

Buying Deer Dirt



Owning hunting land can be a wonderful thing, especially if you use this guide to evaluating and selecting great Deer Dirt.

By Jason Snavelly

The auctioneer sounded off as he stood in one of many log landings on the 400-acre property.

“Now give me four... four... four...and twenty five thousand...four hundred and twenty five thousand... *I got it!* Now do I hear four thirty five... four thirty five... There it is! I’ve got four hundred and thirty five thousand dollars....now give me four hundred and forty!”

I stood and watched, as I had many times before, as the farm of every deer hunter’s dreams was being auctioned. The auctioneer continued, and three bidding parties shrunk to two.

“They quit making large tracts like this, folks,” the auctioneer prodded.

The two remaining bidders studied aerial photos of the property layout as if searching for some way to define their maximum bid. As the bidders grew more and more hesitant to give their affirmative nods, the auctioneer allowed them five minutes to think it over, hoping that the battle would resume at a faster pace when the bidding re-opened.

During the break, a friend of mine introduced me to one of the bidders. My friend explained to the bidder that I assist land-owners with their deer management programs. When I asked him about his plans for a property like this one, he said “We just like to hunt!” This surprised me, since most large land parcels in this particular area end up in the hands of investors looking to subdivide into smaller tracts.

The auctioneer resumed with his thunderous invitation for more money. When it was all said and done, my new friend had

purchased the property for nearly three quarters of a million dollars: a great deal in this particular region!

As I shook his hand and congratulated him, he said, “So, does this area have big deer?”

At that moment I realized just how popular deer hunting is becoming. This gentleman had just spent three quarters of a million dollars on hunting property, and he didn’t know the first thing about the potential of the property or even that region of the state!

More hunters are becoming aware of the fact that they can save themselves a great deal of time, money, and aggravation if they do their homework on the front end of a property acquisition. One of the most common requests I get now as a private consultant is for assistance with finding that perfect piece of deer dirt. In talking with these clients two or three years after the purchase, I find them to be much more satisfied than those who did not do as much research. Perhaps one of the most important advantages of doing your homework is that you have identified most of your hurdles or challenges before you purchase the property. This allows you to focus efforts on those challenges immediately after closing.

Hunters are realizing that now is the time to work hard to put themselves in the position to afford their own piece of deer dirt. I was one of them. Those of you who have been through this probably came to the same realization that I did early on – finding the perfect piece of real estate can be frustrating considering all of the variables. For example, I had noticed a huge difference



in the cost per acre within the same county and even sometimes within the same township. The big difference was usually that one parcel consisted of steep hills and rocky soils while another boasted rich agricultural fields with heavily fragmented forests. What was the best route? Buy more acres of the less desirable land or fewer acres of the nutrient-rich, desirable farmland?

My search started four years ago and took me all across the whitetail's range. I thought I had a very good idea about what factors to consider when searching for my own deer dirt, but I still learned a lot. I have since developed a checklist to use when qualifying properties and identifying their potential. Although there are many questions to answer before closing on real estate, these key considerations will provide you with an advantage over those who are not doing their "deer dirt" homework and help you realize the ultimate dream of every hunter: land ownership.

Consider Travel Time

We all dream about owning land, often in a completely different part of the country. I can remember reading articles as a youngster by outdoor writer John Wooters about the trophy buck potential of south Texas. I have always wanted to own property in south Texas and have a crack at managing my own Brush Country bucks. However, with limited time to spare at this point in my life, it's just not the best option.

Your first goal is to narrow your search to a particular state and then to a specific region of that state, if not a specific county. Travel time is incredibly important to keep in mind when making this decision. Today's deer hunters invest a great deal of time and money on property improvements such as food plots, native habi-



When scoping out potential property, talk to local officials who will know about deer management in the area. The local wildlife law enforcement officer, for example, may be able to tell you whether QDM is practiced on surrounding tracts of land, and how much cooperation you are likely to get from neighbors in a QDM effort.



Just because a property is small does not mean you can't produce great hunting experiences through QDM. This 3½-year-old 8-pointer was killed by Michigan bowhunter and QDMA member Ken Kozminski on November 6. Ken owns and manages 100 acres of land, and he has seen 13 different bucks on his property so far this year. Ken has created sanctuaries, enhanced cover, and planted food plots to ensure that his small tract is a deer haven.

tat enhancement, pond construction, infrared-triggered camera surveys, observation surveys, and more. I have seen many landowners purchase great deer land only to realize a year later that they don't have enough time to travel to the property for habitat projects, let alone hunting. Many properties sold each year are being sold by these absentee landowners.

It's important to understand your travel tolerance up front. For example, if you do not like to fly or cannot afford to fly on a regular basis, don't buy a property that is more than 500 miles away. Remember the purpose of the property: to get your hands dirty working with your own piece of "deer paradise." Think realistically and make sure you will be able to spend plenty of time enjoying your deer dirt.

Study State Agency Laws and Regulations

Some states are friendlier than others when it comes to providing hunters with the necessary management tools and flexibility to successfully manage their properties for a quality deer population. Before placing a giant bullseye on the state of your choice, always study the state agency's laws, regulations, willingness to permit landowners to harvest an adequate number of does, and the impact of politics on hunting regulations before signing any papers. You may find that your state does not provide you with an adequate number of doe tags, a lengthy season, or other tools to achieve the results you desire. Fortunately, many states that don't have lengthy seasons or liberal bag limits now offer greater flexibility to deer managers through Deer Management Assistance Programs (DMAP).

Large or Small?

One of the most common questions about purchasing hunting land relates to the minimum acreage required to manage for quality deer and deer hunting. As a private land manager, I've had

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the privilege of working with landowners from all walks of life. Some own large tracts of land; however, many own less than 500 acres and a fair percentage of them own less than 200 acres. I'm familiar with many tracts in the 40- to 80-acre range that consistently produce quality hunting experiences and, on occasion, record-book bucks.

While looking for top deer-producing properties, I like to run down a checklist for a particular parcel of land. Often, smaller, more diverse tracts pass this test while larger properties fall short. A small property with the right habitat diversity can make excellent deer dirt, but much depends on what the land around this property looks like. Does a small property boast agriculture fields in an area where cultivated land is scarce? Conversely, does the property offer good escape cover while being surrounded by open lands? Aerial photos and topographic maps are excellent tools for determining if a small property sets up well to attract deer. In fact, the first step I take is to obtain as many maps as I can of the property and any parcel that borders it. Plat maps, topo maps, aerial maps, soil maps and tax maps give you a bird's eye view of the area.

With properties of any size, but especially small properties, the size, number and location of neighboring properties can work for or against you. Small-property owners will have more success with QDM if they can establish deer management cooperatives with their neighbors. But the more neighbors you have, the more difficult it will be to form and manage the cooperative. The best scenario is a handful of neighbors controlling larger tracts of land.

Perhaps the property is bordered on several sides by a hunting club that is well known for their QDM program. Likewise, the club may be well known for harvesting young bucks and not allowing does to be harvested. It's a good idea to contact the local wildlife conservation officer, who will probably know which properties are managing for quality deer and which are not. The officer will also know the areas where game-law violations are a problem.

In the event that you end up with one or more neighbors who do not practice QDM or wish to be a part of a cooperative, at least you have identified a potential drain on your program. You can tailor your property design and layout to play defensive deer management with that particular neighbor. These techniques might include the designation of sanctuaries or changing your original plans for food plot locations.

What is the Property's Potential?

This is the question I hear most often. To get your answer, start with a detailed search of the record books and the map produced by the QDMA that details Boone & Crockett and Pope & Young deer harvested across the whitetail's range. From there narrow your search down to the specific state and county of the prospective property. Talk

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For some land sales, a soil-test pit may be required for a percolation test. This is a great opportunity for you to examine the soil types and textures beneath the surface of a property.

to the regional wildlife biologist and ask him or her about the area and the potential of the deer population. Finally, don't overlook talking to local landowners, farmers and neighbors.

Study Soil and Habitat Quality

Soil pH and fertility is everything. Bottomlands of rivers, creeks and branches are best for both native vegetation and food plots. Loam, sandy loam or clay loam that is well drained and not saturated is ideal. So, get out there and get dirty! (If you need help identifying soil types or textures, Chapter 4 of QDMA's new book, *Quality Food Plots*, is an excellent guide and includes photos and descriptions of these and other soil types).

Many land acquisitions today are subject to the property successfully perking. Perk tests, usually conducted by your local sewage enforcement officer (SEO), require the digging of soil-test pits. SEOs are great sources of information on local soil conditions and limiting factors. They are familiar with local soil characteristics such as soil texture, drainage, and the presence of hardpans in agricultural areas. This is the perfect opportunity to get your hands on the soils of the property. The backhoe operator digs a hole approximately four feet deep to identify the depth at which water begins to collect instead of percolate through the soil. These test pits allow you to get a look at the soil profile and the depth of the root zone. Such information is incredibly valuable when you start to layout your food plot plans come planting time.

Permanent Water Sources

Although deer have the ability to acquire moisture from vegetation, it varies with the time of the year and location of the

property. I always like to see at least one permanent water source on a prospective tract of land. Whether it's a swampy area, a pond, or a stream or river, surface water is an asset to your deer management program. If a parcel of land is a true slam dunk for producing quality whitetails but it lacks surface water, identifying potential pond or water-holding tank sites becomes my first mission. This factor is especially critical where low rainfall can be a limiting factor. South Texas comes to mind!

Percent Open Fields vs. Woodlands

Another popular question relates to the recommended percentage of open pastureland/field vs. forested land. When I started working with real estate and deer management programs, I heard and read many rules of thumb. The answer varies with the characteristics of the property in question, geographic location, and many other factors. However, I feel comfortable with as much as 50 to 60 percent open land and the balance in forested cover. Properties under 200 acres are more difficult to manage once the percentage of open land is greater than 65 percent simply due to a lack of adequate security and winter cover to hold deer year round. The composition of the surrounding properties will also determine how far you can push this rule of thumb. If you have high-quality agricultural crops and food plots as well as quality bedding cover, and surrounding properties don't, your property will serve as the local whitetail "Bed & Breakfast." High-quality food plots will help you keep more deer at home where open land dominates forest cover.

It's most important to remember that white-tailed deer prefer

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edge, early successional habitats and diversity. The more diverse your landscape, and the more habitat types you have converging on your property, the more favorable it will be for whitetails. If a prospective property lacks habitat diversity, it's crucial to consider the amount of time and money required to whip it into shape.

For example, let's say you have narrowed your search down to two properties in your price range. On one tract, years of clean farming (destruction of hedgerows to maximize tillable acreage) have resulted in lots of large, open fields. Your plans with this property include establishing hedgerows and edge habitat to enhance fawning cover and make deer feel more secure on your property year round. The other property is dominated by pine/hardwood stands of varying ages and densities with a few interspersed openings. In most cases, the time required to re-establish hedgerows and travel corridors on the first property will be much greater than the time required to do some dozer and food plot work on the second property.

Timber Quality/Appraisal

When purchasing a property, always ask the seller or agent for the most recent timber cruise. If one is available, do some research on the forester or company who conducted the cruise. Oftentimes, landowners are quick to tell you how their Uncle Pete thinks you can get rich by cutting the timber. If a cruise is not available, ask a forester with your state forestry agency to accompany you during a brief survey of existing timber resources.

Provided a forest is managed on a sustainable basis, periodic timber sales result in income that can be applied to planting food plots or other aspects of your management program. Do your

homework when selecting a forester, and always explain your goals and objectives up front. Many foresters are trained to maximize a landowner's income from timber. However, your primary objective may be to manage for quality whitetails with timber management as a secondary goal. Your best plan of action will probably be found in the middle ground between the forester's recommendation and a wildlife biologist's recommendation, so get input from both. This is the value of Forest Stewardship Programs available in most states – to help develop a plan for your property that integrates wildlife and timber production.

Camera Work

Those of you who have read my article series on infrared-triggered cameras in *Quality Whitetails* know that I am a trail-camera nut. Trail cameras can also be used in your search for a property. In today's competitive market, you often have to move on land immediately or someone else will jump on it. However, if you are not in a rushed situation and the landowner is willing, set up a camera or two for a few days. Most landowners will be willing, since this is just another way of kicking the tires, the same as appraising timber or studying aerials. But be sure to ask anyway.

If you have an older film camera in your arsenal, use it for this scouting job just in case it is stolen or vandalized. A film camera won't set you back as much as a digital model.

What exactly are you looking for? Of course, the time of year affects the type of information you can collect, but a few rolls of film can give you a rough idea of fawn recruitment, buck age structure, buck:doe ratio, general health, antler size, presence of

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other wildlife such as wild turkeys, hogs and black bears, and even the presence of poachers or trespassers.

Income-Generating Opportunities

Management costs of a well-developed program add up quickly. Costs such as food plot establishment and management, infrared-triggered camera surveys, supplemental feeding, deer stands, purchasing and planting mast producing trees and professional consulting fees can break the bank if you don't plan a budget. Fortunately, income-generating opportunities on raw land are more abundant than ever. Government habitat incentive programs such as CRP, CREP, WHIP, WRP, and other can help absorb some of your management costs. Talk to the local Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) office for information.

Farming leases, if acreage permits, provide the same benefits through annual rental rates. Timber harvests and gas/mineral leases are other potential income-generating opportunities. Other programs provide opportunities to decrease your tax burden, such as conservation easements that were discussed in the August issue of *Quality Whitetails*. Always completely understand what you can and can't do under such programs before you enroll in them.

The Banker AND The Broker

There's a well-known lesson in business that preaches the importance of establishing and maintaining a rapport with your banker. After all, you just never know when you may fall on bad times or, better yet, decide to grow at breakneck speed and require additional funding. Unless you have a large sum of cash readily

available for buying land, a lending institution will probably be a part of your land acquisition team.

The same is true when it comes to real estate brokers. I have found much more success by getting to know one or two successful and driven real estate brokers, particularly one who specializes in land and farm sales. These professionals are paid to understand exactly what you are after and locate the perfect property. A broker who deals strictly in land or farm sales is typically in tune with current per-acre prices and are often familiar with property owners who are contemplating selling their land. In today's market, raw land does not sit for very long. In fact, a lot of real estate is exchanged privately without ever being listed.

The unfortunate truth is that land is becoming more and more fragmented. Those of you who are fortunate enough to already own your own piece of hunting property: congratulations! I suggest you hold on tight and don't let go. There isn't much that tops owning and managing your own hunting property. For those of you who are still searching for your own slice of deer dirt, I wish you the best of luck and assure you that the rewards make up for the hard work and determination invested.



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