

*As promised, the author returns with an honest, objective review of his experimental tactic.*

BY GENE WENSEL

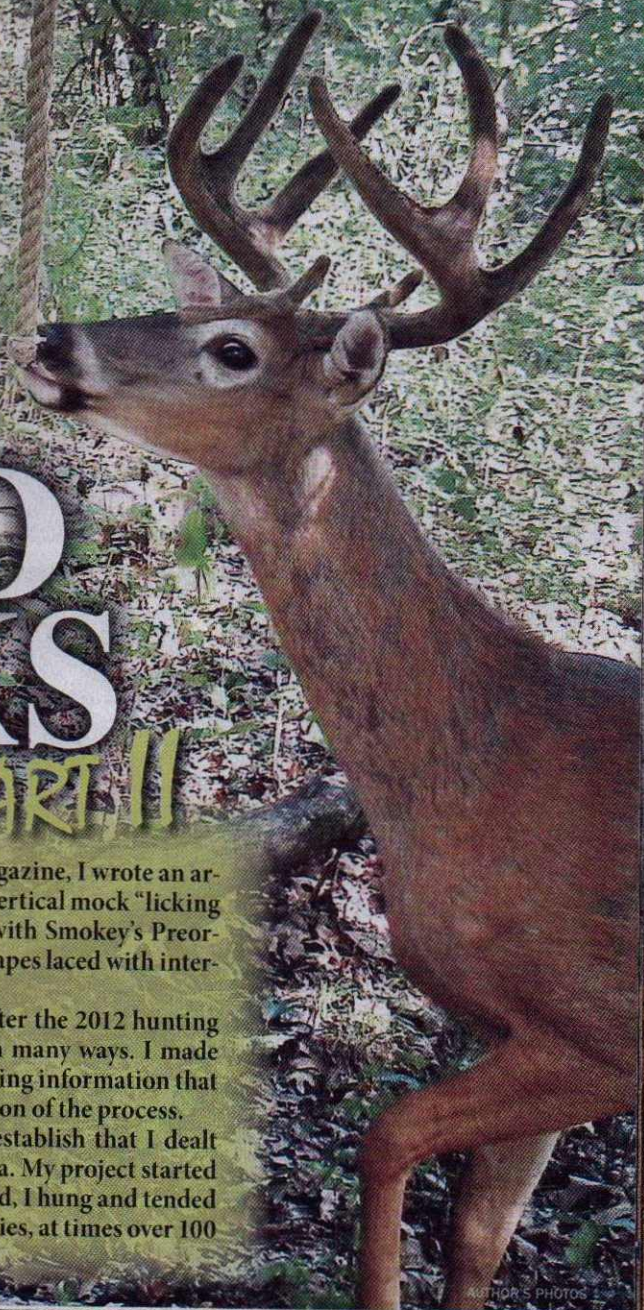
# WICKED WICKS

## PART II

**I**N THE OCTOBER 2012 ISSUE OF Bowhunter Magazine, I wrote an article outlining a project I was undertaking last year to study vertical mock "licking branches." This involved using heavy rope wicks doctored with Smokey's Preorbital Gland Lure ([smokeysdeerlure.com](http://smokeysdeerlure.com)) hung over mock scrapes laced with interdigital hoof scent.

I'm back because I promised to share my findings with you after the 2012 hunting season. Needless to say, this was a learning experience for me in many ways. I made some mistakes that I'll share here, but I also gained a lot of intriguing information that might help those of you who want to try your own future application of the process.

Before we get into specific observations and details, I must establish that I dealt strictly with 100-percent wild, free-ranging whitetails here in Iowa. My project started in May 2012 and ran through late January 2013. During this period, I hung and tended dozens of rope wicks spread on various low-fenced private properties, at times over 100



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## Wicked Wicks Part II

miles apart. With the help of numerous trail cameras working for me 24/7, I accumulated enough evidence to convince almost anyone that using vertical scent ropes is definitely a tool worth trying anywhere in whitetail country.

As far as I knew going in, no one had ever done anything similar. I expected to make some mistakes, so let's first go over

the ones that are most easily corrected. I initially hung the bottom end of the ropes too high — three feet off the ground seems to be the best height. Bucks often stand on their hind legs to work over high limbs, but the obvious ease and convenience in finding, noticing, and using the wicks is desirable. I quickly learned to make the wicks more visible as well. I also learned to wrap the bottom end of each wick no more than an inch up from the end, using a plastic zip tie. Any higher than an inch up the rope caused too much fraying and increased the difficulty of dipping or freshening the wicks with preorbital gland lure.

I tended to use too much lure. Freshening each set every 10 days or two weeks with an eyedropper used far less lure, yet seemed to work just as well. Dipping the entire end of the rope in a jar was both unnecessary and costly. Using rubber gloves, I learned to turn the very bottom end of the rope up to apply fresh lure with an eye dropper, then (very important) allowed a minute or so for the lure to soak in. Since high-quality, oil-based preorbital lure is not easy to collect or make, it is not cheap, but it is definitely worth the investment.

The timing of maximum-use periods by deer was very interesting. During spring and summer months, fully 50 percent of visits were made by does, which surprised me. After antler velvet was shed, I found more than 80 percent of deer visits were made by bucks. During early November, when a doe abandoned her buck fawn(s) of the year, button buck use dropped way off until after the peak of the rut, probably due to intimidation or potential confrontations with older bucks. I noted that yearlings didn't pay much attention to the wicks until late November or early December, when most fawn visits were made by button bucks as far as I could tell. Most were accompanied by their mothers, who by that time had probably already been bred.

I tend to think most doe visits (and many buck visits) were strictly out of curiosity. Once velvet was shed from hardened antlers, some bucks checked the wicks every time they walked by when alone, while others regularly walked right on past. If wicks were upwind of a passing buck and not noticed visually, some bucks simply passed by, even though they were still in range of my trail cameras. When a buck was tending or following a doe, most deer ignored the ropes. Lone bucks of all ages that were "cruising" were the ones that regularly stopped to check out the wicks. Placing a rope wick within a shooting lane turned out to be a very good idea, but was most effective when dealing with these lone, cruising bucks.

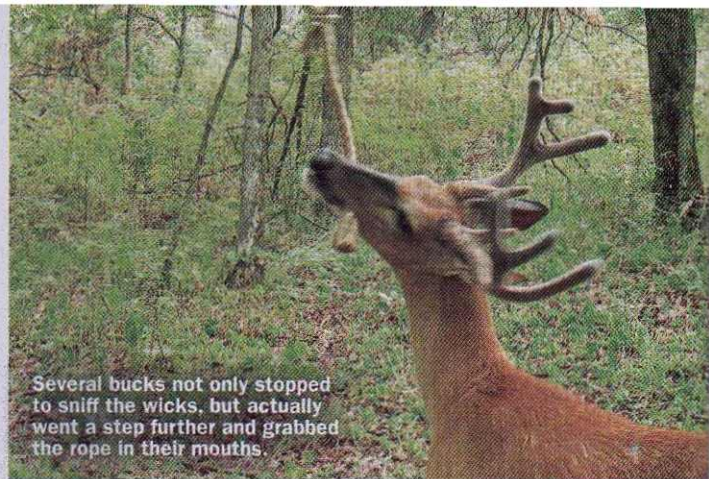
How various bucks used the wicks was particularly interesting. Very few actually gave themselves "facials," as I expected they would. About half of visiting bucks moved the rope with their noses, mouths or antlers, while the rest just stopped, sniffed the wicks and scrapes under them for a few seconds, then moved on. I got one series of photos showing three different velvet-antlered bucks checking out the very same wick one minute apart. They were essentially standing in line to take their turn at the rope! Several bucks actually grabbed the rope in their mouths. One buck had the rope sideways in his mouth as far back as he could get it!

**This series of photos shows three different velvet-antlered bucks checking out the same wick one minute apart.**



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Several bucks not only stopped to sniff the wicks, but actually went a step further and grabbed the rope in their mouths.

My cameras recorded several sparring matches started right next to the wicks after use. At least one sparring match led to a more serious fight that exposed dozens of photos before the bucks finally broke up and moved off.

One of the biggest problems I encountered was movement of the ropes on days with high winds, causing sensitive camera triggers to trip "empty" photos. Movement of the rope end could be confirmed in consecutive photos only seconds apart.

I also noted a definite preference for rigidity in the rope, something I wasn't expecting. I'm convinced the free-swinging ropes were too flexible for many bucks. In one place, I set a rope and trail camera very close to a vertically hanging natural branch about the size of a finger. I applied preorbital lure to both the rope and the nearby natural limb. Bucks definitely worked the rigid limb more than the rope. Next year I'm planning to stiffen each rope by attaching a thin green limb the size of a pencil along the side of each rope wick to stiffen it. I suspect rigidity needs to run all the way to the top to make it as stiff as possible, yet still be able to retain the scent of the lure at the wick's end. I also suspect this means I could get away with using smaller-diameter rope that costs less, possibly even cotton clothesline. As long as it is stiffened with a green limb, I expect the terminal end of a smaller, less expensive cotton or manila rope would hold enough lure and still retain rigidity.

Surprisingly, I got many photos of individual mature bucks one time only, probably because they were traveling through an area, often long distances from their normal core areas. These nomadic buck photos almost all came during prime rut or pre-peak rut dates. These were the roaming bucks that fre-

quently cause us to ask ourselves, "Where did he come from?" I'm convinced many adult bucks take long-distance routes during the rut, making trips of up to five miles or more to go back to where they spent the first year-and-a-half of their life before they left their family group to establish their own home ranges. They never forget where they were born or how to get back there!

As the whitetail rut wound down and scrapes were mostly abandoned, I moved many wicks from above scrapes to obvious travel corridors or funnels, and I didn't even bother to make a mock scrape with interdigital scent. During late season, I again moved many wicks to areas adjacent to or right on trails being used to and from food sources.

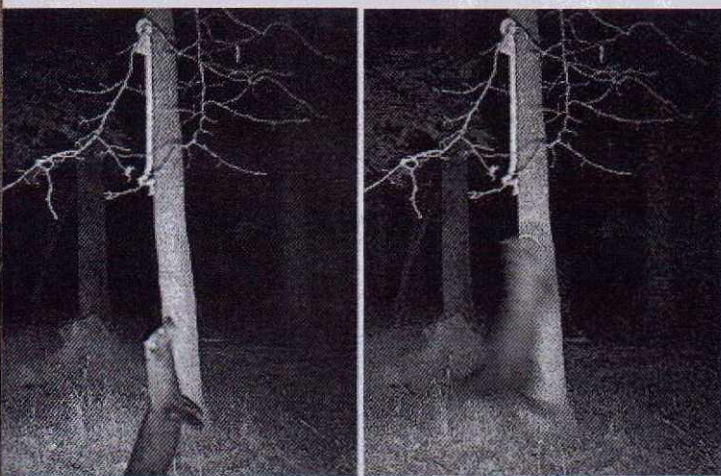
Iowa's gun season predictably moved multiple "new faces" onto properties set aside for archery-only. As expected, bucks from surrounding areas checked out my rope wick sets regularly, well into late season and right up into mid-January, when I quit monitoring ropes and cameras. In all honesty, I suspect rope wicks would be checked year-round if freshened regularly.

I got quite a few images of other species checking out both the ropes and scrapes under them. Other than whitetails, I recorded investigation from feral cats, stray dogs, badgers, foxes, coyotes, coons, possums, skunks, woodchucks, rabbits and squirrels. A friend who also had a couple wicks out got photos of a fisher standing upright and even jumping for the rope! But most importantly, all totaled, I got photos of hundreds of whitetails checking my sets.

I'd like to be able to tell you that I killed a mature buck while it was sniffing a rope wick, but in truth, I killed a nice buck on November 9 when he followed a hot doe past my stand. Since Iowa law limits us to one buck tag until late season, much of my hunting was curtailed during some of the best days of the rut.

I don't believe the use of wicks is going to attract deer from long distances. These scented ropes will stop deer but won't actually bring them in from more than proximate distances. Nor can they be used or expected to "hold" deer to keep them from straying onto a neighbor's property. I no longer think of them as any sort of bait or food source attraction that might draw or hold deer. Long distance "drawing power" seems minimal or nonexistent. Nor can they be expected to pull a buck away from a doe he is actually tending. But whenever bucks are cruising alone, they will almost always stop for a sniff, hopefully right in one of your shooting lanes.

Like many other tricks of the trade, I'm going to continue to use rope wicks to get good trail camera photos, learn how many top-quality bucks are available on the "menu," and hope to stop cruising bucks right where I want them for a shot. For more info, go to [brothersofthebow.com](http://brothersofthebow.com). ««



Other than whitetails, I recorded visits from all sorts of wildlife. I wasn't the only one. My friend got these photos of a fisher in Pennsylvania as it stood upright and even jumped for the wick.

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