

Blood-trailing Deer: Stop, Look, and Learn



You are deer hunting. You have made the shot, and the deer seemed to be down but definitely not out. It ran away. You go to where the animal was standing and find evidence of a definite hit. What do you do now?

This scenario plays out in the woods during deer season many times; however, deer that are marginally wounded and left in the woods can be recovered with careful observation.



What was the animal's reaction to the shot? Did it kick? Did it lurch forward? The reaction is very important to know because the way a deer moves when it is struck can tell you where it was hit.

Normally a deer that is hit in the lungs will "mule kick," or arch its back legs toward its head. This is a good hit and usually results in a deer running only a few yards before expiring.

A deer that hunches after the shot, runs a short distance, and then begins walking was usually hit in the liver. A deer hit in this area of the body will go and lie down a short distance from where it was shot.

A deer that reacts very little to the shot but runs away with its tail down may have been completely missed, grazed by the projectile, or hit in the intestines. This is also known as a "gut shot."

"Timing is everything." That old expression is especially true when a hunter is trying to recover a deer. A good rule of thumb is to wait at least 20 minutes before attempting to recover the deer. It is hard to stay in the stand after the shot, but it is very important to do so for several reasons.

One reason is to allow yourself time to calm down. Many hunters have fallen from their stand because they were in such a hurry to get their deer. Taking several breaths and allowing yourself to settle down is always a good idea. You must give the deer time to expire. Even a deer that collapses within eyesight may not be completely dead for another few minutes.

Watch for breathing and any other movement. If the deer continues to move, you may need to shoot it a second time, but that decision is yours alone.

Remember that the landscape looks totally different once you are out of the tree, so make sure to mark a spot on the ground mentally before climbing down. You can use any landmark, such as a log, tree, or even a leaf, just as long as you can identify it again.

Always start looking where the deer was standing when it was shot. Begin quietly and slowly looking for signs of the hit. Some hunters go immediately to the last place they saw the deer. This is not wise and can cause you to walk over signs that would tell you exactly what type of hit was made.

Make sure that you keep movement to a minimum and any communication down to a whisper. Any type of loud talking or noise may startle a deer that bedded down after the hit. A deer that moves again after it has bedded down will likely not bleed because of the beta carotene from its diet mixed with a sudden surge in adrenaline that clots blood flow to the wounds. In other words, if the deer moves again, your chances for recovery decrease significantly.

If you are working with a partner, you can use a “hub and wheel” technique to search for signs. One partner should be the hub, and the other should slowly begin working out in “spokes” looking for signs. If the “spoke” partner finds a sign, the “hub” partner can move to that spot and you can repeat the process.

You can place small bits of toilet paper on the ground where signs exist. These will indicate the direction of travel as the trail gets longer. Just remember to pick up any paper before you leave the woods.

Once you are at the site, begin looking for signs. Signs can be anything from blood to hair to hoof prints. Here are some things you may find:

- A lung hit will normally result in an initial spray followed by heavy or steady bleeding with bubbly blood (**Figure 1**). You may also find parts of the rib cage mingled with hair. If it is above 60 degrees, recovery of the animal must be quick in order to salvage the meat. If daytime temps are below 60 or overnight temps are dropping, then the meat will keep longer; however, leaving a deer overnight may give coyotes an opportunity to eat it.
- Liver hits produce dark, sporadic blood dissipating into barely any blood at all (**Figures 2–4**). If you realize the deer has been shot in the liver, quietly leave the area and—if temperatures are below 60—stay out for at least 4 hours before you resume the searching. The deer has probably bedded down in some nearby thick cover and should be dead by that time.



- Deer shot in the intestines, or with a “gut shot,” can be the most discouraging. There may be some blood, but bowel contents will be mixed in with clear and brown liquids (**photo 5**). Depending on what the animal has been shot with, you may or may not be able to recover the deer. Most of the time the deer will die and be lost for consumption. It is completely false that a deer that is gut shot cannot be consumed due to meat contamination.
- A sign that is often overlooked is hoof prints made by the deer as it is running off. These tracks look totally different from those you would see made by a deer just walking (**Figure 6**). Look for overturned leaves that appear crushed. There may be unnatural dirt on them that was dug up by the deer. These signs can tell you a great deal about the direction of travel beyond the last place the deer was seen.
- When blood is sparse, look for insects moving on the ground. Sometimes ants are immediately attracted to spots of blood to feed on. Their movement can help you find an area that you overlooked.



Finally, remember you owe it to the animal to make every effort to recover it. Do the very best you can, and hopefully you will have some tasty venison as your next meal.

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