

NORTHEAST



Adirondack Attack

My family has found success in hunting this vast, unforgiving region of New York for over 80 years. Here's what works for us. BY RANDY SALERNO

MILLIONS OF YEARS ago, a vast mountain range was created in what is now the northeastern part of New York. Adirondack Park's six million acres encompass incredibly wild habitat containing many beautiful creatures. Most notably, from a hunter's perspective, the region is home to the majestic white-tailed deer.

In such remote wilderness, these deer still are able to roam with little pressure from man. The exception to this general rule is the hunter who's willing to cover many miles from sunup to sundown.

As the years have gone by, access to remote areas of the park has become more difficult, due to an increase in the purchase of surrounding private land. Studying maps and using current technology is a must for those willing to hunt the Adirondack Mountains — not only to facilitate hunting the most remote areas, but also to make locating mature bucks simpler. After all, they don't come easy.

For my family, hunting big bucks in the Adirondacks started back in the 1940s. Paul Salerno Sr. worked for the state, doing gypsy moth control in remote areas of the woods. In doing so, he saw plenty of big deer. Coming from a large Italian family, he began to view deer hunting as his way of contributing meat for the family.

The Salerno tradition continues to this day. My dad, Pat Salerno Sr., continues to hunt the mountains alongside his sons: Paul, Tim, Dustin and me. Years of hunting and guiding have enabled us to down a number of huge-bodied bucks, some weighing as much as 235 pounds field dressed.

Hunting the Adirondacks is a real challenge



for even a seasoned hunter, thanks to expanses of thick, swampy lowlands, dense underbrush, blow-downs and open hardwoods between towering slopes that rise to elevations of 3500 feet. Hardwood forests consist mostly of oak, beech, pine and birch.

Food sources vary from season to season but consist largely of acorns, beechnuts and apples. These masts are the main autumn diet of whitetails when available. Browse found near brooks and swamps during seasons without bumper crops is preferred, and finding these elusive and changing areas will prove very beneficial to your hunting results.

Perhaps the biggest challenge presented by the unforgiving Adirondacks is the unpredictable weather during the transition from fall to winter. While hunting and tracking through remote areas, you must be prepared for anything Mother Nature might throw at you.

For example, many years ago my hunting partners and I started out from camp in the dark, making our way to



Above: The author harvested this 209-pound bruiser buck in the winter of 2013. These mountain warriors grow to enormous weights.

Left: Members of the Salerno family take pride in hunting these unforgiving New York mountains. And clearly they're no strangers to success in killing worthy whitetails. Photos courtesy of Randy Salerno

an area we knew a mature buck was working. The temperature was in the upper 60s when we left. But the wind picked up to an unbelievable velocity, and the temperature dropped rapidly. It started to rain sideways, and by the end of the day we were caught in the middle of a blizzard.

Did we check the weather forecast back then? No! Little did we know a major hurricane was coming up the coast, and we had no clue as to the severity of the approaching storm front. Luckily, we survived that surprise weather attack. And never again have we gone into the wilderness unprepared.

Our hunting tactics haven't changed much throughout the eight decades

Salernos have hunted this remote region. To be successful, we capitalize on four main hunting approaches: drives, stands, still-hunting and tracking. Of these, stand-hunting seems the least productive. The low deer density simply doesn't lend to high success rates for killing mature bucks from the stand. So in our years of hunting backwoods bucks, the name of the game has consistently been covering as much ground as we can.

As for determining which of these approaches will best serve your hunting situation, the answer largely depends on the weather. Still-hunting has been our mainstay when snow is non-existent. Once we have an idea what the primary food source is that season,

we focus on staying above both the feed and the deer in order to gain a vantage point. When hunting these remote mountaintops, our success rates remain strong only if we take every step to prevent mature bucks seeing or smelling us. Getting above the deer is a great way to gain an edge on mountain bucks, as you can see them coming and prepare yourself for a shot well before they know you exist.

When the season begins, there are heavy leaves on the trees, which makes it extremely difficult to even see deer. Mature bucks love high, remote areas, where they feel more comfortable due to familiarity and no human scent. If you're hunting the early season, you'll



need to keep this in mind and start high. Teamwork is critical, and hunting in a group with others heading the same direction is a great approach. Space hunters roughly 100 to 200 yards apart and advance methodically toward the target area.

This approach has granted us tremendous early-season success, and we've learned that most of the bucks we encounter tend to circle back when jumped. In turn, driving mature bucks increases our chances of catching them sneaking back to their safe zones. A slow, steady pace is needed to cover ground, along with a strong mentality that you'll spot deer before they spot you.

Whereas teamwork is critical when there's no snow, solo hunting seems to work best once the ground is covered. When hunting fresh or dense snow, it's just you vs. that mature buck. Finding a big track with long strides and great width between the prints, becomes the primary objective.

Plan to read every detail of the trail you're advancing on. If tracks appear to be following a straight line with long strides, tracking speed is a must. Meandering tracks suggest a buck is feeding or looking to bed. Remember that bucks love to bed above their tracks, in order to spot danger on their trail. Wind also plays a factor, but due to the terrain and cover, it shifts often. Don't get too caught up in wind direction, but be mindful and aware as you near a buck's hideout.

As the seasons change, snow is what we pray for. There's no doubt our knowledge of areas where bucks traditionally live has helped us immensely. However, regardless of your knowledge of an area, reading the size of a deer's track is paramount to trophy success. Once you've located a track you deem to be from a mature buck, you have to try and get into his head. As you maneuver through fresh snow, put yourself in tune with the deer's journey. Advance carefully; never rush yourself. Stay focused on the terrain and structure around you.

As you hone your technique, you'll be able to sense when you're closing in on a buck's location. Knowing a mature buck is within a certain distance of you, your mental state will become focused in such a methodical way that all of your senses will be heightened. Your adrenaline will pump wildly.

Covering ground is key. Don't expect



Tim Salerno killed this 194-pound 10-pointer by tracking him through fresh snow. Tracking is one of the best ways to hunt mature Adirondack bucks. *Photo courtesy of Randy Salerno*

to walk a mile into the woods and stumble onto a mature buck track or bedding area. One important aspect of being able to hunt for miles is only carrying the essentials. Don't go light, go *lighter*. Minimalist water/windproof layered clothing, comfortable waterproof hiking boots, compass, lighter, rope, ammo, water purifier, energy bars, a good pair of gloves and a warm, waterproof hat are among the essentials. The lighter your load, the more ground you'll cover and the better your chances of killing a buck.

As you embark on your Adirondack hunt, pick the surrounding landscape apart. Always be looking for deer movement and stationary body parts: the flicker of a tail, nose or ear, horizontal features of the back or belly, contrasting

brown objects, legs moving, etc. A good rule of thumb is to always look as far ahead as you can see the ground, which will probably be between 50 feet and 100 yards. And survey as far right and left as possible. It's a mental game. Stay focused and pay attention to detail, because Adirondack bucks are always on high alert.

My family has been successful in killing mature bucks year in and year out thanks to our persistence in practicing these strategies. The last eight decades have encompassed a tremendous amount of preparation, perseverance and patience. The lessons I've learned from great Adirondack hunters and woodsmen such as my father and uncle have imparted wisdom that I hope to pass on to the next generation. Success in this area is possible. And when it's achieved, the jubilation of harvesting an elusive mountain giant is unparalleled. **NAW**

WEBSITE

Visit the author's website for more photos and short stories of big-bodied, heavy-racked bucks taken using the methods described in this feature. (www.salernobrothers.com)