

How I use my Trail Cameras

My intentions in this article are to review how I use trail cameras to help us monitor and manage our deer population. I am not going to review all of the different kinds of trail cameras or all of the different manufacturers of trail cameras. Prices range from \$60 to over \$650 but as is the case with most things you get what you pay for. You should be able to get a decent camera in the \$100 plus range.

The only thing that I do want to point out is that there are three kinds of flash available on trail cameras. The three are the original incandescent (white) flash, infrared red flash and the newest infrared black flash. I started using trail cameras when there was pretty much just one manufacturer making them. The camera had a large special battery that was a little bit awkward to work with but it did take pretty good pictures. In 2005 I started experimenting with a couple of other cameras which at that time only came with the white flash. I learned a lot about the cameras and our deer over the next few years. Up until 2011 I had stuck with the white flash cameras but when I needed to replace a couple of cameras in 2011 I decided to try an infrared camera. In case you don't know, the big concern about the white flash is that it scares the deer. As I have pointed out several times in many of my articles "Everyone's situation is different". I am simply explaining what has happened in our situation. I was always concerned about the flash scaring the deer but after several years of getting pictures I am convinced that **for us** most of our deer are unaffected by the white flash. They may look at it but they are not scared away by it. There may be that one Doe or Buck that is skittish and stays away from the camera but overall we can get pictures of most all of our deer while using a white flash. Keep in mind that my cameras are placed at feeders and on food plots with corn in front of them. (Legal in Georgia) I do not put my cameras in the woods over trails or scrapes because I believe the flash would disturb them in their bedding areas or woods trails. When I got the infrared cameras in 2011 I set them up on a feeder and I was anxious to start getting some pictures. So guess what happens, the first 5 pictures are of two young Bucks and they are staring directly at the camera. I am certain they were looking at the red glow of the infrared. You can just imagine the first impression this made on me. I was immediately convinced that the deer can see this infrared camera. I now add that to the fact that the pictures weren't as good a quality as the pictures that we were getting with the white flash and I immediately got a bad impression of the infrared cameras. I guess the red glow isn't as shocking to the deer as the white flash is but still I was hoping the deer wouldn't react to it. I guess this is why they have now come out with a black flash that the deer should not be able to see. I'm hoping that the camera manufacturers will hear my concerns and thus continue to make a variety of white flash cameras for those of us that want to continue to use them. What I'm finding now is that it's hard to find a white flash camera. One manufacturer may have 10 different infrared cameras to choose from and then only one white flash camera. I know the battery life is longer in the infrared camera and the trigger speed may be a little faster but the quality of our pictures is critical for us to do our Buck counts. Of the two cameras I bought in 2011 one was a \$160 infrared camera and the other was a \$75 infrared camera from two different manufacturers. If I had never used a white flash camera before I would probably think that the infrared pictures were pretty good but having used the white flash for so many years we can see the difference in the quality. Right now I am unpacking two new cameras. One is a \$70 white flash and the other is a \$150 infrared red flash. I am anxious to get them set up so I can do some more comparing.

For those of you who do not currently use trail cameras let me say that you shouldn't let the technology scare you off. They are actually very easy to use. I believe the trail camera is one of the most important management tools that you can use today. If you feel that you don't have very many Bucks on your property then you can set up a trail camera(s) to see if you can get some pictures of some Bucks. **If it is legal where you**

hunt you can put a camera over a feeder or put some attractant in front of the camera such as corn. This will allow you to prove or disprove that you don't have very many Bucks. Whenever I buy a camera I buy two digital cards that go into the camera. (i.e. SD Cards) This way I can remove the card in the camera that has pictures on it and then replace it with a blank card. I do this every 1 or 2 weeks depending on how many pictures I am getting. For those of you who are not familiar with the digital cards that go into the camera I just want to point out that after you review the pictures on the card you can either copy them into your computer or just erase the card so you can just use it again in the camera. I will now review in detail how I use my trail cameras to monitor and manage the deer on our property.

We use five cameras to cover our 1100 acres. There is no set number of cameras that you should have because again everyone's situation is different. You should have enough cameras to be able to get pictures of most of the deer on your property. You can always move the cameras around like I do so you can cover more territory. If you have thousands of acres then you will just have to focus on a certain amount of acreage. Our Bucks finish growing their antlers between the end of July and the beginning of August. I usually get a little anxious and put our cameras out in August at our feeders. I review the pictures just to get a look at some of our Bucks and to see how big they are. They don't start shedding their velvet until late September so I wait until then to start my camera survey. In September/October I start my camera survey so I can try to estimate the following three items. The first thing that I want to estimate is our Doe to Buck ratio. The second thing that I want to estimate is our fawn recruitment rate. The third thing that I want to estimate is how many individual Bucks are on our property. You should try to cover over a thousand acres so you can come up with representative results. Let me now review how I do my camera survey in detail.

I put our cameras at our feeders (legal in Georgia) for two weeks and then move them to a field or food plot with corn in front of them (again legal in Georgia) for another two weeks. The reason I move the cameras is because I determined several years ago that some of our Bucks do not go to our feeders. Let me explain **our situation**. Because we have wild hogs on our property we had to fence in our feeders with hog wire fence. So our feeder consists of a feed trough, a roof over the trough to prevent rain from ruining the feed and a hog wire fence covering a good size perimeter around the trough. As a result of one or more of these things we have a few Bucks that do not go to our feeders so I will not get pictures of all of our Bucks at just the feeders. This is why I also put the cameras out along the edge of a field or food plot with corn in front of them. This usually gets us pictures of not only the Bucks that don't go to the feeders but also many of the Bucks that we've already seen at the feeders. I was always concerned that the flash of the trail camera was scaring some of the Bucks away but when we move the camera to a field with corn in front of it we get pictures (with a flash) of these Bucks that seemed to avoid the feeders. Because I get so many pictures I will actually swap out the camera cards each week so I am only getting one week's worth of pictures. I may get three to four thousand pictures total between the five cameras in one week. When I review the pictures I count how many Does, how many Fawns and how many Bucks I see in each picture. I keep a running total so I can come up with a grand total of how many Does, Fawns and Bucks I counted. You may count the same Doe and Fawn 50 times but that is ok. You may also count the same Buck 40 times and that is ok. I do this for the two weeks the cameras are on our food plots. In two weeks I feel confident that I will get a good sampling of our Does and Fawns and Bucks which will allow me to estimate our Doe to Buck ratio and our Fawn recruitment rate. I simply divide the number of Does that I counted by the number of Bucks that I counted to get my estimated Doe to Buck ratio. I then divide the number of Fawns that I counted by the number of Does that I counted to get my estimated fawn recruitment rate. If you enter these counts into our software then it will calculate these rates for you. During the total four to six weeks that I have my cameras out I try to isolate the different Bucks that are in the pictures. Please read my article "[How do you](#)

determine how many different Bucks you have” to see what I do to estimate how many different Bucks we have. The only way to estimate how many different Bucks you have is by analyzing your trail camera pictures.

In the Advanced Version of my software I have a formula where you can use these estimated ratios. If you are able to estimate how many individual Bucks you have on your property then you can use the formula to not only estimate your deer population but how many deer you need to harvest in order to reach your desired deer population and Doe to Buck ratio. **Unfenced properties should not try to use the number of individual Bucks you count because you are counting some of your neighbors Bucks.** If you are interested in what I am doing please read my article “How we estimate our Deer Population and Harvest Requirements” to see the special analysis that I have to do!

I now want to review some of the things that we have learned from using trail cameras for the last several years. **Again, this is based on our own situation.**

1. For the most part we get pictures of 95% of the deer that are going to use a feeder in about two weeks. What this means is that after the first two weeks that a camera is at a feeder we don't see very many new deer show up. We just continue to see the same deer constantly at the feeder. They are definitely showing signs of being territorial.
2. When we are experiencing dry conditions the usage of the feeders which contain protein pellets goes up a lot. After we get a good rain the usage of the feeders goes down.
3. Sometimes we have a feeder that is taken over by Bucks and the Does stay away or go to the feeder during daytime when the Bucks aren't there.
4. As I mentioned above some deer may be leery about going to the feeder. I had one Buck that wasn't going to a feeder that had a camera with a white flash so I put a trail camera (with a white flash) on a post in a food plot that I knew he was going to. I put corn in front of the camera and got lots of pictures of deer but not this particular Buck. I saw him one time walking past the post at a distance while the camera was taking a picture of another deer that was close to the camera. I knew that this Buck was avoiding the unnatural post in the food plot or the white flash of the camera just like he was avoiding the feeder. What I did now was I moved the same camera (with the white flash) over to the wood line and mounted the camera on a tree and guess what happened. I got tons of pictures of this Buck with the camera mounted on the tree. He was an exception but it proved to me that a small percentage of the Bucks and probably a small percentage of the Does are just very sensitive to things that may appear unnatural. This particular Buck was nervous about the feeder and the post that we put out in the food plot.
5. In general our rut occurs during the month of November. Usually in the middle of October I will start to see some Bucks move around while they are obviously trying to find and establish their own territory. A Buck that was at a certain feeder for four months is now checking out a feeder in another location. The less dominant Bucks seem to move around the most. I've had a couple of Bucks that suddenly started showing up at every camera location (feeders and food plots).
6. Camera angles are everything. In 2014 I went through over 45,000 pictures prior to the season and during the season. I've been going through pictures for eight years so that's a scary thought. You need to do your best to keep multiple pictures of an individual Buck. I can show you some pictures of the same Buck and in one picture his antlers look big and in another picture they don't look as big. Also, in one picture he looks like he's 2 ½ years old and in another picture he look's 3 ½ years old. I try to keep between five and ten pictures of each different Buck we get pictures of. If you have not done so then please watch my video “How to Age a Buck on the Hoof”. We like getting pictures in October because

the Bucks are experiencing their physiological changes for the upcoming rut. This makes the ageing of the Buck on the hoof more accurate. I try to keep pictures from different side angles as well as front angles. By reviewing multiple pictures of the same Buck we feel fairly confident that we can estimate his age and thus make a decision ahead of time on whether we would like to harvest that Buck or not.

7. Camera photo delay. Each camera has the ability to set the delay between pictures. If I set it to one minute then after a picture is taken it will not take another picture until after one minute has passed and a new motion is detected. After the first few years of using the cameras I determined that I could use three minutes to minimize the number of pictures that were being taken and yet not miss taking pictures of many (if any) deer. Remember that I place my cameras at our feeders and on our food plots with corn in front of them where there is continuous deer traffic. Many cameras today offer one minute and then five minutes, ten minutes etc. I don't want to make it five minutes because I may miss a picture of the Buck that just goes to the feeder for a couple of minutes. As a result of this concern I am forced to use a delay of one minute because a five minute delay is too long. This means that I get a lot more pictures than if I was using a three minute delay. I would love to reduce the number of pictures that I have to go through and yet still get enough pictures to use for an accurate camera survey.
8. Daytime pictures. Most people will tell you that the majority of deer pictures are taken at night. This is probably true in most situations. Once again "Everyone's situation is different". Because we make such an effort on minimizing the pressure on our deer we actually get a good percentage of our pictures during daylight. This includes Bucks (even some older Bucks).
9. Print yourself a photo album. Each season after I have segregated the pictures of all of our different Bucks I make a photo album for all of our hunters to review. We have done our best to age each of the Bucks on the hoof and we note it on the pictures. I usually just print one picture of the younger Bucks and then two pictures of the older Bucks. This is a great education for our hunters on how to age the Bucks on the hoof. Because of these pictures along with the video we take of our own Bucks all of our hunters have become quite proficient at ageing Bucks on the hoof. If you don't have the time to print out any of the pictures then you can at least let everybody review the pictures on their computer. Please read my article "Sharing Trail Cam Pictures with your Hunt Group".

In summary, by using trail cameras you can get a good feel for how many deer are on your property. You may get pictures of deer that you may never see while you are hunting because they are nocturnal, they may spend hunting season off of your property or possibly they just never walked within sight of you. I know that there were some seasons where we were concerned that we didn't have many Bucks on our property but by using the trail cameras we feel very confident about whether we have many Bucks or not. If you at least get pictures of some Bucks and then you don't see them you know that you may need to do something different to improve your hunting. Some of you may be saying that you aren't seeing the Bucks because your neighbors are shooting them (which may be the case) but don't assume anything. In one of my other articles I explain how I put my trail cameras out after hunting season to see if I can tell which Bucks if any, survived. We've been thrilled to see that most of the Bucks that we let walk do in fact survive the season. If you aren't interested in using cameras because you like the element of not knowing what deer are out there then you should at least monitor your sightings and harvests so you can tell if you are seeing more or less deer than in previous seasons. Also if you are interested in growing older and bigger Bucks then you can still learn how to age a Buck on the hoof so you can pass up shooting younger Bucks. I am hoping to provide enough information on this website so

even if you don't use trail cameras and you don't take video of your own deer you will learn how to monitor your deer population and maybe even try to get your Bucks out to an older age.