

Habitat 101

By Jared Van Hees

Jared Van Hees is a passionate habitat manager and Michigan landowner with a strong drive to educate others. He is the founder of Habitat Podcast and a habitat consultant to private landowners across the Midwest. He has a bachelor's degree in entrepreneurship from Central Michigan University and is an avid sportsman who spends time introducing his young family to the outdoors.

A cloudy, 25-degree day with winds out of the north greeted me as I hopped out of my truck. It was daybreak in early January, and unfortunately, hunting season was in the rearview. It had been a phenomenal season for me, and I wanted to go back and relive it already. I had harvested not one but two mature 9-point whitetail bucks with my bow on my 15 acres in Michigan. In addition, I was lucky enough to tag a few antlerless deer on client properties where herd reduction was needed. What a season! It's over now, and I have to wait another nine months to hunt. So, what in the world am I doing in the woods in January, when I could be in my warm home office instead — improving habitat.

Many people, me included at one time, hang up our hunting gear and shift into whatever season is next.

Ice fishing for me usually, when we have good ice, and this year we do. Skiing and snowmobiling are as fun as anything. Even just warming up from a fall of cold mornings while watching football can be nice.

Who in the world wants to spend more time in the woods in this weather?

Whether you want to spend more time outside or not, we need to consider it. It can be a significant and crucial time to pay attention.

It is one of my favorite times to



The author poses with a buck he harvested on October 19 on his 15-acre property after a timber harvest the year before. The buck was bedding in a swamp with white oak tops that were left behind from the harvest per the author's direction.

scout. Why is frigid cold weather one of my favorite times? It's not due to the weather, trust me. There are a few reasons, and I will cover them here. The first and main reason is simple — visibility.

Have you ever noticed how much further you can see into and throughout the woods when the leaves are gone?

Most of us recognize this during hunting season. For example, we are able to see more and further hunting in November vs. bowhunting in early October and not being able to see a darn thing. This is similar to scouting habitat and property in January through April, compared to

summertime when the vegetation is in full bloom and the greenery has flushed in. Not only does it make it harder to see long distances, but it also makes it very hard to see the sign I am looking for. Trails, tracks, rubs, scrapes, buck beds and nearby terrain features are all much less challenging to decipher prior to spring green-up in place.

I tend to focus on finding a bedding area during this high-visibility scouting time frame — buck bedding to be even more specific. These areas stick out in the snow. Often, the warmth from the deer's body will melt away the snow leaving a large oval shape

Scouting Habitat Post-Season

behind with leaves showing. This is relatively easy to find if you are looking for it. A buck bed will often rub nearby, if not the tree or brush he is bedding up against. Bucks tend to bed out in swamps or areas where other predators need to cross water to get to them. Water will keep the majority of coyotes or humans out of an area. Another advantage to scouting now is that walking these bedding areas in the winter is great because the ground is frozen. The ice means no more sweat, knee-high mud and muck or mosquitos to deal with to get to the same spot in the swamp. In my January scouting trip I mentioned above, I was able to walk on the ice of the frozen swamp out to these remote bedding locations.

This was infinitely easier than mud.

How does this relate to habitat management for whitetails? Knowing where the deer bed and what habitat they prefer to bed in or near can help us create or duplicate more of this on our own farms. This is advantageous when building and manipulating our properties.

Red osier dogwood grows well in these wet bedding areas, and the dogwood I found was very prevalent and all browsed on by the deer. Now, in addition to bedding, we want to find a preferred food source. This screams deer activity and something to write down and keep in mind. Although it is challenging to get a deer to bed exactly where you want them vs. their already preferred bedding locations, it can be done.

Now that we know exactly where the deer are bedding and feeding, that changes the game come hunting season. If we are too late, and there are green leaves and flush vegetation everywhere, it is highly challenging to see the same

deer beds and food source I found with ease.

I want to mention one caveat with scouting in the snow — it can be misleading. Deer tracks are what I am referring to. Wintering habitat is not the same as fall or even summer habitat.

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So, if we are seeing many tracks in January in a particular area, there could be a great winter

A frozen cattail marsh on the author's property becomes easy to traverse in the winter.

food source near there or a warmer thermal bedding area. Deer don't necessarily need or use the same habitat or bedding areas in early fall as they do winter. Or the opposite, like on my 15 acres, I do not have a large amount of deer sign in the first quarter of the year. The deer move on to better thermal cover and a higher carb food source, more fitting than my small food plots. One may be discouraged by seeing no recent deer sign at my 15 acres this time of the year, but I know they will be back based on past history. This caveat is just something to consider while reviewing the sign you are seeing on your property.

Timber Stand Improvement (TSI) is another wonderful habitat improvement practice that takes place in the winter and spring months. Firing up the chainsaw and felling trees is hard work but creates stellar wildlife habitat. In





Mature timber on the author's property that is almost ready to be harvested.

my column here, Habitat 101, we have covered this before, but it warrants more attention. This is because TSI is that effective. I just picked up my Stihl saw and two new chains from my local power tool store in preparation for some tree dropping. I can't wait to get out and get to work on my woods. Cold weather and no bugs are perfect conditions for running a chainsaw. What I want to cover today, though, is a timber harvest.

That January morning, I was in the woods to complete a timber survey with a local forester.

We wanted to know the monetary value of the trees in these woods. The subject property was all wooded, had a reasonably low stem density, and one could see a very long distance through the timber. This park-effect woodlot

is the antithesis of quality wildlife habitat; therefore, a timber harvest was the subject of our discussion. Once woody browse or deer food gets above a deer's head, where they cannot reach it, it is almost useless habitat other than to provide timber value. Can you think back to what your woods look like? Is it providing quality food and habitat for your wildlife?

Many hunters and landowners reflect on their hunting season in late winter and early spring, wishing it had turned out better. We can help with that. Nine out of 10 properties we consult on need a timber harvest. Maybe yours does, too. Harvesting your timber doesn't have to be something taboo or intimidating. Many folks enjoy the tall towering trees in their woods, as they should. They're beautiful.

I enjoy some very old white pines behind my house. The unfortunate part about these remarkable, towering trees is our habitat value and hunting success does not correlate well with this mature timber. This setting lacks cover and food, which are two of the four main things deer need.

Winter is an excellent time for loggers to get the job done due to the nature of the frozen ground.

If the woods being cut are somewhat wet or we had a year with plentiful rainfall, having frozen ground can be a requirement to harvest. No Logger wants to bury their equipment up to the doors in mud and make a mess of the trails.

This is another advantage to this time of year, and I will be using this on my property up north.

There are also many different "cuts" that can be performed on your timber. These cuts open the canopy, which is great for wildlife, and all have different aesthetic outcomes. Which one is right for you? Well, that depends on your goals. We work with our clients and our foresters to ensure that the client is satisfied at the end of the harvest and that the client's goals are met. Harvesting your timber is almost always a positive impact on your long-term hunting and habitat goals. There is a lot more to a timber harvest, and I would urge you to find a great consulting forester to make sure your needs are met. Completing a timber harvest is a perfect activity to perform during this favorite time frame.

The long and short of it is, I find value in spending more time in the woods. Especially now, post-hunting season. I believe you will as well, and I hope this article points out a few great reasons to try it. You will visibly see what you are missing and if a timber harvest is necessary.

Winter and spring can give us an authentic feel of our woods without all the leaf and green vegetation. Throw on the Carhartts, grab the hand warmers and see what you can learn from this year's post-season scouting.



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