

Finding Wounded Game- Deer Recovery of PA

By Andy Bensing

Sooner or later it happens to almost all of us involved in the sport of deer hunting. Careful aim is taken, the decision to shoot is made, the arrow or bullet is sent on its way, and for a whole variety of reasons, some under our control, some not, a perfect vital hit on our quarry is not made. The deer, or bear for that matter, you were trying to harvest runs off wounded.

As we all know, a deer that is well hit in the vitals with arrow or bullet rarely travels more than 50-100 yards before expiring and usually leaves a trail easy to follow. But the perfect shot is not always made and sometimes, even with the perfect shot, it is remarkable how far a mortally wounded animal can travel. Ethics, common sense, and the Game Laws require you to make every legal effort possible to recover the animal.

Right after the shot you begin to gather the information needed to find the deer that ran off: where on the animal you hit, the deer's reaction to the hit, the manner and direction in which the deer ran off, etc. At the appropriate time you approach the location where the deer was at when you shot. At the hit site more important information is gathered such as type of hair and blood present if any. On the basis of all the information you have at this point, you must now decide how long to wait before following the trail.

Much has been written on the topic of when and how a hunter should search for a wounded deer. That topic is beyond the scope of this article. Some of us are better trackers than others but there is one truth that is inevitable. If you hunt deer long enough, sooner or later you will end up with that twisting feeling in your stomach that comes from the realization that an animal you have wounded is out there somewhere and although you have given every effort to track it down, you have failed. The trail has run out. Your ability to visually track the animal has come to an end.

The majority of these animals will recover, but the fact that bothers the ethical hunter the most is that some will die and not be found. Under current Pennsylvania law, there is nothing else you can do. Deer Recovery of PA (DRP) is working to change that. DRP is an organization of outdoor enthusiasts whose common goal is the legalization in Pennsylvania of the use of leashed tracking dogs for the ethical recovery of wounded big game animals when all other human tracking attempts to recover the animal have failed. DRP does not believe that there is a widespread wounding loss problem in Pennsylvania, but it is our position that one lost animal is too much and that the use of trained, leashed tracking dogs should be permitted for recovering wounded big game animals that would otherwise be lost and go to waste.

Hunting deer with dogs has been banned in the Northern States for a long time and DRP wants it to stay that way. NY State got things started back in 1976 but in the last 10 years, 11 other northern states (IN, MD, ME, MI, NE, VT, WI and just last year OH, IL, AK, and KY) have successfully amended their game laws to allow the use of leashed tracking dogs to help recover big game animals after the shot. This is what DRP is all

about. Our neighbor to the north, New York State, spearheaded the movement and has had wonderful results as have all the other tracking states. They have enjoyed great support from the game law enforcement and hunting communities.

The concept is quite simple. Dogs, typically from the sporting or hound breeds, can be specially trained to follow the scent trail left by a wounded deer. The dogs are always worked on leash so there is absolutely no chance for these dogs to “run healthy deer”, the most commonly heard initial objection to the concept. In the typical deer hunting situation, the deer hunter shoots a deer that runs off and falls dead. The hunter takes up the blood trail and easily finds the deer. However, sometimes the blood trail runs out before the deer is found or in some cases there is very little blood in the first place. This is where the trained, leashed tracking dog shines. When the hunter’s abilities to follow the wounded deer’s trail have been exhausted, a blood tracking dog can be brought in to use his nose to follow what the hunter cannot see.

The dogs are started at the very beginning of the track, at the initial hit location, not where the hunter lost the track as you might have expected. By starting at the beginning and retracing the blood trail already followed by the hunter, the dog quickly comes to recognize the specific, individual scent of the wounded deer being followed. Although commonly called “blood tracking” dogs, these dogs don’t actually need the presence of blood on the ground to follow the wounded animal. When the dog comes to the spot where visual blood is no longer present and the hunter previously lost the trail, the dog can easily continue the trail using the track scent left by the specific wounded deer that he has been following from the start.

On a recent trip to New York State I had the opportunity to observe a young 18 month old dachshund bitch, Elli, that on the day before my arrival had successfully found an archery hit buck that had been hit too far back in the gut. The trail was 28 hours old when the dog was brought in. The deer had traveled only 300 yards but there were no signs of visible blood along the way except for one place where the buck had laid and rested. It is amazing what these dogs can do. The question is often asked “What is the oldest track that a dog can follow?” This depends upon scenting conditions, but generally an experienced dog can follow a trail that is several days old, much like bloodhounds regularly do when trailing humans, but there is a practical limit. If the deer lies dead too long it will of course spoil depending on the air temperature or will be found by scavengers, such as the coyote, and consumed. When using blood trailing dogs it is not unusual, however, to successfully find dead deer that were shot 24 to 36 hours earlier and still be fit for consumption.

As mentioned earlier, Deer Recovery of PA is working to legalize the use of these leashed tracking dogs here in Pennsylvania for the benefit of the Pennsylvania hunter. We currently have HB420 sitting in the House Game and Fisheries Committee. HB420 would legalize the use of leashed tracking dogs in PA and directs the PGC to set up regulations to govern their use. We all look forward to a speedy passage of HB420. Hopefully we will be tracking in the Pennsylvania woods by the 2006 hunting season.