Scouting for mule deer—a few new things and a few things to remember

Here it is mid March and I’m gearing up to start trapping and counting sage-grouse in various locations throughout Utah by the time you get this newsletter we will likely be done. It’s hard to do believe it or not©, I would rather be out looking for a big set of deer or elk sheds but someone has to do it. Within a few months the nice green days of spring will be gone the mule deer and elk will be in their traditional summer ranges and it will be time to start thinking (seriously thinking) about scouting and locating a good buck or 2 to chase this August.

The word scout came from Anglo-French—a word called escuter which simply means to listen. Webster tells us it means to explore an area or obtain information about someone or in this case something. So you all LISTEN up or read up which ever you prefer.

For me scouting isn’t a year round thing which might be surprising to some of you. While I eat sleep and drink mule deer take photos and video 24/7 my scouting—serious scouting doesn’t really start until late June early July. Why is that you ask? For those of you that really know mule deer know that most of the deer in our state are a migratory herd of some sort or another and most of the time they don’t make it back to the summer range and get settled in until sometime in June. I know there are exceptions so don’t jump all over me but generally speaking this is the general rule. Another reason is simply because of antler growth. While most of us can tell a mature buck anytime of year a buck typically won’t tell you what he’s going to be until late July. 3 years ago, I had a hunter come scouting with me on elk ridge one year on the 24th of July, we saw a few bucks that I figured were already over the 170 mark and a bunch of 3-4 year old deer that were in the 150-160 class. One deer I had an opportunity to take several good pictures of (figure 1) while I thought he was a fair deer, I didn’t get to excited and neither did our hunter. That buck didn’t even make it into our ‘I would take that buck the last day if I had too’ category. As fate would have it he took the buck (figure 2) exactly 30 days later in August. It scored just over 170 and just under 24” wide—a good buck in anyone’s book. Funny thing was, it wasn’t until I got home and started really looking at my pictures that I even realized it was the same buck.

There really aren’t any secrets to scouting or at least I don’t think (I’ll share that maybe to some of you later)—we all know what a mule deer track looks like, we all know what a good buck looks like. What we need to remember is they need water (but typically not
every day), they need green groceries (especially in May through July), we know that traditional salt licks used by the cowboys are good areas to concentrate on, and we know that most of the big bucks need to be away from all the ATVs and recreational enthusiasts out there (generally speaking). So we all know to look for these areas and hopefully we get lucky enough to find the buck or the track we are looking for.

If you are headed into a new area or even if you want a new look at your favorite honey hole there are several neat/cool/amazing places to look at. I typically start with a good topo map. Most of these are on line for the state of Utah and are called digital raster graphs at [http://www.waterrights.utah.gov/quads/](http://www.waterrights.utah.gov/quads/) in various scales and also digital ortho quads (black and white aerial photos). You can save and open these in any of your photo software. If you know how to use a GIS they even better and you can really do some cool things. Another new and great source to start looking is Google earth [http://earth.google.com/](http://earth.google.com/) WOW! is all I can say. If you pay for the premium service, you can likely spot that gnat on the deer’s gluteus maximums. You can easily find ponds, springs, and other lesser know watering areas. More importantly you can find these areas away from roads. Just because you may think you know your area like the back of your hand, don’t over look these cool new tools, I was able to find new watering holes on the San Juan for pete sakes…

There can’t be substitutions for being there—the more time you spend out in the field the more likely you are able to get a glimpse of that buck of a lifetime or figure out that he’s no where to be found. Having said that another new tool we have been using a bunch is the various scouting cameras. We have used these for several years but it wasn’t until the digital cameras that we have really realized a great benefit of having them out there in the field. We use the Stealth Cams with a 512mb SD disk inside and we can go weeks even when the elk hit the water hole before we fill up the disk. I have been amazed at how many different bucks we see on the trail cam (figure 3 and 4) that we never see early in the morning or late in the evening searching the same areas. There is a great web page with lots of pictures that has good reviews on most of the digital trail cameras out there, it can be found at [http://www.chasingame.com/](http://www.chasingame.com/)

Finally I leave you with my words of wisdom my little secret. In my opinion with our increasing elk heard, ATVs, outdoor enthusiasts, etc, etc., many of our mule deer have sought out those areas that a good friend calls the ‘twiners’ those areas that are often over looked because they are lower, not much cover, or just in an area where you would never
think there would be deer. These are the areas that today I constantly look for and think about. I do this mainly because I want to get away from all the pesky things I mentioned above so next time you’re out and about—don’t over look these areas.

Thanks for read’n and listen

About the author; Todd A. Black is a wildlife biologist and environmental consultant and part owner of Black Timber Outfitters (BTO). He enjoys hunting, photography, birding, and spending time with his family. Originally from Blanding, Todd currently lives in Hyrum Utah where he works at Utah State University as an Extension Specialists. You can find out more about him and Black Timber Outfitters on their web page at http://blacktimberoutfitters.net/