

Outdoors column: Trail cams are “eyes in the woods” for sportsmen

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Trail cams offer views of wildlife that hunters and others might not see otherwise. ▲

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scrapes, rubs or other evidence of game - and hope a buck or good-size doe would come by. Nowadays they can rig up a small camera at the site and get an idea beforehand of what's going on there. In some cases there may be deer passing through but only at night. Or, a big, impressive scrape may have been made by a spike buck that the hunter would rather let go until another year. In any case, a trail cam can give the hunter an inkling of whether a spot is worth setting up on.

The Trail Time Company introduced the first trail cams in 1985 but they didn't really become popular until 1995 when Bill Powers developed a system for using motion to trigger a 35 mm camera. Thirty-five mm trail cams are still available but digital models are more popular, by a huge margin, because of their convenience, durability and options. Today, there are scores of trail cam models available, ranging in price from less than \$100 to nearly \$1,000. They vary in different ways, including the number of megapixels they produce. A simplistic explanation of pixels is that they are the tiny dots on a photo that determine resolution. Resolution relates primarily to the amount of detail an image has when viewed on a computer monitor at 100%.

Factors other than the number of megapixels also affect the quality of photos a camera takes, however. They are things like the optical quality of the lens, natural and produced lighting, proper focus and exposure times. Those often vary from one camera to the next and the best way to tell which ones give the most satisfactory results may be to ask people who have used different models. Joe Hughes suggests doing that. A retired environmental specialist with Weyerhaeuser, Hughes has been using a trail cam for about ten years to observe the critters in the woods near his Craven County home. Starting with a camera that was a gift from his wife, he has accumulated a vast collection of photos of deer, coyotes, bears, foxes, raccoons, opossums, squirrels, turkeys, bobcats and various other species. Hughes said he is reluctant to recommend a particular brand of trail cam because some companies constantly introduce new models that may be better - or worse - than previous ones. He noted that one of the best ones he's had was his first, and it had only 3 megapixels. Most trail cams offered today have



One factor that some trail cam users disagree on is whether to get one that uses a traditional flash unit or one with an invisible infra-red flash. Some folks (and camera ads) maintain that the latter is less likely to alarm animals and make them avoid the area. Hughes said he has always used a traditional flash and he doesn't think it has any effect on the subjects of the photos. He can produce evidence such as several shots of the same deer, taken at five minute intervals, each produced with a bright flash.

Other things that can affect a trail cam's cost and, possibly, its value to the user are the effective range of its flash and its internal memory. The former is 50 to 100 feet for some cameras (usually the more expensive ones) and no more than 30 for others. Most



more pictures are generally used, however.

For some users, shutter speed is an important aspect of a trail cam. For example, one Cuddeback camera has a 1/2 second trigger. Another model made by the same company boasts a 1/4 second shutter speed. The latter is more likely to capture a clear image, especially if the animal is moving. The sharpness of the photo might not be a major issue if the person using the trail cam is simply interested in getting an idea of what kinds of animals are frequenting the site. On the other hand if the camera user wants sharp images with good contrast, perhaps for publication, it might be more important.

Nearly all trail cams offer features that make them even more useful to hunters. Some of those include the date, time, temperature and even moon phase at the moment a photo is made. That information can be printed on each image if desired.

How important different trail cam features are is something that an individual will have to decide for himself. In addition, if he's a hunter, he'll have to decide if using one to scout game violates the principle of "fair chase." (The Boone and Crocket Club doesn't make it clear). He'll also have to determine whether he wants to take that next step down the technology trail and, in doing so make his sport a little more complicated - or fun.



A lot of non-hunters set out trail cams just to be able to have an "eye in the woods" that can see whitetail deer peering into the darkness or a sow bear with her twin cubs enjoying a dinner of corn. Tom turkeys primping for their hens, bobcats covering up their prey, coyotes and foxes creeping through the forest in the half-light of dawn - any or all of them may show up on a trail cam image. It's a mesmerizing feast for the eyes for sportsmen of all ages and stripes.

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