

# Deer Hunting Starter Guide: The Basics



Do you want to start deer hunting but don't know where to begin? If so, there's no shame in that! Do you know a little about it, but want to fill in the gaps? There's nothing wrong with that either. The fact is, many hunters probably wish they had gotten a better (or earlier) start. After all, starting on a strong footing can make for more productive hunts – and faster.

Make this is your year.

1<sup>st</sup> Light Hunting Journal is committed to helping you start your journey – well not only you, but your friends, kids, and spouses.

## Why Do We Want to Help?

There are several reasons. First, there are many rewards for deer hunting. It has a rich tradition and there is a lot of thrill and challenge associated with pursuing the most popular game animal on the planet. Of course, there is also the camaraderie of deer camp, delicious venison, and being part of conservation. Not only do we not want you to miss out on this great pastime, but we also want to help remedy our declining number of hunters.

## Keeping it Simple

This straightforward guide is here largely to lay out the basic things needed to start deer hunting. *Deer hunting strategies, tips, and other information will come in later guides.* This minimalistic guide is intended for the onset hunter of any age. That is, you won't find the latest and greatest gear here. Just the basics. Keeping it simple is the idea – you'll have plenty of time later to add higher-end gear and accessories to your arsenal if you choose. So, with that, here is a list of the basic things you need to get started.

*Note: this guide assumes the initial use of rifles for hunting. While some hunters cut their teeth hunting with a bow, many more do so with a long gun. This is a great way to be introduced to the sport (that's not to say it's better, worse, easier, or harder than archery).*

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**1. Hunter's certification.** Currently, 45 of 50 states require hunters to complete hunter education prior to getting a license and hunting. In Texas for example, hunters who were born on or after September 2, 1971, must first complete a course approved by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department. However, there is reciprocity among states. That is, a states will accept certification issued by other jurisdictions that meet official International Hunter Education Association (IHEA-USA) requirements.

To be approved a course must teach hunters to become:

- Safe (by following all hunting safety rules)
- Responsible (about hunting, wildlife, conservation, and hunting laws)
- Knowledgeable (by knowing and demonstrating acceptable behavior and attitudes while hunting)
- Involved (in joining and participating in hunting and conservation organizations)

These are all worthy lessons and the courses are not difficult. This is also a great way to get acclimated into the hunting world for any novice hunter.

**2. A hunting license.** Told your we were keeping it simple. Duh, you say? You might be surprised how many people cut this corner. Take time to get the appropriate license needed for deer hunting in your state. You can typically get them online at your state's



Wildlife or Natural Resources Department or at stores such as Walmart, Academy, and Bass Pro Shops – most any sporting goods outlet. Ask questions as necessary to secure the type of license you need that includes whitetail hunting. If you want deer hunting only, tell them. If you want it to include fishing or other game animals, tell them. Don't be bashful.

A state hunting license usually comes with literature featuring such information as bag limits, season dates, rules, and regulations. It can't hurt to get a leg up by reading through it – particularly the sections regarding whitetails and deer hunting.

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3. **A place to hunt.** If you've made the deer hunting leap, you obviously need hunting grounds. Start with friends and acquaintances that already deer hunt. Ask to tag along. Further, approach friends and family that have a section of property for you to hunt. Chances are, you have hunting or non-hunting contacts with idle rural property. The idea is to be intentional. There is nothing lost by asking.



Look to friends and family with access to a rural property to deer hunt.

At a minimum, read up on your state's hunting regulations and public hunting opportunities. Your state's Wildlife or Natural Resources Department website is a great place to start.

4. **A mentor.** If you look up the definition of a mentor, it will read something like, *an experienced and trusted advisor*. It doesn't say, *expert of all experts*.



Having a mentor can help get you off to a great start

Every new hunter needs a teacher. My dad and both grandfathers were hunting mentors for me at an early age. I'm one of the lucky ones. For the onset hunter, it's important to have someone you trust to

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walk you through the process. At a minimum, your “teacher” will go alongside you and help to set expectations, pick the right gear, make you comfortable with a firearm, and set you up for safe outings and hunting success.

- 5. A suitable rifle.** What is meant by suitable? Simply a caliber that is adequate for the size of deer in your area. Many calibers will do the trick on whitetails with good shot placement. I prefer mid-high-powered calibers such as .270 or .308 for versatility. For children and youth, ratchet that down to smaller calibers like .223, .243, or even lower. If you don't have the luxury of having one passed down from family, consider borrowing one from your mentor or another friend that deer hunts.



For adults, consider good all-around calibers such as .270 and .308.

If you choose to buy one, there are plenty of quality budget alternatives in the rifle market these days – often packaged with a scope. New Rifle-scope combos can be found in the \$300-\$600 range. You can also consider buying a used one. What could be more exciting than purchasing your first hunting rifle? Talk about a rite of passage.

New hunters don't need a high-end rifle (if ever) depending on how and where they hunt. Chances are, the deer in your crosshairs will be moderate in distance. Don't overspend here. Regardless of hunting

areas or conditions, many common hunting calibers are offered with both budget and expensive guns. Still, you can bide your time by borrowing one at this stage.

In either case, take time to practice with your mentor or other shooters or deer hunters at the local shooting range or any rural property you have access to. Shooting alone is a fun part of the hunting tradition.

*Hint, if you're going to stretch your spending limit on your rifle, do so for your scope. Quality optics are never a bad idea.*

- 6. Ammunition.** Though there are some premium brands and varieties of ammo available, you don't have to spend \$40-plus a box to effectively hunt deer. For example, for common calibers, Remington Express Core Lokt ammunition is very popular (and effective) at a price point ranging from

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\$15-\$30 per box. The fact of the matter is that, with proper shot placement, deer can be easily taken down. I've yet to see deer hunt end badly because of ammo price.



Remington Core Lokt ammunition come in many calibers, are effective, and come in at a good price point

- 7. Hunting clothing.** In the hunting world, camo is big. It's big business too. However, a lot of it has to do with advancements in fabric technology and garment design offered by some brands. While camo helps hunters blend into their surroundings, it can be overly expensive. The fact of the matter is that dark colors (olive green, gray, brown, and black) do the trick. Along with avoiding light colors, concentrate on minimizing movement while in the stand.



There is a ton of camo clothing on the market. At the start, keep it simple and don't overpay.

If you're going to outfit yourself in camo, start with the basics such as jackets, pants, and headwear – but prepare yourself, the endless racks of camo clothing at big box hunting stores can make you dizzy.

Better yet, seek hand-me-downs from friends or family. Hunting clothing at this stage should have more to do with comfort than style. Comfortable gloves, socks, and boots appropriate for the typical area weather conditions go a long way toward positive hunting experiences.

A new wardrobe of fancy camo isn't important for new hunters. For now, concentrate on being still in the stand and learning. The hordes of camo styles and brands aren't going anywhere and will be available later.

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Note: Many states (and most public hunting areas) require blaze-orange hunting clothing for safety. Educate yourself on local requirements.

8. **Optics.** A good deer hunt starts with spotting the animal in the first place and you should never underestimate the value of quality optics like binoculars and rifle scopes. A dependable, if not a nice set of binoculars adds to the experience. Seeing the game is half the fun.



You usually don't need tons of power for deer hunting. For binoculars, anything in the 8X – 12X magnification range is sufficient, though 12X can be a hindrance for close-up viewing. For your average deer hunt, you can pay \$50-\$150 for adequate binoculars, \$200-\$500 for a good pair, and \$500 and up for exceptional ones. Keep in mind that they will have other important uses such as scouting.

And for rifle scopes? For average deer hunting scenarios, anything over 10X is okay but arguably unwarranted. A good reliable 3X x 9X powered scope can be bought in the \$150-\$300 range. You can spend much more, but it's not necessary for most deer hunting situations.



Vortex Crossfire II 3-9X40 riflescope - \$149

*Note: optics are one of the most important tools for hunting. While not crucial to deer hunting success under average conditions, better optics can enhance the hunting experience.*

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9. **Flashlight.** A good flashlight is one of the most basic yet but important items to have in your deer hunting arsenal. It can come in handy when navigating the way to and from your stand, locating shot deer, and in extreme cases, for survival. Obtain a lightweight flashlight of medium to high-power and make sure it's operational before hitting the field. Hunting lights come in many styles including handheld, headlamps, and cap lights.



10. **A good knife.** A good friend, outfitter, and guide once told me, “the best kind of knife is a sharp one”. I tend to agree. While new hunters don't need an elaborate set of knives (or an expensive one), a good skinning knife is an essential part of your pack. The knife is one of the most basic but important staples to have in your arsenal, whether you are hunting, camping, or hiking. While you probably don't know how to field dress a deer yet, you'll want to learn. Plus, knives have many other uses in the field.



Buck BuckLite Max II fixed blade knife - \$37.99

The fact is, you can get an adequate hunting knife for less than \$40. Don't overspend here. As mentioned, it's more important to keep it sharp. Also, bigger isn't better. You're not using it as a weapon – you just need it to feel comfortable in your hand. A blade of 3"-4" is adequate. At this stage, your money saved can be used on a good sharpener.

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**Less gear is better...for now.** There will always be the constant barrage of new hunting products and gadgets; the latest and greatest hunting lures, revolutionary camo, calls, decoys, and assorted electronics. The same goes for the incessant flood of improved ones. The taglines, testimonials, and marketing pitches can make a sportsman covetous.

Amid the aggressive and effective product promotion in the deer hunting industry, it's hard to distinguish hunting needs from wants. And this is for *existing* hunters. New and fancy gear can be bewildering for onset hunters, not to mention distracting. Keep your eye on the ball and keep it simple (there is that phrase again).

If you're breaking into the deer hunting game, the idea is to focus on the basics. Don't overspend right out of the chute, rather rely on a mentor and don't go crazy with new gear. There is a lot of value in keeping hunting sessions a controlled experiment and not adding too many variables. After logging more field time and polishing your skills, there will always time for new and upgraded equipment.

We hope that your desire to deer hunt and learn will only increase with each new season. Be resolute and get started this season – and when the time comes, pay it forward by passing this great tradition on to others.

We hope 2020 is your year to get immersed in one of the greatest traditions ever, deer hunting.

Stay tuned for more deer hunting guides from 1<sup>st</sup> Light Hunting Journal.

Best of luck,

Jerald Kopp

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