Doe Season. During this time, you can use firearms or a bow to harvest does from private land. This works perfectly into our strategy. At this point in the fall, bucks are not following does, and it's very easy to pull a few ladies out of the population without alarming any of the resident bachelors. The goal is to extract a doe or two without leaving any witnesses that will be much more wary when bow season comes along. With that in mind, you want to look for single does, or draw a bead on the first doe that comes into the field. This is particularly important if you're doing your work with a firearm. You want to avoid busting up a whole herd of deer just to harvest a doe or two. This rule also holds true for the youth hunt on the following weekend. Leave no witnesses. If you can keep this in mind, you will have scores of naïve deer walking around the woods when you come back in a week or two with your stick and string.

Bow Season – Part 1

Game on! Now you can keep your eyes open for the buck of your dreams. This is also a great time of the season to fill doe tags. For the first two or three weeks in October, does and bucks are still generally traveling in separate groups. Because the rut is still nearly a month away, you can usually get away with taking a doe or two out of the population without the risk of spooking a following buck. Like the early season, if you are going to take a doe, go for a single, or try to do your work with as few other deer around as possible. The fewer deer that are around when you take your shot, the less wary they will be when it's their turn to be in the crosshairs.



Bow Season – Part 2

As you come toward the end of October and into November, it's time to leave your doe tags in your wallet. Bucks are starting show interest in does and beginning to follow their movements. Even if a single doe comes into your view, a buck could be tailing her by ten minutes or more. Take a shot at the doe, and you will never see the buck. This is the time to give a free pass to the ladies. Let them wander around your stand and leave their natural scent all over the place. The more does you leave around, the greater chance that you're going to draw in the bucks that are following them. Pass on the does, your patience may very well be rewarded with a rack for your wall.

Gun Season

Welcome to the smoke-wagon free-for-all! Over 800,000 hunters head into the woods with the hopes of bringing Bambi home. If you're one of them, the best advice I can give you is to make sure you're in the woods on opening day. Statistics vary, but somewhere between 60-80% of all the deer taken during gun season are shot on opening day. That leaves the remaining 20-40% of deer to be harvested on the following 13 days. In short, opening day is very important! After that, those lucky enough to survive usually head for thick cover, or adopt a nocturnal lifestyle. Gun season usually hits right around the end of the rut, so bucks will still be following does. If you're hunting private land, and there is not a lot of pressure from other hunters, this is still a time that you would want to pass on does. Let them mill around, and your gun season buck may show up.

Late Season

Following gun season, there is an assortment of deer hunting opportunities, including late bow season, black powder season, and late doe season on private land. Typically, the deer are pretty shell-shocked from two weeks of dodging bullets, and things don't usually settle down until the second or third weeks of December. When they do settle down, the rut is over, and bucks are moving separate from does again. If it's a season that you can take a buck and you still have a tag to fill, do your thing. Deer tend to be extremely wary in this late season, so pay attention to all of the details. This is also your opportunity to fill out your remaining doe tags and fill up your freezer, without fear of spooking a buck. While this can be one of the most frigid and miserable times to sit still in a tree, the thrill of seeing a deer wandering through the leafless timber, or the chance to follow a clear blood trail through unblemished snow makes the late season an unforgettable experience.

There you have it...a complete strategy for your hunting season. Approach next fall with a plan like this, and you'll have the chance to hang a trophy and dine on venison well into spring time.

