

# Searching for the "Lost" Hunter

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It happens every fall somewhere in the rural areas all across the United States, police, fire, EMS and search & rescue organizations are dispatched to search for a "lost" hunter. Most often the calls go out about dinnertime, after dark and frequently in cold and wet weather. The outcomes vary from the comic to the tragic. We could go on about the causes and prevention by education, but in the end we know that we'll be out in the woods looking for these folks. Since we know the searches are going to happen, lets look at some ways to do our job a little more efficiently with a little less "wasted effort".

Since a lot of search and rescue personnel are not hunters, they tend to lump all hunting together and have no knowledge of the sub-specialties of the sport. A basic knowledge of types of hunting, methods, clothing and weapons can help to extract pertinent facts for the command staff and help members of the actual search teams to determine what is a clue and what is litter. For purposes of this discussion we will break hunting into the following categories: gun hunting for big game (deer and bear), bow hunting for big game, turkey hunting, duck hunting and small or upland game hunting.

As with any subject, knowing what our lost hunter is wearing is useful. In the case of hunters, the clothing may not be distinguishing, there may be several others in the woods wearing the same color, but it will give us an idea how hard they will be to spot. In most eastern states hunters are required to wear blaze orange outer clothing during the firearms season. This makes spotting them much easier in the woods. Bow hunters and turkey hunters are intentionally much harder to spot in the woods. Every year the manufactures market a new pattern of camouflage that is guaranteed to make you invisible in the woods.

Big game hunting with firearms can itself involve several variables. The firearm can be a rifle, a shotgun, a handgun or a black powder weapon. Hunting can be from a tree stand, a blind, by stalking or what is called "still" hunting or a group of hunters can put on "drives". Drives involve part of the group taking "stands" at one edge of the area being hunted while the rest of the group, the "drivers" walk through the area. For SAR purposes we can pretty much discount this method, as one missing member of the group is usually found by the rest of the group in short order.

Bow hunters are more frequently by themselves in the woods and as well hidden as they can get. The most common method used is tree stands, but those who opt for remaining in contact with terra firma will usually do so in some type of blind, a commercial version or one constructed on the spot using bushes, etc.

Turkey hunters are worse to find than bow hunters. They seldom climb trees. Their preferred method is to hide in a blind of some sort on the ground. Once they are "invisible", they proceed

to make noises resembling the mating sounds of their quarry, hoping to lure them within shooting distance. Turkey hunters have the highest incidence of "accidental" shootings. This happens when a fraction that the rest of the hunting community refers to as "slobs" or "idiots", hears the sounds of a turkey in a bush and shoots at the sound without visual confirmation of their target.

Duck and goose hunters are seldom the cause for a search. These are the folks who sit in a blind or a boat, over a spread of decoys and making honking noises to lure their quarry within shotgun range. Most of them hunt with a faithful companion who leaves their side only to retrieve the kill. Said companion is usually better than his human partner at finding his way home. In the rare cases when such hunters are lost, such as by falling into the water, "Rover" will probably remain in the area and know just where his master is.

Small or upland game hunters, (rabbits, squirrels and birds), are a real treat to find. These folks park their pick up and walk for miles. Fortunately, most of the areas they hunt are fields and trails, but you may need 3 of the 7.5-minute quads to cover their hunting area. More than half of them will also have a furry companion, so if they are sick or injured you may locate them by following the sound of barking.

Most searches for lost hunters are for deer hunters, and most times the call does come after dark when they fail to return. Any hunter safety class teaches that lone hunters should advise somebody of their location and expected time of return. If they are not back by then, somebody calls.

Before we head into the woods, let's be aware of some of the causes of their failure to return. Injuries from falling out of tree stands are high on the list of causes. In these cases, if you can find the stand, you found the hunter. I know of one case where a bow hunter fell and was inverted with his leg wedged in the fork of the tree for several hours until found. In another case, the hunter was not wearing the recommended safety strap and stepped off the edge of the stand. We found him within 100 yards of his stand where he attempted to crawl back to his truck.

The exertion of getting into the woods can cause the onset of various medical problems. One hunter that I know of suffered a heart attack while using a climbing type of tree stand and his body was found 20' up the tree. Wounds from accidental discharges when the hunter does not wait until in position to load his firearm are also not infrequent.

Many of the happy endings come when the hunter has hit his/her quarry and has to trail it away from his/her stand. While some hunters will become disorientated while tracking and end up lost, many a woods wise hunter will know where they are and just not be willing to give up the track. If the hunter is successful and has found the animal and field dressed it, the real work has just begun. Dragging it out of the woods may require a great deal of effort and the hunter may not be willing to leave his/her prize in the woods overnight. They might not even be dragging back towards their point of origin. If my truck is a half mile up the hill but there is a road a quarter mile down hill, I will drag my deer down hill to the road then hike back and get my truck.

Last but not least is the "city boy" who thinks he is Daniel Boone and heads into the woods with no woods sense or navigational ability .He is just plain lost. Once the other causes have been ruled out, this is just like most other wilderness searches. Even the most experienced hunter can become "just plain lost", but determining the level of experience involved will give an indication of that possibility. In order to apply all we have learned and put it to use, we need to ask some questions of our witnesses, (Somebody called), hunting partners, spouses, friends, etc. In addition to the normal descriptive information; name, age, height, weight, build and all the other stuff we ask about any subject, we now know to ask several pertinent questions. What were they hunting for? What is their "style" of hunting? How much experience do they have hunting? What were they wearing? Some hunters will chose to disregard the requirement for blaze orange and wear camouflage or wear an orange vest into the woods and stuff it in their pack upon getting to their stand. Honest answers to these questions may be important.

What type of weapon were they using? Unfortunately some who hunt are very sloppy about picking up empty casings and some searchers feel any casing they find is a clue to this subject. Shotgun and rifle shells or casings generally have the caliber or gauge stamped on the base. Shotgun shells will usually have the size of shot on the side of the hull. If our subject is hunting with a .30-06 rifle, a shell casing from a .30-30 rifle or a shotgun shell is not pertinent to our search and doesn't require marking and calling in as a clue. If our hunter is hunting with a 12-gauge shotgun, (the most common gauge), a 20-gauge shell is of no help to us. If our subject is hunting with black powder you may find small cloth patches or plastic sabots that hold the bullet or wads from a shotgun, but these will be very hard to spot in the woods. Empty shells are of no help in locating this subject.

With shotgun hunters, knowing what they were hunting for and what make and size of shot they were carrying can be a help, but to a lesser degree. This might be determined by asking, or looking in their truck for shell boxes. If we know that he is using Federal 00 buckshot, the Winchester casing is probably not going to be significant. With shotguns, however, some other variables may come into play. Our subject may have had Winchester shells left over from last year and bought a new box of Federal for when they run out. In some states, such as Virginia, he/she may have gone out deer hunting using buckshot or slugs, but also carried some #4 shot because turkeys are also in season. If we are looking for a bow hunter, any arrow found in the woods looks like a clue. There are several variables that should affect the weight we give that clue. Arrows come in different sizes and weights just like bullets. Many are then cut to specific lengths for the particular bow and archer. While a hunter may have several types of arrows, the experienced archer will only use one type for hunting. Using different arrows and/or different tips will vary the point of impact.

To give you a usable example, our subject hunter, (in this case me), uses Easton 2013 XX75 Camo Hunter arrows cut to 25" and tipped with folding type broad heads. In dry weather he uses green and orange fletchings (feathers) and in wet weather he uses brown and green veins (plastic). Some hunters may carry an "off" arrow or two for foxes, squirrels, etc. but they will probably be the same length. No arrow that doesn't look like it has been left in the woods for a while can be ruled out, but finding an arrow that meets this description is a definite clue.

If someone knows the location of the hunter's stand or blind, or even a general direction or location, that area is the obvious starting point in most cases. One exception would be a case where their vehicle has been located and there are tracks leading in a different direction. Be aware that the more astute hunter may circle to get to his/her stand, depending on wind direction at the time. We also want to know as much as possible about the subject's style of hunting. Some hunters will spend the whole day in their stand; others will get down and walk around during the mid-day. If we are looking for a subject who does not use stands, we would like to know the general area they usually hunt, and now we are back to our normal search patterns and techniques.

Once we locate the stand, blind or other indications of a last known point, we want to begin by looking for clues, some standard, some specific to hunting. First among clues are, as always, tracks. Tracks that leave and return to the stand will probably be a false lead. Most hunters refuse to answer nature's call within 100 yards of their stand in order to reduce human scent in the area. While there may be a "clue" at the end of this trail, I am not going to be the one to "tag it and bag it"! Shell casings near the stand are a good indication that our subject got a shot at something and is probably in pursuit. Similarly, an arrow found within 50 yards of the stand is an indication of a shot. Examine the tip for blood and or animal hair, a good indication of a hit. (Be aware that most deer and bear hit with an arrow will travel 30 to 150 yards before dropping from a lethal shot).

Tracks that wander may be an indication that the hunter was looking for something, quite possibly a sign that they hit their quarry. Blood on the ground is a good indication that they did. In the absence of a good human trail, (hard dry terrain, etc.) following the blood trail may be a good idea. Animal blood trails may not always be a positive track to the hunter, but in the absence of other signs or clues, they are a good lead.

A blood trail that leads to a place where an animal has obviously been field dressed is an indication that you are getting close. There will probably be a "drag" trail leading away. This is much easier to follow, as it will usually take the path of least resistance and be down hill if possible. Unlike the blood trail, it will not cut through every briar patch and brush pile in sight. You probably have the hunter who was late in recovering his kill, or won't leave it in the woods until morning. Attraction searches will probably have a favorable result.

One rare case of lost and injured hunters is the hunter who comes upon his wounded quarry which appears dead. The deer or bear arouses in time to object to the hunter's intention to begin premature field dressing. Signs of this can probably be read in the disturbance in the brush and more blood sign. Unlike the grizzly bear of the northwest, the black bears of the east very seldom attack even when wounded unless cornered. Given such clues, however, you want to make sure medical help is as close as possible to your location.

Many search and rescue personnel are unfamiliar with guns and hunting in general, and uncomfortable being around or near somebody with a gun. Hearing shots fired is cause for them to want to hide and/or depart the area. Especially for these people, a couple more pieces of information and advice may be in order. When I was young and just starting to hunt, I was told that if I was lost or in trouble I should fire three shots in the air. While most people now realize

the danger of firing into the air, (what goes up must come down somewhere), three shots into the ground or a dead tree is still recognized as a distress signal by many. It works like this; when you hear the first shot you jump out of your boots and/or duck. When you hear the second shot you get some idea how close and in what direction it is coming from. When you hear the third shot you fine tune that estimate and suspect that you have a distress signal. If you hear a fourth shot, you know you have either a subject that can't count or a hunter who can't shoot straight.

The best way to handle the above, unless you are sure that you are extremely close, is to plot your position and your best guess at direction and call it in. Sound travels in funny ways in the woods and it might not be a distress signal at all, so don't leave your assigned search area unless told to do so. If you are sure you are close, acknowledge the three shots with three whistle blasts. That tells a subject in distress that somebody heard his signal and tells other hunters that there is somebody else in the woods. Remember, sound travels a long way in the woods

If you are searching during daylight hours, there may be other hunters in the woods who may or may not know about the search. For that reason you should always wear brightly colored outer garments, preferably the blaze orange vests, and make some obviously human noise. As always, you need periods of quiet to listen for calls for help, but don't sneak through the woods. Be aware that our grid searches frequently act just like deer drives. As we sweep an area it is not unusual to have deer running ahead of us. If there is another hunter ahead of us you can imagine his delight and his response. If you hear shots ahead of you, slow down or stop, make more human noises and call in for instructions. Hunters are not the enemy, they aren't going to intentionally shoot at you, but don't take chances.

The last consideration is the presence of firearms when you locate the subject or victim. As we all learn in first aid, first responder or EMT, don't touch the gun unless absolutely necessary and then keep it pointed in a safe direction. If the subject is conscious and alert, he/she can clear and safe the weapon themselves. If you locate the hunter who is dragging out his trophy, he may ask for assistance in totting his weapon and gear. If you are one of those people who would rather touch a snake or a live wire than a gun, don't touch it. Get someone on your team to do it. Remember if your subject is unconscious or worse, you are at a possible crime scene and the gun is evidence. Don't touch it. If the firearm is in the way of patient care, have somebody who is comfortable with them move it out of the way. There is no immediate need for anyone but the owner to do anything to clear and safe the weapon. We don't need the macho type who knows all about guns because he saw them on TV to attempt to manipulate the weapon and cause an accidental discharge. If we have to Medivac the patient, local law enforcement will be there, let them handle it. A gun will not jump up and shoot you if nobody touches it or drops it. Handle it properly and then put it to the back of your mind and do your job.

Archery equipment is less of a concern. If there is an arrow knocked, take it off the string and replace it in the quiver. It does not take a rocket scientist to know that the dangerous part is the razor edge on the broad heads. Don't touch it and it won't cut you.

If some of this was confusing, find a hunter and ask questions. You may be surprised to find out who the hunters are. You can look for the Jeff Foxworthy type, getting out of their pick up,

wearing overalls and spitting tobacco juice, but you might find them taking their briefcase out of their BMW and straightening their skirts.

**Additional Readings:**

Characteristics of Travel by person lost in Albertan Wilderness Areas C. Heth and E. Cornell  
Journal of Environmental Psychology 97.

Managing the lost Person Incident Ken Hill Nasar Chantilly, VA 97.

Mitchell B Summaries of the National Association for Search and Rescue Data Collection and Analysis, Handout, 80-85.