

Not too early for mock scrapes

By Gary Clancy
Contributing Writer

Now, I've been hunting deer long enough to know that the woods are still too darn thick for any serious scouting at this time of year. But it's not too early to start putting in a few mock scrapes.

Yes, I know the bucks have not even reached their full antler growth yet, and what antler they do have is still covered in velvet. And I'm aware of the fact that it will be at least another three months before bucks are doing much scraping on their own. So, what am I doing in the deer woods at this time of year? Well, you might call it setting the table. Let me explain.

When I first learned about mock scrapes, I made the same mistake I see hunters making today. Most of us wait too long to put in our mock scrapes. A safe rule of thumb is this: If the bucks are already pawing out their own scrapes, you've missed the best window of opportunity for mock scrapes.

For a mock scrape to be effective, you want your mock scrapes to be the first scrapes in the woods. If you wait until mid-October, there should already be real scrapes everywhere. Bucks are not nearly as interested in your mock scrapes when they have their own scrape lines to monitor. Anytime between now and the archery season opener in mid-September is the right time to start your mock scrapes. After that, if it's a mature buck you're seeking, then you're probably already too late.

Where should you place your mock scrapes? If you've hunted the area for several years, you should have a good idea of where bucks like to scrape. Beat them to the punch and put mock scrapes right where deer want to do their scraping. You can really get a deer's attention by putting in mock scrapes on what they see as their prime scraping sites.

If you have not hunted the property or public-land area before, just snoop around and look for the kind of places where you'd expect to find scrapes. Field edges, logging trails, fence lines, or the seam where hardwoods meets pines. Don't overlook any kind of edge. In hill country, make your scrapes on ridges, not down in the valleys. Yes, bucks scrape in the valleys a lot, but the wind is so fickle down there that I no longer waste time putting in mock scrapes. If the area you hunt has a lot of low, swamp country, the edge where cattails and slough

grass give way to alder or willow is a good bet.

It's been 30-plus years since I first messed around with mock scrapes. I'll share with you here what has worked best for me.

When I first started making mock scrapes, I made the mistake of only making one or two in an area. But I've learned that a string of scrapes works better. How many depends upon the terrain and habitat. On the average, I'll put in five to seven mock scrapes at each stand location, with the scrapes anywhere from 50 yards to 50 feet apart. Bucks are much more likely to visit a line of mock scrapes than a single one.

The most important part of any mock scrape is the overhanging branch. Without the overhanging branch, a scrape is worthless. At the other extreme, you can encourage bucks to scrape where you want them to by providing a branch about 5 feet above the ground. Sometimes you can just bend a branch down to the right level. I've also had good luck bending down saplings to the right height and tying them down with twine.

If you own the land you hunt, you can take a branch from one tree and attach it with nails or wire to another. If you don't own the land and ever want to hunt that land again, stick with twine. Once you've located a branch or made one of your own, take your boot heel or a garden trowel and clear a circle or oval-shaped area about the size of a beach ball. With the garden trowel, dig down about 3 or 4 inches and bury an H.S. Scent Wafer in the Buck Rut flavor. These scent-impregnated wafers will hold scent for weeks, sometimes months if there is not much rain.

There is no need to check on mock scrapes any more often than once a month. Because bucks are not yet rubbing or scraping, you won't find much evidence of their visit at this time of year anyway. The best way to see if bucks are hitting your mock scrapes is with a trail camera. Another good clue is when the overhanging branch has been chewed on.

When a buck nibbles on the tips of the branch or branches hanging over the scrape, he's leaving scent from his saliva gland. And when he rubs his face and antlers in the branches, he's leaving scent from the pre-orbital glands in the corner of his eyes and the forehead glands. You and I cannot smell either, but it's one way in which deer recognize each other.



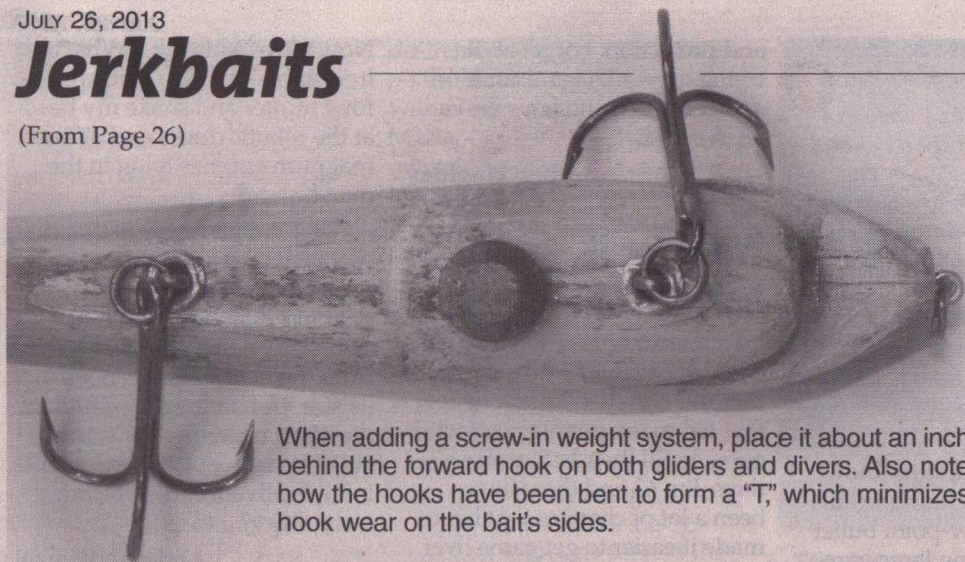
It's not too early to consider mock-scraping for autumn deer-hunting success. A number of products, like these scent-impregnated discs, are on the market to start mock-scraping now. Photo courtesy of Gary Clancy

I have no proof of this, but I think the main reason mock scrapes are so successful regarding mature bucks is that the buck never sees the buck making scrapes in his home area. As the pre-rut builds and bucks spend less time socializing and more time cruising their turf looking for fights, making rubs, pawing out those first tentative scrapes, and, of course, making unwanted advances to uninterested does, the buck does not forget about those mock scrapes. Again, I cannot prove this, but I think the main reason a buck will visit a mock scrape line during shooting hours is that he's hoping to glimpse the seemingly invisible buck that has been pawing out scrapes on his home turf since mid-summer.

When the habitat allows, I like to use a buck decoy
(See **Mock Scrapes** Page 27)

Jerkbaits

(From Page 26)



When adding a screw-in weight system, place it about an inch behind the forward hook on both gliders and divers. Also note how the hooks have been bent to form a "T," which minimizes hook wear on the bait's sides.

ing the tail – a straighter angle allows for a deeper dive – whereas a pronounced bend will yield a shallower dive and choppy action. If the bait favors one side, bend the screw eye (line tie) one way or the other until it runs the way you want

it to run. It's smart to "T" the hooks on the bait's belly to minimize hook wear, regardless of jerkbait style. Finally, if the hooks on your bait are not attached with split rings, cut off the old hooks and replace them with new ones attached

Mock Scrapes

(From Page 23)

when hunting over my mock scrapes. When that big buck finally lays his eyes on the buck that has been messing around his stomping grounds, his ears will lay back and the hair on his neck and back will stand erect as he goes into that stiff-legged kind of sideways shuffle that always reminds me of John Wayne sauntering into a saloon to take on the bad guys.

Yes, I know it's hot and sticky in the woods this time of year. And yes, the deer flies, skeeters, and ticks can be nasty, too. And yes, that itchy rash probably is poison ivy. But just wait until that day in late October when you come home with that big 10-pointer riding in the bed of your pickup and get to tell your buddies the buck just came

cruising in right along one of the mock scrape lines you established in July.

Now, there's a sweet moment in any deer hunter's life. I've been there a few times, and let me tell you, when that buck shows up working each mock scrape you laid out for him and finally steps into the closest mock scrape – the one I call "the killer scrape" – you will forget all about how hot and humid it was and how the skeeters about drove you from the woods.

Now it is time to draw smoothly without him catching you, take a deep breath, pick your spot, and drop the string.

Is there a finer moment in all of the outdoors? I can't wait for September.

with rings. While this may slightly hinder a bait's action, the better hooking capabilities more than make up for it.

When the situation or the muskies call for a diver, the first bait out of my tackle box will probably be a Suick, because I can do so much with the action. I can make a well-tuned bait dive in the direction I want, so I can steer it in an out of cabbage or around rocks. And with a wrist snap I can make it flop on its side or back and expose its belly to the sky. Still, there are times when the wider head of the Bobbie is more advantageous, such as when bumping it in and out of still-green coontail in early fall, or when casting to suspended muskies.

Among gliders, my first pick is usually a Hellhound or Phantom because their plastic construction allows me to fish them fast, dart them just under the surface, or dive off a weed edge. However, the wider head of a big, slowly twitched Reef Hawk creates more water move-

ment, which can trigger a lunker muskie looking for a quick, belly-filling meal.

Adding weight to a wooden jerkbait can make it much more versatile. Pre-made, screw-in weight systems, available at many tackle shops, allow an angler to fish the bait without weight, or to add up to an ounce to its belly. Almost all jerkbaits balance about an inch behind the front hook, so place the threaded insert there. On a diver, extra weight will gain depth and create more hang time during pauses in the retrieve, while on a glider the extra weight will allow you to fish the lure faster while maintaining depth, or to run it much more deeply by counting it down before retrieving.

I always try to fish as fast as conditions allow in the belief that by contacting more active muskies, I'll catch more. Still, the days when muskies are aggressive are rare, and that's why jerkbaits demand space in your tackle box. Fish them right and unleash their magic.

SUMMERTIME PIKE

(From Page 25)

find suspended schools and run your baits at these depths. I've even caught pike off downriggers in this manner.

If motor trolling isn't an option, you'll have to try a slower approach. You could try row-trolling or even dragging crankbaits behind a canoe. I've caught a lot of pike in this manner. The biggest pike I ever caught on the lake on which my grandma has a cabin came while I dragged a crankbait behind a leaky, old rowboat. And my biggest open-water pike to date (yup, my biggest came through the ice) was caught while I fished from a canoe. Catching a big gator from a canoe is extra fun because it can literally drag you around the lake. So yes, although manual trolling requires some elbow grease, it certainly can be effective.

If that doesn't fit into your plans, you can cast deep-diving cranks to those same deep weed edges or even try a large creature jig, which should keep your bait in the strike zone for a

longer period. Vertically jigging a large blade bait near those cisco schools is an option, as well.

In rivers, try to find slack, weedy areas adjacent to current, or better yet, adjacent to springs or in-flowing feeder creeks. River fishing is typically a much shallower prospect, so you may be able to cast spinners, spinnerbaits, or spoons, in addition to crankbaits.

Two things anglers shouldn't be afraid to do for big summer pike: fish relatively deep, say 15 to 25 feet, and use big baits. A big pike has no problem crushing a lure intended for muskies.

Fishing for big pike in the summer is a game few people play. If you cast lures into shallow, weedy areas, you'll probably catch fish, but nothing of any great size. If you want to land a wall-hanger, be prepared to fish deeper and to catch fewer fish. In that respect, it's kind of like muskie fishing or hunting for trophy bucks. You're not going to score every time, but when you do, it will be memorable.