Mule Deer

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Hunting opportunities for future generations depend upon the development of strong ethics by today's hunters.

Basic Hunter Ethics

Hunter ethics is the set of written and unwritten rules of hunting behavior based upon respect for the land and water resources, all wildlife species, and other hunters. It is likely that the number and types of big game hunters, as well as the number of available upland game, waterfowl, and furbearer species available to hunters, by the middle of the twenty-first century will largely depend upon the quality of ethics developed and practiced by hunters in the early part of this century. The various numerous, and often wealthy organizations which mildly or vehemently oppose hunting as a sport are a serious threat to hunting. They will certainly utilize observed poor hunter ethics as arguments and weapons against hunting.

The ethical deer hunter of the early twenty-first century must exhibit and teach the next generation not only the joy and lure of hunting, but even more importantly the highest hunting ethics. High ethics must be continuously practiced not only on hunting trips, but during each outdoor activity, including camping, fishing, birding, sightseeing and other trips.

Many of the basic concepts of deer hunting ethics are listed below. The list is not complete, as each hunting situation is unique and requires adapting individualized ethics. However, these concepts may serve as guidelines. Although few hunters have observed the highest level of hunter ethics during all hunting trips, and most hunters have broken at least a few of these concepts, all hunters should adopt a higher standard of personal ethical behavior rules.
A poacher is caught in his headlights. Over the decades, the objective of the poacher has changed from obtaining venison to acquiring trophy antlers.

Common concepts of ethical deer hunting:

(1) Never litter, including empty casings.
(2) Report all hunting violations to the local law enforcement authority.
(3) Always respect private property.
(4) Always obey all hunting rules and regulations.
(5) Always be able to visually identify the game animal(s) being hunted.
(6) Never be under the influence of alcohol while hunting.
(7) Never destroy habitats by driving a vehicle in closed areas. Drive only on designated roads.
(8) Never carry a loaded firearm in any motorized vehicle.
(9) Always check for a wounded animal every time a gun is fired, even if a miss was a certainty.
(10) Always clean the carcass immediately after the kill.
(11) Never waste nor allow venison to spoil.
(12) Never leave a carcass in the field, even if you accidentally killed an illegal deer.
(13) Always instruct new and young hunters in proper hunter ethics.
(14) Never aim a gun at anything you do not intend to shoot.
(15) Never use a rifle scope in place of binoculars.
(16) Always assist other hunters who need help.
(17) Never allow companions to hunt illegally.
(18) Always condemn unethical behavior.
(19) Practice with your weapon before hunting, know your skill level, and make “clean” kills.
(20) Never take a shot in which you are not absolutely positive about safety or the target.
(21) Always respect other hunters.
(22) Never criticize the valiant efforts of law enforcement.
(23) Never “party” hunt.
(24) Never harvest more game than you can or will consume.
(25) Diligently work to never leave a wounded animal in the field.
(26) Never hunt just to kill.
(27) Never hunt on a bet or a dare.
(28) Always hunt safely.
(29) Always hunt within your physical capabilities.
(30) Know what to do in case of an emergency.
(31) Always hunt in the style of “Be Prepared.”
(32) Be knowledgeable and well-read about mule deer biology and management.

Not all acts of poor hunter ethics directly affect the biological management of mule deer. Littering, for example, has no effect on deer numbers. However, whenever deer are wasted or illegally taken, or habitat is negatively impacted, population dynamics and management options are decreased.

**Three Frequent Ethical Problems**

**Party Hunting**

Deer are often observed in groups throughout the year, and “bachelor” buck groups with or without one or more does are not uncommon, especially at the beginning of the rifle hunt. Consequently, hunters spotting deer often find two or more bucks together. Party hunting results when
one hunter illegally harvests two or more deer which are then tagged by another hunter or hunters in the party. Party hunting results in a lowering of success rate for the ethical hunter and hunting parties, and often leads to a few hunting parties having all the ‘luck’. Party hunting is commonly observed by a male hunter placing the tag of his spouse or mother on the deer. Both the hunter and the owner of the tag are subject to a wildlife citation.

**Illegal Kill and Wounding Loss**

Occasionally, a hunter may mistakenly kill two deer. Examples are killing two deer standing side by side with one bullet, or shooting at a second deer in a group after the first was, unknowingly, mortally wounded. In such cases, the second deer should be cleaned, but not transported, and then immediately reported to the local conservation officer.

Far too many deer are killed, wasted, and left in the field. On the average, a hunter will find one or more deer shot and left by the end of the rifle hunt every five or six years under buck-only hunting. Although wounding loss may be decreasing, about 18 percent of rifle hunters find a wasted deer yearly (Austin and Jordan 1989; Austin et al. 1992; Stapley 1970). Solutions are ethically simple: if a hunter kills an antlerless deer on a buck-only tag, the deer should be cleaned, and the hunter should immediately report the violation. Every time a hunter shoots at a deer, even a probable miss, the area should be carefully checked for a blood trail. On buck-only hunting units, illegal kills usually involve antlerless deer, and wounding losses consist mostly of unretrieved bucks.

**Poaching**

The purposeful, illegal, out-of-season, harvest of big game is significant, but fortunately decreasing in frequency. Poaching simply decreases success for ethical hunters. Furthermore, since poachers often select only the largest antlered bucks, trophy bucks become more limited to ethical hunters.

Hunters must report poachers. In Utah, day or night, call 1-800-538-DEER. Other states have similar hot lines. Significantly more poaching cases are processed by tips from ethical hunters and other concerned citizens than are directly observed by conservation officers in the field.

The number of deer poached yearly in Utah is not known. Most poaching activity takes place at night with a spotlight and is rarely reported. For example, I conducted research studies into depredation by
spotlighting and counting deer using alfalfa and wheat fields. In over 100 nights of observations, only on one occasion was the activity questioned or reported to authorities.

Estimations of combined losses from party hunting, illegal kill and wounding loss, and poaching range from 2 percent to over 50 percent of the annual legal buck harvest. As a rough mean estimate, in my opinion, 10,000 deer, but possibly as few as 5,000 or as many as 20,000 deer, may be annually lost to these unethical and unlawful activities in Utah.
Chapter 11

Successful Mule Deer Hunting

Be Prepared.

Boy Scouts Motto

Since only about one in three hunters, or fewer, are successful in harvesting a deer in Utah in any year, it seems reasonable that hunters who really desire to be successful would place considerably more effort into preparation. Most hunters anticipate the annual Utah deer hunt with the hope of success, but far too often, hunters return home with feelings of too many hunters and too few deer. Although being prepared is no guarantee of harvest success, it is a guarantee to a more enjoyable hunt and likely will increase the chances of success.

It is interesting to note that about 20 percent of Utah deer hunters really have minimal desire to harvest a deer. From my observations, these hunters use the deer hunt more as an opportunity to get out into the woods and share social time with family and friends than to harvest a deer. Hunting is only of secondary importance to these hunters.

Note: My early pre-teen and teen experiences with deer hunting began the night before the beginning of the hunt when my uncles would furiously try to pull all their gear together in an hour for the three day camping-hunting trip. Their only preparation prior to the evening before was to decide what time to leave and where to go, and to let my aunts know that “deer hunters’ widow for the weekend” shopping was okay.

Invariably, some important item was always forgotten. One year an uncle had brought a new 270 Remington rifle but had remembered to bring only three shells, leaving the unopened
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boxes in the family car. On another trip one uncle forgot a sleeping bag and had to borrow my extra bag, which my dad had insisted I bring due to the extra cold weather. My family never practiced aiming and shooting, and I fondly remember sitting on a hillside in the Strawberry Reservoir area watching as my uncle and four friends, with almost uncontrolled excitement, emptied their iron-sight lever-action 30-30 rifles of about 25 total rounds at a group of standing bucks less than 100 yards away, and while the hunters frantically reloaded, the unscathed and, to me, smirking deer, slowly walked into the timber.

One year I was “brushing” deer up a draw to the ridge line and the awaiting family hunters. Several times I had noticed a deer just staying out of my clear visual sight and slowly moving in front of me up the draw. Upon reaching the last stand of conifers, the doe saw the hunters on the ridge and me below, panicked, bolted down the slope, crash-slammed into a downed log, and, as I watched between the trees, somersault-flipped in the air and landed on her back with a broken neck. It is the only deer story I have ever heard where a deer was harvested without a shot being fired.

To my extended family, any deer—buck, doe, or fawn—was a good deer, antlers were essentially worthless, a single deer harvested by the party meant a successful hunt, all deer tasted the same, and we always shared the venison.

Factors of Success

Two factors which would appear to be, but are not, highly important in determining hunting success are the hunter’s age and the number of years of hunting experience (Austin et al. 1992). When these two factors were compared with buck hunter success during the rifle hunt they were only weakly correlated. In only two of four years was the number of years of hunting experience significantly related to buck hunting success, and in only a single year was age significant. Consequently, much of the success in harvesting a buck depends upon plain “hunter luck” and other factors. However, it is likely these two factors would show a higher relationship for archery and muzzleloader hunters, due to the generally higher levels of hunter dedication and necessary skills.
The majority of bucks that are harvested during the rifle hunt are harvested on opening weekend (Utah DWR 1951–2008). Long-term averages indicate about 40 percent, 15 percent, and 10 percent of the harvested bucks are taken on Saturday, Sunday, and Monday, respectively. About 10 percent are harvested the second Saturday. Harvest on all other days is about 5 percent or less. Because opening weekend pressure is high and deer are moved in and out of cover by hunter presence and especially the bangs from rifle shots, it seems reasonable that hunter location being in the right place at the right time may often prove to be a more important factor than past experience combined with hunting skill. Almost every hunter has a story of how a deer just happened to walk out of the cover when the hunter just stopped momentarily, or how the hunter jumped a nice buck, could not get a shot, and the buck ran straight into the guns of another party who were simply visiting, often by their vehicles. Nonetheless, the well-prepared hunter increases the chance of a satisfying experience and perhaps for harvest success, particularly following the opening weekend.

Most hunters believe the patriarch buck is also the smartest buck, and research supports this claim (Maguire and Severinghaus 1954). If all bucks, regardless of age, had the same degree of hunter wariness, there would be no change in the proportion of younger to older bucks in the harvest as the hunt progressed. However, if older deer are indeed more intelligent, a lower proportion of older bucks would be taken at the start of the hunt, and the proportion of older bucks in the harvest would gradually increase as the younger deer “wised-up.” The latter is the case. For example, on opening day in 1977 from the Current Creek deer unit, 81 percent of the bucks harvested were yearlings. On the second day 73 percent were yearlings and by the third day 69 percent were yearlings. It has generally been observed that after the second or perhaps third day of the rifle hunt, the differences in wariness between older and younger deer become minor and wariness is about equal.

Nonetheless, hunters should not wait several days before hunting that big buck because most bucks, even most big bucks, are harvested during the opening three days. Another factor to consider is that daily hunter success decreases from about 10 to 20 percent on the opening three days, with opening day being the highest daily hunter success, to less than 10 percent during the rest of the hunt.
Hunt Preparation

Physical Fitness

Most of us vividly remember hiking to the mountain peaks with little effort just a few years ago, followed by the memory of the struggling effort involved in climbing the smallest hill during last year’s hunt. With most hunters employed in sedentary jobs, few are physically ready for marching up a mountain with a five-pound gun, ten pounds of hunting gear, two apples, four candy bars, water canteen, and too many pounds of excess body fat. Too many current hunters rely almost solely on ATVs and four-wheel drive trucks to do all the work. However, for the hunter who is in good shape, the hunt becomes many times more enjoyable, regardless of available transportation or success.

Getting in reasonable shape does not take a lot of time and really not much work. Your spouse will be delighted, you may prevent a heart attack, and you will just plain feel better. However, shaping up does take several weeks of consistent effort (Krantz 1992). Labor Day in early September may have a double meaning for the rifle hunter and is a great time to begin exercise training. Archers should consider July 1. Remember, a check-up with a doctor is a prerequisite necessity.

Daily, or almost daily, walking, increasing to fast walking, and then to a slow jog, is the cornerstone to slowly and properly improving fitness. Fast walking means walking a mile in about 15 minutes or a pace of 4 mph. A daily fast walk for 15 to preferably 30 minutes, after two to three weeks of effort, greatly improves muscle tone and the cardiovascular system. Additional strenuous exercise through activities such as jogging, swimming, cycling, tennis, hiking, even heavy yard or housework will help to improve fitness even faster. However, with increased physical activity, the risk of injury such as tendinitis, lower back problems, swelling in the joints, and pulled muscles is greatly increased, especially if the conditioning is not approached gradually.

Note: Many years ago I set a personal goal of getting into shape every year for at least a short period of time. For me, year-round training simply led to too many injuries. My goal was to be able to run at an eight-minute-per-mile pace for at least 24 minutes or for three miles, and for two months of the year. Although my goals have changed and decreased in the last few years, this was
a reasonable goal for me that I maintained for almost 30 years, past 55 years of age. I suggest every hunter set a similar personal yearly goal.

It has often been said that exercise is king and nutrition is queen. A well-balanced diet is the second factor in obtaining and maintaining good physical condition. Every hunter should establish good dietary habits and weight limit goals and stick to them.

**Firearm and Bow Preparation**

Practice with a well cared-for weapon. Too many hunters fail to practice shooting before the hunt, and many more do not practice enough. Almost all hunters have personal stories like, “It was an easy shot, but I just missed.”

I recommend archers spend five to eight sessions in practice before the hunt and firearm hunters two to three. Sessions do not need to be long. Importantly, by the end of the sessions, the hunters should feel very confident in being able to hit a target. As a general guideline, a hunter should be able to hit an eight inch circular pie plate in the field at 25 yards with two out of three shots using a rifle or muzzleloader, whereas archers and pistol shooters should be able to hit the pie plate at 15 yards.

When rifles are sighted in at 25 yards, which is the common distance, the bullet is centered at both 25 and about 200 yards, depending upon the ballistics of the gun and ammunition. At about 100 yards the bullet will be about one to four inches high. Because of the variability in muzzleloaders, they should be sighted in at the distance the hunter anticipates to shoot, usually between 50 and 100 yards. After a hunter becomes confident with the accuracy of the weapon at these short yardages, I recommend setting the pie-plate targets at 100 or more yards for rifles and 75 yards for muzzleloaders and practicing until the plate can be hit with two out of three shots. Archers should practice at distances ranging from about 10 to 40 yards.

With my 30-06 iron-sight rifle, I often have checked the rifle’s accuracy and my ability by setting out three aluminum cans at 100 to 120 yards. Hitting two of three cans at that distance in sitting position or with a solid rest assures the hunter of a high level of shooting accuracy.

Although scopes on rifles allow the hunter to more easily see the target, scopes do not make holding the rifle steady easier. Also sometimes
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hunters fail to get off a shot because of not being able to find the animal in the scope. Another problem with using scopes is the potential of the scope being bumped or jarred out of the true alignment without the hunter knowing. Nonetheless, scopes are a very valuable addition to effective hunting, and most deer hunters currently use scopes on their rifles. Indeed, the rifle without a scope is rapidly becoming a rarity. However, scopes are certainly not necessary to be successful as evidenced that very few hunters used scopes in the early 1960s or before.

Another important element of hunter preparation is a clean and cared-for gun. Cleaning a firearm requires a cloth, ramrod, solvent, oil, and about 15 minutes. When hunters fail to clean their guns, their value is reduced and often the guns become unusable and must be discarded. A well cared-for firearm, even if used very often, will easily last a lifetime.

**Basic Deer Hunter’s List**

The items a hunter can carry by personal choice are many, but only a few, mostly lightweight items, are necessary:

**Clothing:** Always carry enough clothing to keep warm in consideration of the current temperature and weather conditions. Appropriate for the weather, well-conditioned, and comfortable boots are extremely important. An extra pair of stockings, which can double as mittens, is a good idea. A clean handkerchief, which has many practical and first aid uses, should always be included. When weather conditions are cold and snowy, it is also a good idea to carry a pocket size emergency blanket. Hunter orange outer clothing that covers the head, back, and chest is required by law.

**Compass and area map:** Every year hunters get lost. Regardless of a hunter’s experience in an area or outdoor expertise, getting lost or disoriented, particularly during heavy fog or blizzard weather conditions, is always possible. Using a compass and map is easy to learn and a skill that every hunter should acquire. The readily available Boy Scout Handbook is an excellent source for learning. GPS units, which require batteries, are rapidly replacing the compass and map.

**Water:** Carrying a quart of water, not soda pop, in a canteen or water bottle may seem like a lot of extra weight, but even on very cold days, body liquids are lost and need to be replaced. Physical efficiency decreases rapidly with body dehydration. Eating snow will help. Also, when snow is available, start out with a canteen full of hot water and replace the water in the canteen as it is consumed with snow. The warm
water will melt enough snow to stretch the canteen water to about one-and-a-half quarts.

Matches: Always carry strike-anywhere matches in two different containers, such as a plastic bag or match case. Butane lighters or other fire-starting materials may substitute for one container of the matches.

Knife: A sharp pocket knife or dagger with a straight blade three inches or longer is a necessity.

Rope and String: Most hunters should plan on using a nylon rope, about eight feet in length, for dragging the carcass to the road or in some cases hanging the carcass from a tree overnight, and a string, about two feet in length, to attach the tag.

License and Shells: Beware as these are the most commonly forgotten important items. Double check for the license. How many shells should a hunter carry while hunting? In an unpublished survey of Utah hunters, I determined less than one percent of hunters ever shot more than 20 rounds during the hunting day at deer, and almost all hunters who were successful in harvesting a deer used five or fewer shells. I suggest hunters carry 20 shells or one box plus a few bullets in the magazine, not chamber, of the rifle. Only a few hunters will use the shells from the box. For hunters using more than one caliber of rifle, make certain the bullets match the rifle.

Food: If a good breakfast is eaten, very little if any food is needed. However, most hunters enjoy eating a couple of chocolate candy bars and an apple during the day.

Reading the Regulations

Understanding the proclamation and especially any special regulations associated with one’s particular hunting unit is not only a preventive measure to avoid making an inadvertent violation, but it will also raise the hunter’s level of confidence and add to the overall hunting experience.

Most wildlife citations issued to deer hunters are a result of negligence. Hunters rarely purposefully violate regulations. In Utah, 5,000 to 6,000 wildlife citations are issued per year for all violations. About one-fourth are related to deer hunting activities. Less than one percent of Utah deer hunters receive a citation in any year, and most hunters never receive a wildlife citation of any kind over a lifetime. The most common violations associated with deer hunting are failure to properly tag, failure to wear hunter orange, hunting without a license, loaded firearm in a vehicle, shooting from a vehicle or road, and trespassing.
Hunter Safety

Deer hunting in Utah is a very safe sport with few accidents. Since the beginning of the hunter education program in 1958 and the required wearing of hunter orange in 1973, the mean number of total Utah accidents and fatalities related to all kinds of hunting per year has averaged about 11 and 3, respectively, with about three of those accidents and one fatality associated with deer hunting. In recent years these figures have continued to decrease. Before 1958 when neither hunter education nor hunter orange was required, over 100 accidents and about 20 fatalities occurred yearly from all hunts combined. Compared with many other outdoor recreation activities, such as downhill skiing, hunting has become a relatively safe sport.

General Hunting Techniques

Using Binoculars

Probably the number one change the majority of hunters could easily make to become more successful would be to carry and use a good pair of binoculars. The use of a pair of average 6x30 to 10x50 binoculars will greatly aid in finding deer. Every ten or twenty minutes and especially every time a new draw or landscape is approached, the area within view should be searched carefully. It is really amazing how many additional deer and other wildlife can be found when using binoculars.

One technique, uncommonly used, is for the hunter to climb to the top of a ridge or other high point and search the area carefully for 15 to 20 minutes or until a deer is located. The area searched should extend for a mile or more in one to several directions. The hunter then determines the best, hidden approach to the deer where the hunter may expect to obtain a good shot.

Too often hunters use the scopes on their rifles as binoculars. Most scopes have a very limited field of vision, and it is very frightening as well as maddening to see a fellow hunter on a distant ridge with his scope on you. Scopes should only be used when the firearm is to be fired!

Hunting Time

On the morning and evenings of the four primary and most successful hunting days during the rifle hunt, the first three days and the second
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Saturday, hunters intent on bagging a buck should be in the field. Since deer are crepuscular, most active in the early morning and late afternoon-evening hours, hunters should be hunting during these times. The most successful hunters will be in the field at the chosen hunting location at first light, and will return to camp only later in the evening, often using a flashlight. A small flashlight and fresh batteries are basic items.

Besides hunting the primary four days, all other days when the hunter can plan to hunt will increase the chance for success. Many bucks are harvested near the hunter’s home town when the hunter leaves work early, about 2:00 to 3:00 pm during mid-week, and returns home after dark. Sunday afternoons often have most hunters returning home and usually offer a more relaxed and uncrowded hunting opportunity.

Daily Planning

Each day’s hunting scheme will be more successful if thought out in advance of the hunt. It is always a good idea to decide which area or draw will be hunted if you are familiar with the larger area. Much time is wasted in trying to decide when to stop the car or ATV and begin hunting. A good rule is to plan hunts in locations where deer were harvested or at least observed on previous hunts. If hunting an unfamiliar area, spend at least part of a day driving and scouting before the season to decide upon a promising area with good habitat. Each hunting party needs be willing to adjust the next day’s hunting plan based on the experiences of the day.

Always decide on the size of the buck you are willing to harvest before stepping into the field. Far too often hunters shoot a small buck and are disappointed with the size. Hunters sometimes ignore, waste, and leave the small buck in the field. Occasionally a hunter will harvest, clean a small buck, hang it in a tree, and then hunt for a larger buck. This practice of “high-grading” is not only especially illegal, but disturbingly unethical. If a hunter really does not want to harvest a small buck, especially at the beginning of a hunt, the gun or bow should not even be removed from the resting position anymore than if a doe or fawn was sighted.

Habitat Selection

Hunt only where deer are found. Very often hunters spend considerable time in empty habitat. If few or no fresh tracks or pellet groups are observed in the area, simply hunt elsewhere.
On the mornings and evenings of the four primary harvest days during the rifle hunt, look for deer on the edges of openings near adequate cover. After the opening weekend, deer spend most of their time in heavier cover but usually within their home ranges. Habitats preferred by deer after having been pursued by hunters on opening weekend include mixed stands of conifer and aspen, mixed stands of conifer and mountain browse species such as Gambel oak or maple, and areas of mixed, patchy habitat such as clumps of aspen, Douglas fir, mountain mahogany or Gambel oak. Few deer are found in open habitats without visually protective cover. These habitats include low-growing big sagebrush and mountain meadows. Intermediate habitats include large expanses of aspen, conifer or Gambel oak and riparian areas.

Hunters should not spend the majority of time hunting canyon bottoms and ridge tops, except on the mornings and evenings of the four primary harvest days. Outside of these times, hunters should spend most of their time hunting at mid elevations between the canyon bottoms and ridge tops, because that is where the majority of deer will be hiding.

Using Intuition

Few hunters with considerable experience have not had the feeling of being watched by game animals, or the feeling that game animals are very close. Hunt quietly. Our sixth senses sometimes detect animals before our regular senses can verify. Never hesitate to look back over the shoulder or retrace a few steps when a “feeling” comes. Never hesitate to stop for a few minutes and listen to an unknown soft sound. Also the common sound of the bounding gait of running mule deer is unmistakable. This form of running, called stotting, where all four legs leave the ground simultaneously, is a very unusual form of running and adapted to mountainous terrain to escape from cougar predation.

Carcass Care

Shot Placement

Only after the shooting ends and the carcass is examined does the realization of the importance of good shot placement become apparent. Deer which have been shot through a major part of the hind quarters with even one bullet will have a significant portion of the meat destroyed. As much as seven to eight pounds of meat can be damaged with each shot.