LIFE Out HERE

Your Trail Camera Buying Guide: How to Choose the Best Trail Camera

I'm addicted to trail cameras. I have MTM totes full of digital trail cameras, and my collection of cellular devices continues to grow.

Why?

Manufacturers have done a remarkable job of pouring purposeful technologies into these 24/7/365 scouting devices. Most of today's trail cameras, whether digital or cellular, offer numerous customizable features. From adjustable flash ranges to theft protection to A.I. species recognition, the list of amenities goes on and on. This is awesome, but with numerous trail camera manufacturers and a wide range of models available, anxiety can arise when making a trail camera purchase.

We spent the summer and early fall testing the best digital and cellular trail cameras available to consumers. We transported them from the rugged elk woods to back 40 whitetail properties and put each through a rigorous field test.

Here's what you need to know about choosing the right trail camera to fit your scouting/hunting needs.

What Does The Law Say?: Knowing Where Trail Cameras Are Allowed

The first step in your trail camera buying guide is understanding laws regarding trail camera use in your state or wherever you plan to use a digital or cellular camera. States like Arizona and Nevada have banned the use of trail cameras for hunting. Other states, such as Kansas and Delaware, don't allow trail cameras on public land. Then, states such as New Mexico, Alaska, Utah, and Montana have banned the use of cellular trail cameras entirely. Other states have cell-specific laws. The bottom line: Read the rules and regulations to keep yourself on the right side of trail camera laws.

Pros/Cons of Cellular Trail Cameras: Who Are They Best For?

Benefits of Cellular Trail Cameras

Cellular trail cameras are game-changing devices. Top-end models from brands like Tactacam, Moultrie, Browning, Stealth Cam, and others are compatible with AT&T and Verizon, allowing them to capture the strongest cellular signal in the area. Cameras are fully customizable, allowing you to adjust the number of photos taken per trigger, delay time between triggers, video options, and more. Best of all, no matter how you set up your cellular trail camera, the images are delivered directly to your smartphone in real-time.

Cellular trail cameras are addicting because they provide so much immediate intel, and the more of them you sprinkle around your deer dirt, the more big-buck patterns you unravel.

Cellular trail cameras also keep you out of the woods unless you're hunting. Adding solar panels and high-performance power-pack batteries will reduce your human footprint.

Drawbacks of Cellular Trail Cameras

As amazing as cellular trail cameras are, they have some drawbacks. One problem is connectivity. Although cell service has become remarkably widespread across the country, there are still many areas where it remains unavailable. You're out of luck if a camera can't connect to a carrier. I packed six cell cams into a remote elk area a few years back. I came out with all six cameras because I couldn't get service.

Another consideration with cellular trail cameras is the required data plan. While reasonable, reading the fine print when selecting your cellular camera data plan is essential. Plans between $6 and $8 per month typically include 50 or 100 photos and a few videos, while packages in the $12 to $16 range offer unlimited pictures and a specified number of videos.

As I mentioned, cellular trail cameras are addictive. Last year, I ran nine cell cameras across three states, and my monthly bill was over $100.

Pros/Cons of Digital Trail Cameras: Who Are They Best For?

Benefits of Digital Trail Cameras

As much as I love cellular trail cameras, I've decided to go mostly digital in 2025. Today's digital trail cameras are excellent. Most capture images you can blow up to poster size, record at least 2K video with audio, and have more modes and functions than there are hot dogs at a ballgame. Many models feature on-camera color screens, making setup easy and allowing you to view images directly on the camera.

Hint: Get a card reader. I prefer Stealth Cam's Touchscreen SD Card Reader/Viewer. The screen is large, battery life is excellent, and I've yet to experience any product failure. Another option is to get an SD card reader that attaches to your smartphone. I know many hunters who go this route, but I've struggled with them and often get in a hurry and forget to delete photos from my cellular phone.

Another benefit of digital trail cameras is that cellular data plans are not required. When you go digital, you have a one-time expense. After purchasing the trail camera, you'll need batteries and an SD card, and that's it. I've also noticed that many digital trail camera manufacturers now offer two- and three-packs of digital cameras, complete with batteries and SD cards. Last season, I took advantage of a two-pack from Muddy and a three-pack from Stealth Cam. I purchased five digital cameras for under $300, and while they weren't top-of-the-line digital trail cameras, they served my public land whitetail needs well, and all of them are currently functioning correctly.

Drawbacks of Digital Trail Cameras

I've tested enough digital trail cameras over the years to say that there are some lemons out there. I realize I raved about the two and three-camera packs, but I'd used those trial cameras before and knew what I was getting beforehand. I knew they would false trigger during extreme heat and wind, and their photo quality and battery life weren't the best. However, they served my public land hunting, and if a sticky-fingered hiker or hunter wandered by, I wouldn't lose much money.

Understand that the cheaper the digital trail camera, the fewer customizable features it will have, and battery life and false triggers are typically problems. When purchasing trail cameras for private property use, I highly recommend the Stealth Cam DS4K Ultimate, Browning's Strike Force Pro DCL Nano, Bushnell's CORE DS-4K NO Glow, or Muddy's Pro Cam 24.

Besides purchasing a cheap, low-quality option, digital trail cameras have few drawbacks. Going into the woods to swap SD cards and make setting adjustments is a drawback, but only a minor one. In fact, I enjoy playing the wind, using good woodsmanship, and going in and out of my whitetail areas to check my SD cards. Plus, I love the anticipation digital trail cameras create. With digital cameras, you don't have immediate feedback. You don't know what's been around your trail cameras until you view the SD cards.

Do You Hunt Public or Private?

Although I touched on this briefly, we need to expand on it, as the type of trail camera you purchase should be dictated by where you hunt. I don't run cellular trail cameras on public land, even those with theft-detection devices. Cellular trail cameras are too easy to spot, and twice I've had pricy cell cams smashed in by hunters who saw the camera from a distance, slipped around them, and then bashed them in with a log.

When hunting public land, I use low-priced cellular trail cameras. However, when I stumble upon an area that looks too good, I place a quality digital trail camera. In public-land areas where I expect the camera to capture numerous game animals, and likely some quality ones, I want a digital trail camera that takes high-quality HD photos and excellent video with audio. Additionally, when roaming the elk mountains or any other area where I plan to leave a digital trail camera for an extended period, I use a quality digital model with excellent battery life.

When hunting private land and using cellular trail cameras is legal, I use models from Moultrie, Browning, and Tactacam. I've had excellent luck with all three brands, and the apps make setup easy. Each manufacturer offers a new model for the year that will serve your cellular needs exceptionally well.

When hunting on private land and using cellular trail cameras is taboo, I use the digital trail camera models mentioned in the *"Drawbacks of Digital Trail Cameras*" section of this article. I have used every one of these trail cameras extensively, and they are excellent.

Additional Expenses

Only you know your budget. If you go the cell cam route, I promise you'll end up with more than one, and if you have an addictive personality like I do, you likely end up with more than 10. Last year, I spent over $150 per month on cell cam data plans and batteries. If you have the discretionary income, you can't beat the effectiveness and real-time information that cellular trail cameras provide. Keep those data plan expenses in mind, and don't forget to cancel your subscription when you turn off your cameras.

Final Thoughts

At *F&S*, we work hard to field-test as much gear as possible, providing you with the necessary information to make informed buying decisions. I highly recommend thoroughly reading our 2025 Cellular and Digital Trail Camera Field Tests. Each field test will answer other questions you still have. All you need to do is heed the advice in this article, find a trail camera or two that suits your needs, and get them out and running where you plan to hunt.

Photo Support:

Service: When placing trail cameras far off the beaten path, I carry digital and cellular trail cameras. The last thing you want is to find a big-game honey hole, discover there is zero cell service, and only have cellular trail cameras in your backpack.

Use Them Everywhere: Bushnell's CORE DS-4K No Glow Trail Camera takes exceptional photos and rarely false triggers, even when exposed to extreme heat and wind.

Have A Bunch: The author spent months testing 2025's best digital and cellular trail cameras.

Elk: When you find a secluded elk honey hole on public land that other hunters probably won't see, consider putting up a top-tier digital trail camera like Browning's Strike Force Pro DCL Nano.

Card Reader: Stealth Cam's SD Card Reader/Viewer is an inexpensive, easy method for viewing your digital trail camera photos in the field.

Make It Easy: When cell service is available, it's hard to beat the effectiveness of a top-end cell scouter.

Reduce Human Footprint: When using cellular trail cameras, solar power and lithium battery packs can power the cameras for months, and in some cases, even years.

Easy Setup: Modern-day cellular trail cameras make setup straightforward, and camera functions are easily controlled through user-friendly apps.

Crisp, Clean, & Clear: Modern-day cellular trail cameras capture crisp, clean, and clear photos, and their detection/capture ranges are remarkable.