

# Trail Camera Basics, Tips and More.



## Purchasing a Trail Camera

Considering that trail cameras can cost anywhere from \$50 to upwards of \$800, purchasing a trail camera can be exciting and intimidating at the same time. It can also be addictive and expensive. You will notice a large selection of cameras with an even larger selection of options. Which one do you buy? A cheap camera or expensive one? Lots of bells and whistles or bare bones? Flash or IR? SD card or Compact Flash? AA, C, D, 6V? Here are a few thoughts, questions and suggestions to help you with your decision.

What is your goal? Are you trying to get printable photos or do you just “want to see what is around”? Generally the low-end cameras (below \$75) will give you low-end photos. You will be able to distinguish a buck from a doe but you may not be able to count points. Cheaper cameras generally have fewer options for file size, memory size, shot options and often don't have a video option. They also tend to have slower trigger speeds.

Most of the mid to high-end cameras will take good to great photos for printing. Some of the larger file sizes will give you the option of enlarging prints as well. The more expensive cameras generally have more options including multiple file sizes, expandable memory, sensor adjustments and video options. They also tend to have faster trigger speeds.

Will your camera be on private land or public land? Will it be close to a road or in the backcountry? While nothing is sacred anymore, generally, private land is safer when it comes to camera security. Typically there will be less human activity and a lower likelihood of theft. Access to private land may be a factor in the decision to purchase an expensive camera.

Public land is a completely different situation and may push you to a cheaper camera depending on the local human activity level. Remember, every user group has its share of lowlife thieves, be it hikers, bikers, brush pickers, dog walkers, antis or even hunters.

Trail cameras run the gamut when it comes to available options. Are you tech savvy or tech challenged? Will you be comfortable with a camera that has many options or will you be more comfortable with a ‘set it and forget it’ type camera? Some of the bare bones models have a “Test” mode, “ON” mode and only allow you to change the date and time. Other cameras offer more options like day or night mode, flash/IR on or off, variable photo size, standard or wide screen video, multiple shot bursts and some cameras have the ability to send you photos from the field directly to your pc or even your cell phone.

Flash or Infrared? Does flash (or IR) scare game? This is one of the most debated issues with trail cameras and I will let you come to your own conclusion. One thing for certain is that a flash in the woods will get the attention of a human. When it comes to purchasing a trail camera, the IR's are often more expensive, but their “flash” is a lot harder for humans to detect and should cut down on vandalism or theft.

What type of memory? Most cameras have a small amount of internal memory capable of holding a few images but this requires you to take the camera home and hook it up to your computer to view them. Trail cameras use two basic types of memory in the form of SD cards or Compact Flash (CF) cards. The SD cards are small but can hold thousands of photos. This type of card is used in most types of digital photography cameras and you can often view your tcam pictures on your handheld camera. The CF type cards are much larger in physical size and provide fewer options. (not often used in photo cameras, mp3 players, etc.) Make sure to purchase memory cards that are compatible with your trail camera. SD and CF cards are easily distinguished as not compatible due to their size differences, but the newer SDHC cards are the same size as the regular SD cards, but not compatible in non-SDHC devices. Whichever type of card your camera requires, purchase a couple extra cards so you can rotate them during your camera checks.

What type of batteries and how many? Do you buy new batteries or use rechargeable? Your camera will not work without batteries and batteries are expensive. Good rechargeable batteries are expensive as well, but will pay for themselves after a few weeks. More and bigger batteries often mean more pictures and longer “soak” times. This used to mean bulky 6v or as many as 6 D sized batteries, but recently there have been a few trail cameras on the market that use AA batteries and have extended battery life. Some of the AA models state they will last 6-12 months on 4-8 batteries. The larger 6V batteries can have a long life, but they are expensive and very heavy when carrying enough for multiple cameras.

Once you have factored in all of the above and have decided on a camera, think about your second, third or even fourth camera, (it is addicting) and how your first purchase will work with your subsequent purchases. If your first camera uses SD cards and AA batteries, it makes sense to purchase a second camera that at least uses SD cards. If you purchase a couple sets of rechargeable C batteries for your first camera it does not make sense to purchase one that uses D batteries unless you want to purchase rechargeable D batteries as well.

### **Trail Camera Placement**

Trail camera placement is often the bane of many users. Sun flares, partial animals, blank photos and no photos (with obvious animal sign nearby) are just a few of the problems that most of us have experienced at least once or twice.

To help with camera placement, you should know your camera and have an idea of how you want to use it. Will the camera sit over bait or over a trail? What are its capabilities? How fast will it trigger or how long will it take to wake up? How far will it sense game and how far will the flash fill? If your camera has a 30-foot flash and can sense out to 45 feet would you really want to place your camera farther than your flash can fill? If the flash is only 30 feet then from 31 feet out to 45 feet would be very dark or even black and you would not see what triggered the camera.

Depending on your camera, the sensing capabilities can vary greatly from summer to winter (as will battery life). On some models heat detection can be greater during winter when outside temperatures are low. The opposite can be true in the summer when the surrounding vegetation absorbs and retains heat a camera may only detect an animal when it is closer.

One general rule of thumb for setting trail cameras is to face your camera either North or South. This will help eliminate false triggers and washed out photos from the sun rising or setting. If you must set your camera facing East or West you can mitigate undesirable effects by placing your camera higher with a downward angle or in heavy cover.

How high and how far to set your camera? It depends on your location and intended target, but a good starting place is about 4 feet high and about 20 feet away. Some people swear by mounting the camera above and looking down so the flash or IR will not be at eye level of the game you intend to monitor. Smaller animals like raccoons and bobcats may require setting the trail camera lower.

If you are getting a lot of “rear” or partial photos you may want to set your camera farther back. This gives your camera time to “wake up” and take the picture before the animal leaves the frame.

When monitoring trails you want to set your camera facing down the trail, not across it. Most trail cameras need a couple seconds to “wake up” and if your camera is aimed across the trail then the animal will be out of the camera frame by the time it takes the picture. By aiming down the trail your camera should be able to sense, wake and shoot before the animal is out of the frame.

Setting a camera over bait can be pretty straightforward when you get to select the site. Whether it is an apple pile for deer or a beaver bait for bobcat, if you can choose where to place the bait you can set it in a good location for a camera. A small clearing with a few trees nearby is a great bait/camera location as are timber edges. Try to find the camera location first and take a few test photos with the camera in place before adding your bait to the site.

Setting up over a gut pile or predator kill can be a bit tougher when it comes to hanging a camera. Often these baits are not in an ideal location and may require a bit more site prep, including brush clearing and making a stake for hanging your camera.

Make sure to trim back or remove all brush and branches that may trigger your camera. Warm or moving brush will set off a camera, often taking hundreds of pictures with nothing ... but moving brush. Also be aware of fast growing plants like ferns that may be small when setting the camera, but could grow a couple feet between camera checks and potentially block your camera on longer soaks.

There are numerous hanging devices on the market depending on your brand of trail camera. Some of these will allow you to hang your camera higher in a tree and any angle you like. Others are nothing more than a tripod that allows you to place your camera in areas without trees.

Some cameras have an aiming laser to help in positioning your camera, but many of the newer models. To confirm that you are aimed where you want you can take a few test pictures and view them in your digital camera.

Make sure to turn your camera on or switch it on from setup mode. There is nothing worse than coming back a few weeks later (all excited) and finding out that it was never turned on.

### **Protecting your investment**

Cameras, batteries and memory cards can be expensive so we need to take precautionary measures to protect our investment. From camouflage and pin numbers to locked bear boxes and cables, there are a few ways to help secure your camera.

The first step is to document your purchase. Write down make, model and serial number as well as keep all receipts. In case of theft you will have at least some information to pass on to authorities and if they are found you will have concrete proof that they are yours. You can also engrave your driver's license number or other identifying mark onto the camera. Taking a photo of your trail camera can also aid in identifying your property in the event that they are found or turned in to the authorities.

Camouflage can be anything from using markers to create contours and contrast to covering the camera with moss or ferns. Just be careful not to block any sensors or the camera's lens. Some people will cover their camera cases with construction adhesive, sculpt and paint realistic patterns that will make a camera nearly vanish in the woods.

Camo tape can also be used with mixed results. Some brands of tape will weather to dark and muted tones while other brands will change shades or brighten colors.

Most cameras have a place to attach a lock but since the camera body is made of plastic it is pretty much useless when it comes to camera security. But it can be used to make sure no one opens your camera to check the card inside. Another simple way to know if someone has checked your camera is to put a zip tie through the lock hole. Obviously this only works if the "inquisitive" passerby is honest. Otherwise your whole unit may disappear.

Depending on the location, style or cost of your camera you may want to lock it up to protect it from thieves and bears. Many trail camera companies have metal protective boxes often called "Security Box", "Bear Box" or something similar.

Security cables 4-6 foot long are much lighter than chains and will allow you to secure your camera/box to fairly large trees that can not be easily cut down.

Multiple locks that are keyed the same will make it easier and faster to check your cameras since you won't have to sift through multiple keys at every site.

### **Camera maintenance is important**

Batteries must be in good condition and charged regularly to get the most out of your camera. Use only brand name batteries and chargers. Always take out the batteries when storing your cameras for longer lengths of time. Take care when packing the larger 6 or 12-volt batteries to prevent them from shorting out in your pack. *It has been reported that an individual was transporting the 6-volt battery for his Moultrie trail cam on the way to the field when the battery rolled under the car's seat. The protective caps that came on the battery had been removed and when the battery slid under the car seat it made contact with some metal and resulted in a fire that destroyed the individual's automobile.*

Lenses should be cleaned with a cleaner that is compatible with both glass and plastic. You can use lens wipes <http://www.macksearplugs.com/faq/lens-wipes/lens-wipes-30Pack>, lens pens <http://www.lenspen.com> or micro fiber lens clothes <http://www.amazon.com/Sigma-Micro-Fiber-Cleaning-Cloth-Keychain/dp/B000EIKFOY>. It can be very beneficial to clean them every time you check your camera.

Desiccants can be placed inside your trail camera to absorb moisture. <http://www.theruststore.com/Sorb-it-C32.aspx> SORB-IT Silica Gel Packets absorb excess moisture, rust, mildew and mold. These desiccant bags help prevent damage by adsorbing moisture in the surrounding air. Between .03 and .50 cents each when purchased in bulk depending on size. You may want to purchase large quantities with another team user for additional savings. <http://www.silicagelpackets.com/silica-gel-packets/?SID=3239f01dd7d11d4ec974162969c8d1a7>

Before placing your camera in the woods for longer periods of time make sure to check all seals and gaskets for wear. You don't want water or bugs getting inside.

When packing your cameras around in a backpack it is a good idea to put them in separate bags or wrap them with cloth to help prevent damage to the lenses and sensors. Individual stuff sacks or homemade pouches made from fleece work really well. Damaged sensors can severely alter a camera's performance.

### **Checking your camera**

It goes without saying that the best time to check your camera is when the animals are not in the area. This typically means checking them in the middle of the day. You don't want to spook your intended targets by checking the camera during peak activity, which is usually early in the morning and late in the evening. We all want to see "what's out there" and it can be tough not to check your camera every couple days, but longer is better in this case. Check your camera weekly at the most; every couple of weeks or longer is better.

Depending on your location or intended target, scent control can be important when setting up and checking your trail cameras. Try to walk to your location the same way every time to limit your scent to one path, preferably not the one you expect your target to be on. Wear latex gloves when setting up and changing cards. Try not to unnecessarily touch the brush around your camera site with your bare hands. A drag with cover scent can attract more animals to your camera but just be careful to not get any on your camera. Deer, elk and bears already have a habit of sniffing, licking and (in the case of bears) biting cameras and you don't want to give them and more reasons to smudge the lens or damage the camera.

Longer "sets" or "soaks" can help when trying to photograph wary targets. Human scent is alarming to many animals and it can take days for our scent to dissipate. Larger memory cards (and good batteries) will allow you to minimize your trips into the site and minimize the amount of disturbance in the area.

It is best to use removable memory cards so you don't have to take your camera home with you to view the pictures. Preferably you will have two cards for every camera so you can swap out the card and exit the area and so you have backups if a card goes bad. If you don't have extra memory cards, maybe you can take your laptop with you to your camera site. This will eliminate the need to take your camera all the way home; it will save gas and time. Often times you may want to view your pictures at the site to determine if you should move your camera. Some cameras have built in viewers but most don't so you will need some sort of ancillary viewer.

You can use your digital camera to view your trail camera pictures if they both use the same type of memory card, but you may choose to use one of the commercial card viewers so you aren't exposing your digital camera to the elements and dirty environment often found at trail camera sites. All trail cameras and photo viewers are not alike. Some trail cameras take video in .avi, .asf or .mpg format and some photo viewers will only view one or two of the formats.

## Editing and Resizing Photos

Why edit your tcam photos? Often times you will not see anything in the frame or you will get a very dark photo where you won't see a thing at first, but by lightening or resizing you can often see things you missed. Other times you may want to print and share your tcam photo and most digital photos can benefit from some tweaks like "Instant Fix". Use caution when editing or resizing your original photos. Most edits are destructive and they cannot be undone after saving. Always work with copies of your images. Using a true photo program like Photoshop or Paintshop is best, but they often have a harder learning curve and tend to be expensive. A couple of free alternatives are [Picasa](#) and [Gimp](#)

Why resize your tcam photos? Some trail cams are capable of taking pictures 8 megapixels or more and while that is great for prints, that is often too large for sharing over the internet. Many web forums and hosting sites have a file size limitation to keep loading times fast and to conserve storage space. Remember, resizing is destructive to the original image so always save as a copy or work from a copy. Resizing is as simple as a couple mouse clicks depending on your photo editing software. In Photoshop it is "Save for Web" and then you choose a compression option.

If you do not have a good photo program you can always try these tips from [www.hunting-washington.com](http://www.hunting-washington.com) members to resize your images.

- ✿ In Windows XP: Right click your image and select the "Send To" option, then select "Mail Recipient". Select your size option and email to yourself.
- ✿ In Windows Vista: From the photo gallery click the "Email" button on the top Ribbon and choose your photo size. In the Email dialog box opens, right click on the file name and select open. This will open the resized image. Right click on the image, select copy. You can now paste this to another location as a resized copy.
- ✿ In Windows, open up MS Paint. You can change the image size in "Attributes" by selecting "Image" from the Menu.
- ✿ [Image Resizer](#) powertoy for MS XP allows you to resize any image by right clicking on it. You can save a copy any size and includes commonly used presets.
- ✿ Many photo sharing or storage websites, like [Photobucket](#), will resize your photos when you upload them to your account.

## Organizing your photos

Do you organize and scrutinize your photos to find out exactly what triggered a "blank" photo? Do you make note of the time of every good animal photo to help with patterning?

Right now I bring home the cards and copy the photos to a folder with the date that I checked the camera for a file name. Over the last couple years I have lost track of the where's & when's of most of my trail camera images so this year I started a spreadsheet to help keep things in order and easier to look over in the future.

The spreadsheet has columns for:

- "Check Date & Time" so I know when I checked it last.
- "Camera" for which camera or brand.
- "Camera Date & Time" since I often forget to reset the clock.
- "Actual Date & Time" to adjust off times and dates.
- "Photo" for the photo name with a hyperlink to the photo.
- "Animal" for generic titles such as bear, deer, etc.
- "Notes" for more detailed descriptions.

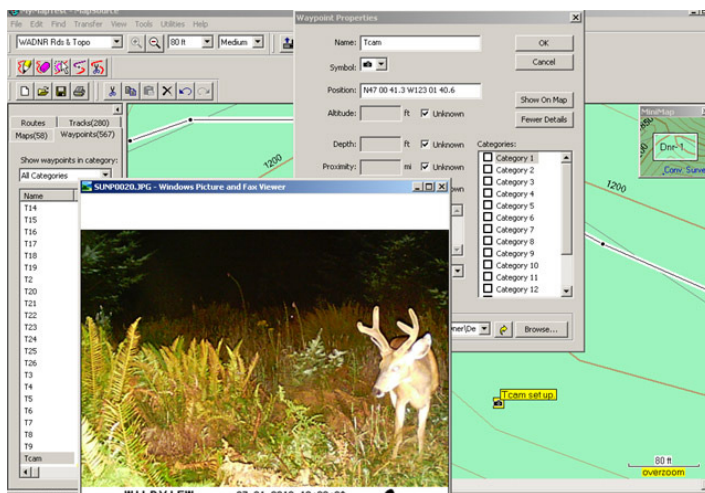
It is a work in progress and I may add or subtract columns as time goes on.

The other day I was scrolling through 1,500 photos and only 15 contained animals. The rest were from the grass moving around the camera. But I carefully looked at each and every one in order to make sure that I didn't miss something. I noticed one 3-shot burst that did not contain much grass and upon further scrutiny, I noticed the leg in left side of the photo.



While it is not really a photo I want to keep, I did note the date and time in the spreadsheet to help me track deer movement through this location.

I also “attach” some photos into my GPS software by linking up the image to a waypoint. This allows me to look over the map and easily pull up photos related to the area. In Garmin’s Topo program you double click on the waypoint icon and select “Browse” at the bottom of the Waypoint Properties box. Find your photo and click OK. Now next time when you open the Waypoint Properties you can click on the yellow arrow “Open Link” and view a picture from that location.



## Trail Camera related articles and websites

Excellent trail camera article by Tom Ryle.

<http://www.pnwbowhunting.com/2010/06/invaluable-trail-camera.html>

Discussions, reviews, pictures.

<http://hunting-washington.com/smf/index.php/board,37.0.html>

Reviews, tests and more.

<http://www.trailcampro.com/>

Reviews, forum, gallery.

<http://www.chasingame.com/>