

Chapter 8

3 MILLION REASONS TO HUNT IN THE ADIRONDACKS

It happens all the time - the place you've hunted since you were a child is suddenly no longer available to you. The property has changed hands and the posted signs have gone up. Perhaps it has been leased to someone else without you knowing it was even available. Or, that 200-acre wooded lot you used to have permission to hunt has fallen into Exurbia and is now a housing development. When talking to fellow hunters some of the biggest complaints I hear are in regard to losing a hunting spot. I've experienced this first-hand, so I know how frustrating it can be. Unfortunately it seems to be happening more often leaving many hunters to ask "Where can I go?"

As a lifelong resident of the Adirondack State Park, I've done 95 percent of my hunting within the "blue line" which defines the region. Not everyone is so lucky. Still, the desire to experience big woods hunting such as that which the Adirondacks offer breathes in the hearts of many hunters who long for the solitude of the deeper woods. Again, the one question I am asked the most by fellow hunters interested in hunting the North Country is, "Where can I go?"

The answer is that there is nearly 3 million acres of public land in the Adirondacks available for hunting and other forms of outdoor recreation. It is the Adirondack Forest Preserve and it is made up of several Wild Forests, Wilderness Areas and other tracts of public land with thousands of miles of trails, rivers and streams, lakes and seemingly endless mountains.

Much has been written on the pros and cons of hunting on public land, and most of it would certainly apply in the Adirondacks. One con that is specific to this region is that a large portion of the Forest Preserve is old growth timber and degradation and reforestation of it is a slow process. Timber harvesting is not allowed on Forest Preserve lands. If it were,

it would certainly benefit white-tailed deer populations. Winters, sometimes severe, and a lack of winter browse keep deer populations in check in the Adirondacks with harvest numbers often being near or even less than one buck per square mile. The deeper into the park you go, the lower these harvest numbers usually are.

The Adirondacks are not loaded with whitetails but mature bucks, those that are at least 4.5 years old (and older), are commonly killed each season. Some of the larger Wilderness Areas have limited access. This is bad news to the hunter with physical limitations or who is afraid of getting lost. But it provides an advantage to those hunters willing to hoof it into the back country and get away from the popular hunting areas, parking lots and trailheads. Wild Forests are tracts of land that are generally more accessible by vehicle and often provide roadside camp sites.

The woodlands of the Adirondacks vary greatly and are often a mix of hardwood and coniferous forests. Among hardwoods are included varieties of maple, ash, birch, oak and beech. The latter two, oak and beech, play a critical role in the world of the whitetail due to the mast crops they can potentially produce. In years of mast crop production deer will gorge themselves on acorns, beechnuts, or both. There are years however when neither of these exists. The fate of the beech remains to be seen due to Beech Bark disease. Softwood species like spruce, pine and hemlock are also common, as are wetlands. Some of these wetlands are in the form of swamps, others in form of beaver ponds thanks to a healthy population of that species.

With a little planning anyone can organize their own Adirondack deer hunt on these big tracts of public land. For a newcomer, I would suggest a fair amount of research and a little legwork to find a worthy hunting location on public land. Not only will you then see how much land there really is to hunt on, you also can avoid trespassing on private lands. The



A collection of maps, guides and other resources that can help hunters find public land to hunt on in the Adirondacks.

resources for this research would be maps, guidebooks, the Internet and if possible a preseason trip or two into the area you plan to hunt.

The first step in the process is to identify Forest Preserve and other public lands. The confusing thing about this is that it changes all the time as more and more acreage is being added to the park. A good starting point would be the maps within the *Hunting & Trapping Official Regulations Guide* that is published annually by New York Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and is often available where sporting licenses are sold or by contacting the DEC. Its predecessor, the *Wildlife Recreation Map*, is a bit outdated but is still a viable reference and is available at most DEC regional offices.

These maps might not be very detailed, but they will put you in the ballpark as far as the location of public land. All you have to do is look for the various green shaded areas on the maps that represent state lands. As you'll see once you look at them, DEC Regions 5 and 6, and the Wildlife Management Units (WMUs) that make up these regions are clearly defined. Major roadways, rivers, lakes and county names are also listed but again it is the green shaded Forest Preserve lands that you are looking for if you wish to hunt on public land. The *Wildlife Recreation Map* also provides information on the DEC, hunting safety and wildlife viewing tips. These publications are handy references and should give you an idea of where you can hunt. Now you just have to zoom in a little closer.

Another past publication that the DEC has published is titled the *Adirondack Forest Preserve Map & Guide*. These maps have been hard to find so if you stumble on one, grab it! This map goes into a little more detail on the public land in the Adirondacks in correlation to roads, waters, forest classifications and townships. A copy of this map hangs in my home office and is a valuable reference. A similar but even more detailed map is called *The Adirondack Park, A Map of State Forest Lands, Mountains and Waters* and is published by the Adirondack Park Agency (APA). It too is in my office. Both of these maps do a good job of differentiating public land from private land but due to yearly additions to the Forest Preserve they have become somewhat out of date.

The maps and guidebooks published by the Adirondack Mountain Club (ADK) and those written by the late Barbara McMartin have excellent trail markings and also differentiate private and public lands. While I have used these publications for hunting purposes be sure to check their publication dates and make sure the state land markings are accurate and up to date. These and other guidebooks in general are excellent resources for learning more details about a particular trail and finding parking areas and trailheads for accessing public land. ADK recently published in cooperation with National

Geographic a series of *Trails Illustrated Maps*. They are weatherproof and also serve as an excellent reference to Forest Preserve lands and the amenities on them. I highly recommend purchasing at least the map which covers your hunting area. They are also now available on CD-ROM for your home computer. This is just another step in the zooming-in process of pinpointing a hunting destination.

DeLorme's *New York State Atlas and Gazetteer*, and *The Sportsman's Connection Eastern New York All Outdoors Atlas and Field Guide* are two valuable resources for finding access to specific areas. These map books provide large overview maps, have GPS markings and some minor topographical features. Major Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs), state parks, fishing access points and boat launches are included. They are a solid reference to be used anywhere in the state, not just the North Country.

For decades DEC and the Adirondack Park Agency (APA) have been involved in Unit Management Plan process. UMPs serve as management guidelines for tracts of public lands. Although not all UMPs have been written or approved, those that have should be available on both agencies' Web sites and in some cases at regional offices. By studying these UMPs the hunter can gain much knowledge of the amenities these lands hold and the forest types within. Wildlife species, including deer, are also analyzed and general maps showing Forest Preserve lands are usually included in the plan.

Once you know the general location of the public land you want to hunt, you should by all means purchase a true, detailed USGS topographical map of that area and carry it with you on your hunt. I prefer topo maps to be 7.5-minute series or the 1:25 000-scale metric such as those you see in retail shops. Although state holdings will not always be marked, a good topo map is invaluable in analyzing the terrain you plan to hunt. You'll need the map before and during your time spent in the woods.

DEC also publishes several brochures on specific state lands. A trip or phone call to the Region 5 or 6 offices will net an arm load of information that you might not have otherwise known existed. In some cases there are maps and information on Wild Forests and Wilderness Areas. If you're not sure, just ask someone at the office for details on a particular area. DEC's Web site, (www.dec.ny.gov) is also a valuable resource, not only for locating a hunting spot but also for researching past deer (and bear) harvest statistics which come in handy for pinpointing a productive hunting area. On this Web site you can use the subject index to research hunting areas and other public lands.

Land acquisitions by New York state in the Adirondacks will always play a role for hunters. Some of these are outright purchases that will likely be open to hunting. However, others such as portions of the lands in the 2004 International Paper deal and the 2007 sale of former Finch, Pruyn lands will only be available as easements and might not allow for hunting. The easements only provide a means to pass through an area during certain times of year. Be sure to check and research any new areas before you make plans to hunt them.



You never know what you'll stumble on when you spend time in the deer woods.

Once you've picked a possible hunting spot, its time to visit the area. An early fall small game hunt, summer camping or fishing trip, or a hike to the spot you intend to hunt will get you going. Shed hunting in late winter and early spring is catching on in the Adirondacks as many hunters visit winter deer yarding areas in search of dropped antlers. Although these areas might not be the same as where you will actually hunt, they will help familiarize you with the territory. Spring turkey hunting is an opportune time to get into a potential hunting area, especially early on before trees start to foliate. This is also a time to be on the lookout for newborn fawns.

Be sure a new area is right for you and imagine what it will be like in November when snow is quite possible. Be very honest with yourself about any physical limitations you might have. If there are any, just find a spot a little closer to the road or that lies more within your limitations and in tune with your style of hunting. The more time you spend in any hunting area, the better off you will be. I'm not saying this to intimidate anyone, but a hunter's survival skills should also be sharp and you need to be mentally strong if you plan to hunt the interior of any big woods. Depending on where you are in the Adirondacks, it can be a long walk of many miles out of the woods if you run into trouble. It's paramount to be prepared.

Finally, remember that there are not only other hunters out there but also other users in general. Hikers, mountain bikers, dog walkers, anglers and others share the woods with us during hunting season. It's important that we all get along and are respectful of each other. The farther back into the woods you go, the less likely you are to run into anyone, or anything for that matter, except the buck you want to drag back out.

