

## Deerscaping with Neil Dougherty of NorthCountry Whitetails

**David  
Barrett:**

Welcome to Bigger Bucks with Trophy Buck Secrets, the show for whitetail fanatics everywhere, hosted by yours truly, David Barrett.

I'm the founder of the Trophy Nation at [www.TrophyBuckSecrets.com](http://www.TrophyBuckSecrets.com), our fast-growing community of dedicated deer hunters just like you.

We showcase the secrets of growing, holding, and harvesting bigger bucks with experts from all around the world of whitetail deer management and hunting to make you a better deer hunter today.

Now, join me for today's show. Neil Dougherty is a wildlife consultant and a nationally recognized leader in hunting property development.

His property layout concepts have been featured in Outdoor Life, Field & Stream, and dozens of other publications and T.V. shows.

He's been called the "brightest young deer woods architect" by Outdoor Life and the originator of "deerscaping."

Neil is here to share his whitetail wisdom with us today. Hi, Neil. We're glad to have you here.

**Neil  
Dougherty:** Hi, David.

**David:** Right off the bat, can you tell us what deerscaping is and what that means to a deer hunter?

**Neil:** I came up with the concept of deerscaping through my consulting service. Basically, the very simple side of deerscaping is that you can create an environment on a

piece of property that is going to lend itself to better hunting conditions.

It takes a little bit of a step beyond the typical biologist working with the property. They would crunch the body fat contents of deer and they'd say, "You need two percent of the property planted in food plots, you need this, or you need that."

Deerscaping would be able to take the core biology which is needed for a property to allow deer to thrive, and then take it to the next level by introducing a kind of landscape to the orientation of these things to get the deer to move where we want him to move.

At that point, we were able to start to create some kind of design concepts for different properties that lent themselves to hunting.

This is especially valuable for bow hunters because we've got to get within that core circle, that 20- to 30-yard circle. An orientation of all these habitat aspects to one another really will influence where the deer go.

**David:** Absolutely. Is there a minimum acreage or anything that you suggest a hunter have in order to apply the deerscaping concept?

**Neil:** No, not necessarily. In its simplest sense, deerscaping can be done around a tree stand location. We want to get a deer to enter into the location exactly where we'd like them to come from and exit out of a location; to protect your scent as it drifts away from you; to keep the deer from going downwind; or things like that.

You can do it on a very small level. Typically, though, when people are talking about property management, they hope to have 50-75 acres that they're able to work with and create a mousetrap, so to speak.

When a deer enters into that location – a good buck, for example – he's in there and he's being led through by the habitat work that you've done; and a kind of

predictable pattern will show up in front of you. That's ideal.

When it gets down to what most guys are caring about – the big deer side of things, how they're going to shoot the big buck – we need age for that deer.

It's unrealistic to have a guy that has 25 acres to think that he's going to keep a lot of bucks or too many bucks on the property all the time; even when you do intense habitat work so that they get to be three or four years old; they get to develop to maturity.

In that case, you need to have a little bit of co-op from the neighbor landowners to help you get some age on, or maybe a little bit larger pieces of property.

**David:** Okay. I know that it would be applied on a case-by-case basis, but what are some of the most common elements that you see that need to be applied to a property?

What type of habitat changes do you most typically need to make to a property in order to start the deerscaping process?

**Neil:** Let me tell you as I look at it from a consultant standpoint. If I visit a new piece of property, I'll take you through my thought process.

In step one, I'm looking for the property foundation; whether or not the property can work foundationally. There are two foundation issues that a property will have.

One is going to be ground slope, and this is mostly true for our northern properties. Ground slope will influence the amount of food that can be produced; and especially produced during the fall, the hunting season.

For example, if your property faces north, it's cooler, the soil temperatures are cooler, and you produce a lot of food during the summer months.

However, as the fall rolls around and frost starts to hit, the grocery source, so to speak, closes up and goes into dormancy because it's cool.

The deer would naturally want to migrate out of that area and go to southern slopes or, specifically, southwestern slopes, where there's more soil temperature and plants still have a chance to grow.

That is a foundation issue. If you're stuck in a northern slope, yes, we can do a lot of work there, but you're fighting against the current, so to speak.

One of the most important factors as to whether you'll be successful is going to be ground slope. That's something we'll look at right away from a consulting standpoint.

The other side of the equation is really a much more complex concept. That is going to be the wind flow. I've done a lot of studies with the wind here as of late and I've spent a lot of time working with wind flow on my property, and wind mapping specifically.

Basically, depending on how your topography lays, you will have very predictable patterns of wind flow across your property.

When it blows along out of the northwest, it follows this ridge, it drops over in this basin, and swirls around. Then the air gets clean and steady and travels across the property.

As the wind switches from northwest to west to southwest, you'll have different currents, so to speak, like a stream would have currents. All these things can be mapped out and are very predictable on the property.

What it means to a hunter is that he needs to have a property that is relatively steady from a wind-flow standpoint, if he's going to be long-term successful.

Scent-Lok suits and all that are great: they'll help you some; but you still can't beat a deer's nose. Understanding the environment that you're trying to hunt in is a lot more important than some of these cover-up scent activities.

Mapping the wind flow is a way that you'll understand what the property is all about. Those are the two main foundation issues for a piece of property.

Let me go back to the wind for just a second. We can't touch it, we can't feel it, and everybody kind of thinks about wind, but they don't think about it properly enough and give it enough weight, in my mind.

The biologist will go crazy when I say a statement like this, but if I try to simplify the latest science on deer, it would be that 80% of a deer's brain is devoted to interpreting scent.

About 80% of your brain and my brain is devoted to being visual. When we look at the woods, you and I are visual creatures. We're predators, so we're kind of consuming things through our eyes, so to speak; interpreting the woods.

The deer really don't care about what's coming in through the visual spectrum. They're more concerned with what's coming in through their nose. They almost have a three-dimensional awareness of the airflow of the piece of property.

That's what's allowing them to know what predators have been there, where the other animals are, where the food sources are, and everything is drifting along.

The scent of another deer or the scent of another hunter easily is traveling 200 or 300 yards in the wind currents, the scent plume that leaves that object. They're able to get a pretty intense look at the woods, simply walking and smelling over a 100-yard path.

**David:** That's some pretty interesting stuff with regard to the wind. I think that anybody who has spent much time hunting deer has experienced that phenomenon.

When you leave the house, you're convinced of what direction the wind is coming from and you feel that it's going to be prime time for this particular stand that you have in mind to head to.

Then you get there and it seems like things have completely changed. The wind isn't doing what you expected it to do.

**Neil:** That's right.

**David:** You're saying that you're applying technology to the topography and able to actually predict some of these patterns and currents in the wind that will develop on property, based on the way it lays.

**Neil:** Exactly. There is some level of predictability. It's not quite a slam-dunk, like "It's going to blow right from this tree to that tree."

However, we get a really good idea of where it's going to be swirling and how it's going to move as the thermal currents change and other things change on the property.

More than any other thing, if you want to be a student of what deer are doing on your property, you'd better get in their shoes. Their shoes are driven by scent.

We feel it when the wind blows across our face, but we're pitiful when we're out there trying to smell. If you want to have a chance at a four-year-old, think about the woods in the way he does. That's a scent plume and the way the air is drifting around. That's all the information that he needs.

In its simplest sense, I have a lot of landowners I work with who go out and create an air map for the property. They take an aerial photograph of their property, the place they like to hunt.

During the fall conditions, when the leaves are off the trees in cool weather, go out there with a kid's bubble gun that blows little bubbles, walk a grid across the property – every 100 yards, for example – and turn the bubbles loose. Wherever those bubbles drift to, you draw an arrow on the map.

By the time you're done walking over the property on a southwest wind, you'll have a pretty good idea of what the wind did at different points.

That's the first step of understanding the wind flow. Then do it on a northwest wind, a totally different wind. You'll find that the swirl zones are in different spots.

There are other places where it actually funnels into certain locations and the deer, by bedding in a certain location, can get a tremendous amount of acres of scent information drifting over them at one point.

A lot of guys will understand if I think about it in terms of what a fisherman would. If you have two boulders in a stream with your predator fish – your trout, for example – he's going to be right off the back side of those boulders and swimming into the spot where the increased current could provide him with more bait fish or more food.

In the deer's case – and specifically a buck, that increased current would be two spots where the wind would increase in velocity because of two hills, a ravine, or something like that. He could get a lot more scent and more information. It allows him to stay alive a little bit longer.

**David:**

So, there's a whole lot more to understanding the wind and how to use it to your advantage with a big buck than just simply knowing, "Well, there's a northwest wind today."

You need to understand how that's going to influence the deer's movements and behaviors within the property.

**Neil:** That's exactly right. Most guys see it in the field range that they're in. If they're sitting on a two-acre field, they say, "Oh, the wind's blowing across the field. I'm on the downwind side. Isn't that grand?"

That's good. That's probably your best approach; but know where the wind is 200 yards away from you. Where is your scent plume? Where has it gone?

That's the way the deer will understand the woods and that's the way your more mature animals – day in and day out – move through the woodlots avoiding hunters most of the time. That's how they get along in the big picture, so to speak.

Again, all of that is just the foundation to deerscaping. That's a little bit more of an awareness of the property that you're working with.

We take that concept. The next thing that really hinges for deerscaping is that the deer are slaves to their stomach.

My mentor, Dr. Grant Woods, preached and preached and preached this to me over a number of years when I was getting started in the consulting business and trying to understand this whole deer thing.

Quite honestly, I've now put together management reports on probably about 250,000 acres. It's hitting home now more than ever that deer are slaves to their stomachs. That means that they go where there is food.

It's a really simple concept. I think we probably should have caught onto it a whole lot earlier. When we predictably put food in there, the deer are going to go to those locations to feed.

They'll pass through and they'll walk in locations where there is an increased amount of food. Whether it's food plots or brambles, briars, and things, they'll spend more time there.

**David:** I've spoken with Dr. Grant Woods and read some of his articles talking about doing the forensics in the skinning shed, where they've been called in to take out deer professionally in population control efforts.

They'd bring the deer in, check out the stomach contents, and basically see the things that were at the top of the line that day.

Then they would know, "Oh, they're eating on this today. Where's that on the property?" They'd find that source and they'd score on lots of deer.

**Neil:** That's exactly right. That is 100% accurate. That's the biology spin of the equation.

Neil's deerscaping spin of the equation is that I'm going to get out in front of that curve and not look at what they were eating, but have an idea of what they want to eat.

I'm going to locate those food sources in places on the property where the winds are steady and I can hunt them effectively. I'll try to get them to go to a location where I can get them killed. That's the whole deerscaping program.

**David:** So, we're way beyond, "I think I'm going to go out, buy some seed, slap a food plot down on my property, and grow some big bucks." We're way past that.

**Neil:** That'll work, but what I'm trying to do is take the variability out of the hunting equation and make the property as steady as it can be during the hunting season.

What I've found with hunting properties is the rut phenomenon, hunting the rut. That's when everybody wants to be in the woods. It's when every property roughly is equal to another.

For that magic four days before the bucks really start to breed, they're goofy. They're rutting around and they're

not paying attention to wind. If you're in a tree, you have a chance of getting them killed.

For example, in my New York season, I've got 60 days of hunting, so that's four out of 60 days. What can I do in the other times when they're being more cautious?

When they're trying to get around a property, what can I do to have a chance to get in front of these older-age animals? We're talking about trying to harvest four-, five-, and six-year-old bucks. They're a different animal.

What we try to do is get out in front of their stomachs a little bit, putting certain food sources that they like in different parts of the property where I have a chance to kill them.

For example, one of the neat things about northern deer is that they really converge on plants in the brassica family when it gets cold.

A brassica plant is a great, big, leafy thing. It could be a turnip, it could have a tuber in the ground, or it could be just leafy stuff. Brassica plants convert starches to sugar once it gets cold, and the deer really key in on them.

If you have your other nutritional needs in your property met, the deer will leave this plant alone until it gets later in the season; especially if you have some turnip mixed in with it.

If you were to have your air map you could look at your property on a northwest wind. That's what we're typically encountering during the later part of the hunting season as it's getting colder.

When we look at the northwest wind and we look at a ridge, you'd say, "Boy, I could sit up in this spot and it's hard for a deer to smell me."

Then why don't we put a food source that's more used during the later part of the year in that same area to try

to encourage the deer to go to that location? I'm trying to match food with the time of the year their going to use them.

If we turn around and do the flip side of that, a lot of guys now are planting the Gobbler Oaks or other things like that: early season dropping oaks. They can grow very quickly and produce acorns.

Here's a food source that drops its fruit really early in the year. During the early part of the hunting season, your winds are typically going to be out of the southwest.

How about we locate and actually plant these types of foods where it's more beneficial for the hunter during a southwest wind?

We're trying to match the time of the year to what the deer wants to eat – to the food that drops – and then put it in the property where it's best for you as a hunter.

It's almost reordering the whole property now to the point where the food, the wind, and everything is lined up in the hunter's favor, rather than typically on the contrary.

**David:** It sounds like a very thorough, logical thought process. At the same time, it's not rocket science, either. You're just going to the next level, a little bit deeper than what most guys have thought about taking it to before.

**Neil:** That's right. None of it really is. The deer management thing is not rocket science. The whole program here, as much as I'd like to say it, really is not.

The bottom line is that you give your deer good stuff to eat. Meet their nutritional biological needs. Allow them get to be three or four years old and they're going to start to really knock your socks off with antler production typically at that time. Get them a little bit older.

Then, we get into the kind of subtle, set-up side of things, like how you can make it a better hunting property. That will be the difference between getting the deer killed and not getting it killed.

In some ways, it's not rocket science; but in other ways, there's a tremendous amount of finesse that will make it happen.

I'll go back to the couple hundred thousand acres of properties that I've visited. A lot of my properties I work with are small: they're 250 acres, 500 acres, or sometimes smaller. There are a few big tracts, but by and large they're smaller pieces.

I can look at a lot of properties and basically, after spending a day on them and looking at their foundation, can say, "On a scale of one to ten, this property would be a three on hunting ease. The winds are wrong and the property has the wrong kind of slope. It's just going to be tough."

No matter what a landowner does on the property, he's going to struggle. As hard as he works, he's still going to struggle to consistently get big deer.

In the magic four days when the rut is really booming, he'll have a chance to be good. Other than that, though, it's going to be a tough property.

On the flip side, I see 25% of the properties and a lot of the pieces you see on T.V. and other things where guys are going and they're slamming these big bucks day in and day out, these properties have an incredible hunting foundation. The property was blessed with all the things in the right spots. If you could master your heart rate, you're going to shoot that big deer as he comes through. It's just set up naturally the right way.

That only happens on its own 25% of the time. Where does that leave the rest of the guys who have property? If you're lucky enough to have an investment or have permission to go hunt somewhere, you can spin it around and put yourself up in that top 25% by

reorienting the food sources or the cover areas on the map.

It's going to be a five- or ten-year process to organize the property; but reorganize it so that now you have the ability to really have a slam-dunk hunting property.

If you're lucky enough to grow an older buck, if he's on the property and gets on his feet, he's in your mousetrap and it's just a matter of time before he exposes himself.

**David:** This is awesome stuff. I'm sitting here looking for my bubbles and my aerial photos right now. I'm ready to go out and start mapping the winds on my property.

What do guys do next? I know you've talked about your consulting services that you do. Where can people go to learn more? How can they get in touch with you, Neil, to see how they can have their place deerscaped?

**Neil:** There are two ways they can get in touch with me. One is going to be to go to my Web site for my consulting service. That's at [www.NorthCountryWhitetails.com](http://www.NorthCountryWhitetails.com).

The telephone number for our NorthCountry office is (315) 331-6959. I've got quite a few DVDs and actually books that I've written about this topic that are on there.

The first step is to get some information and maybe do a little bit of reading on your own. Spend some time with a book and then reach out.

If they do need additional help or really want to get the property deerscaped, that's a hire for a consulting fee. That's a piece of cake, too, to really get the foundation set for your property or give you an organized plan going forward.

**David:** That's excellent stuff. I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us here today. I look forward to talking with you again in the future to learn even more about this concept.

Maybe we'll get into some of the other elements that are involved and just anything that you can do to help us become more successful hunters.

With a lot of the things that you covered today, even if they're hunting on public land or they don't have their own ground, they can still apply some of the concepts and the things that you talked about.

Things like understanding the wind on a property and the north-facing slopes, and how that might not be your best position in the cold weather times can be applied, just knowing what to look for in that foundation.

Even though you may not have the means or permission to alter those things, you can still understand how that's going to affect the property and use it to your advantage.

**Neil:** Absolutely. There's a great future for deer hunting. There's a lot of new information that's going to come out in the next five to ten years.

It's going to come from professional managers, or in some cases it's going to come from guys who are just trying this stuff on their own property; but we're going to learn a lot.

For the guy who doesn't have ground, it's a great opportunity for him to kind of go to school here, because he's going to be exposed to woodsmanship and understanding of deer that he can take and understand.

Suppose you get a blowdown of trees in a particular area on a big piece of public land. Knowing that the protein content of the briars is decent in there, or the different food sources that came up and understanding what they mean to deer, could make a difference.

It's the difference between having success – having your own little honey hole that no one thought to go to – and sitting on that traditional ridgeline where the

habitats matured ten years ago and where there are just not going to be very many deer passing by.

Any more understanding they have of the woods and interaction of the woods, deer, food, and wind will help you no matter where you are.

**David:** I love it. It's a continual learning process. That's what we're trying to do. We can learn a little bit more each day: understand the woods better and understand the deer better. We'll just become better managers, better hunters, and better sportsmen in the process.

Thanks again, Neil. I look forward to talking to you at some point again.

**Neil:** Thank you.