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Steward of the Forest: A Bow Hunter's Journey

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Steward of the Forest: A Bow Hunter's Journey

By

Joseph K. Slocum

THESIS

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Joseph K. Slocum is recommended for approval by the student's thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

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ABSTRACT

STEWARD OF THE FOREST: A BOW HUNTER'S JOURNEY

By

Joseph K. Slocum

This Master's thesis is a collection of essays that tell the truth about hunting. The four pieces chronicle my development as a hunter and my understanding of the role hunters must play as caretakers of the wild.

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I would like to thank my Director: Rebecca Johns and Reader: Laura Soldner, this could not have happened without their considerable help. I'd also like to thank some of the best hunters in the world for teaching me everything.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the MLA Style Guide and the Northern Michigan University Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

The first great influence on my nonfiction was Robert Ruark, who struck me from a very early age as a writer with a primal urge to share his experiences with an audience. I found him in one of the hundreds of outdoors magazines I studied throughout my childhood, and the reprinted articles led me to his novels. Clear communication and able storytelling are qualities I look for in an author and goals I strive for as a writer. In *The Old Man and the Boy*, Ruark tells the story of his childhood with such compelling detail and empathetic voice that the reader is both envious and spurred to reminisce about his own childhood. In the following short selection, Ruark shares an episode in which the local school system shut down due to an epidemic illness two weeks before Christmas vacation, during the hunting season:

I tried real hard to regret this unforeseen gap in my keen pursuit of such things as Latin and geometry, but it so happened I had enjoyed whooping cough and two kinds of measles, and I was salted. Maybe the other people were sick, but not me. I felt just fine. (190)

Every child hopes for a snow-day; two weeks of snow-days during the hunting season is the childhood equivalent of winning the lottery. This passage makes me recall the snow days of my youth. As soon as classes were canceled I would grab a shot gun and take the dogs into the blowing cold to chase rabbit, partridge, and the elusive pheasant. Those cold mornings are very happy memories. Reading this passage makes me happy for the narrator, and green with envy at the same time.

Many authors have influenced my writing, but none as strongly as the works of Ernest Hemingway. In his prose there is an understanding of the human condition delivered with brutal honesty that has motivated me to write for myself. When Hemingway writes about the outdoors

and how the hunt feels, he brings the weather, the sights, and the unfiltered emotion of the experience to the reader in such a way, the reader takes the experience as their own.

Possibly the most impressive trait of his writing is his ability to say so much so succinctly. For example, Hemingway incorporates human nature, history, conservation, and expansion in this passage from *Green Hills of Africa*:

A continent ages quickly once we come. The natives live in harmony with it. But the foreigner destroys, cuts down the trees, drains the water, so that the water supply is altered and in a short time the soil, once the sod is turned under, is cropped out and, next, it starts to blow away as it has blown away in every old country as I had seen it start to blow away in Canada. The Earth gets tired of being exploited. (284)

Hemingway speaks of what would be the end of the safari era in Africa. The passage calls for conservation and responsibility while acknowledging the end of the open safari era in Africa. This passage reveals the worst fear of the outdoorsman: destruction of the habitat.

Cormac McCarthy is the most recent influence on my aesthetic. His employment of simple, short, declarative sentences illustrates the power and complexity of the written word. His characters often speak only a few words, yet say everything about themselves. Similarly to Hemingway, McCarthy accomplishes a great deal with an economy of language, as exemplified in the following passage from *No Country for Old Men*:

This county has not had a unsolved homicide in forty-one years. Now we got nine of em in one week. Will they be solved? I don't know. Ever day is against you. Time is not on your side. (216)

This passage of interior monologue delivered by Sheriff Ed Tom Bell gives the reader an inside look at the feeling of inadequacy of the aging lawman. This character's monologue masquerades as southern storytelling, idle chatter to pass the time, while its primary function is baring the soul of the sheriff. At this point in the novel, the reader has seen Sheriff Bell two steps behind the

killer several times. He is beginning to realize that he is not capable of handling this new breed of criminal, that his time has passed.

For me, writing and the outdoors have always gone hand in hand. When I was in elementary school, I was not a serious student. I simply had no interest in anything that did not directly relate to the woods. Nothing straightened me out until Pa let me know that as long as I received A's, I would be allowed to go hunting every time he did. My studies improved immediately. If it meant more time afield, I could learn my times tables.

English was the first class I actually enjoyed. Somehow, I would always find a way for a writing assignment to make its way into the outdoors. With my own writing, I value truth, directness, and discovery above other qualities. I believe these are the very attributes that make nonfiction such a powerful art form and such a brave medium in which to work. In my essay "My Sweet Clare," I attempt to show what hunting really is and how deeply it affects me:

It is difficult to tell someone what hunting means to me. In a very real way, it is not something I can control. It is not a hobby or sport. It is something my body needs. No matter where I am in the world, there is one day, usually in September, the month before bow season opens in Michigan, when I wake up and the air is different. I can smell fall coming. It doesn't matter if I am in California, Arizona, Michigan, I can smell the hunting air each year. My body knows when it's time to hunt.

Over the years I have struggled to find my voice and style as a nonfiction writer. The most difficult aspect of writing in this genre is the ever-present issue of family. Even if my family does not read my writing, they are still represented in it. I discovered early on that even if I was writing a simple narrative about something as personal as my own thoughts, my family still affected the narrative. I was not just writing about the thoughts I own, but the thoughts of my mother's youngest son, my sibling's little brother, my grandmother's youngest grandson. Because of this difficulty, nonfiction allows the writer two options: don't let anyone see your work, or be

genuine. This realization has made me strive for truth more than anything else; their son, brother, and grandson will not be made a liar. While my family might not necessarily agree with what I have to say, my work will always be honest. My writing is every bit of me as a person on paper; it is truth. I do not censor my writing for the sake of my family; I stand by them both.

The sequence of four essays making up my thesis covers a time line of thirteen years. They begin with my experience as a young hunter with simple goals and show the evolution to my current practice of targeting a specific animal each season. They also detail the growing interest in and astonishment at wildlife management I have gained over three years of witnessing the beauty of planting acres of food plots for the local wildlife.

The first essay illustrates the limited knowledge I possessed at the beginning of my hunting career and the tactics used by a naive hunter. This essay also marks the beginning of my separation from the majority of the hunting community. In the second essay Boone Cook, my hunting partner, and I begin to provide missing nutrients for deer on the properties where we bow hunt. The focus of this essay will be the tremendous amount of effort, money, and planning involved in the creation of successful food plots. The commitment to the land and animals demonstrated by enhancing the ecological makeup of an area, both in fauna and wildlife, is the true meaning of conservation. The properties that have been planted are better now than they were when we found them.

Essay three discusses how the Michigan firearms season has failed to function as a hunting season should and the devastating impact this has had on the deer population. I also discuss the way many hunters, including myself, use firearms season to fill the role of displaced or eliminated natural predators in an attempt to restore balance to the herd. My final essay will detail why this responsibility to the ground we share is important and why hunters must change to be the natural predators we claim to be. Those of us who hunt should always be thinking about the health of the animal population instead of simply filling our tags.

I believe my growth as a hunter is parallel to my growth as a person. Each of the essays outlines milestones in my development. Topics such as conservation, hunting, and personal growth demand to be handled with truth, directness, and honesty.

Knew Every Tree

On Sunday October 22, 2000, I woke up early and started my morning ritual. It was frosty out in the dark, and I'd feel it all over me like a sickness as soon as I was out of the sleeping bag. Dreading it would only make it worse; just tear the band aid off. I slept on a scent-eliminating bath towel in order to warm it in its foil packaging. I washed myself as best I could, and put on my camp clothes to get moving. Pa was up drinking his coffee. He still offered me a cup every morning even though I stopped drinking it because of the strong smell. There was no wind through the canopy of jack pine limbs over head, and all the stars were flickering through the slit-gaps of green needles. I had a sip of water and was off.

The red Silverado slowed to a stop at the last line of "I Drink Alone" by George Thorogood and the Destroyers. My palm flat to the door just behind the handle, I eased it shut with a firm, soft push followed by the solid locking latch of the door. I carried my clothes in their sealed bag away from the truck and quickly undressed from my camp clothes and into my hunting clothes. I was getting pretty good at dressing in the dark, and after three days the morning chill didn't bother me all that much.

Sunday mornings were the last hunt of the week before breaking down camp to return home until the following Thursday. Sundays were special last chance days, and they had always been my favorite. Those mornings were the last step before the two hour drive home, when there was nothing but time to reflect on what had gone wrong and what I had learned in past few days.

Pa had been saying for the past few years that I always looked funny getting dressed in the woods. Everyone else got dressed in camp within the warmth of a camper

and propane heater. I couldn't believe any of them saw deer. All the unnatural smells of camp--the fire and smoke, the food, coffee, sweat, propane--all things people soaking into their clothes to be disbursed in the slightest breeze and on everything they touch like the lingering stink of incense. All of those things would send whitetails into the next county. The cold was cleansing on my bare skin, dried from the chemicals in my scent-killer soaps and towels. I've always believed you must sacrifice comfort for stealth.

My teeth were thankful; I had gotten so good at this I no longer needed to hold the frozen metal mini maglight in my mouth to finish dressing. The olive Scent Lok suit zipped up to my chin, and the bitterly frozen buttons of my leafy, mossy suit snapped tight between my thumb and forefingers. I have bad circulation, and the vibrations of the freshly poured brass buttons hurt to the bone with every clasp. But they were the last part, and soon I would be moving. I sprayed my boots, bow, quiver, and all my clothing with the frigid mist of my scent-killer spray, following it up with a shot in my mouth to gargle. Spitting the solution out quietly, I slipped my first chlorophyll-alfalfa pill into my mouth to dissolve on my tongue, killing whatever was left "human" smelling in my mouth.

The starlight was all I needed to walk my worn trail. The deep ruts left by logging machinery were tough to cross, but they keep my steps a secret when the leaves were corn-flake crispy with frost. The clear cold amplified everything in the world. My ruts led me to the deer trail that connected the mature forest on my right to the scrub oak cutting on my left. Pa always said that deer were a creature of the edge.

Breathing slowly to keep cool and avoid overheating, I was suddenly unsure where I was. Everything looked familiar but different, like someone had rearranged my trees. I knew this clearing. It was my main shooting lane. I was standing right where the

deer were supposed to be, stinking up every blade of wild grass with anything unnatural I may have missed on my body. My front teeth bit the soft tissue behind my lower lip. My knee-high rubber boots backed out just as they had come in and carried me back to the base of my oak tree.

Secured in my safety belt cinched to the solid oak, I wished the darkness would cover my mistake. Nothing will ever be completely scent free, but my goal was to be the first. I reasoned the frost could hold my scent and evaporate with the sun, taking my stink with it. This wasn't possible, but it was all I could do to lie to myself to feel confident again. My bow was across my lap with an arrow on the string, my left hand on the grip and my right hand on the string. I had time before I could see, but I was never comfortable in the woods if my bow wasn't in both hands.

As light came into the woods, I wondered if the trees would have any leaves in a few days. The colors had bloomed and nearly half the leaves were down already. Maples and oaks had shed their reds and yellows on the floor. Daylight brought the bright collage into focus. The melted frost brought damp earth back every morning, making each breath a sip of the crushed leaf and softened earth tea. It was the beginning of the end of fall, and soon the frost would be here to stay for months.

It was eight in the morning, only two hours left in the hunt, when I saw the buck. Sixty yards away in a small window of an opening, I could see his twitching ear and that broad left beam of his antlers. Slowly and somehow calmly, I thought *there he is*. There was the quality of animal I had never imagined. It was no question I wasn't watching a deer but something else. He set each hoof down as carefully and deliberately as the move of a chess piece. His ears were always moving, catching sounds from all directions like

antennas. There was no relaxation in this animal; his body and mind were analyzing the world anew every few seconds.

Only minutes from when I first saw him, he was standing where I had been not two hours before. Twenty yards. At that distance he could hear my breath if I didn't keep control. Most people cannot keep control when they see the antlers of a mature buck, but I never looked at them. Behind his right shoulder blade was my focus. There was a very special hair just back from the crease of the blade that held my eyes. The hair was covering the center of his lungs, and it was the only thing I cared about in the world.

My hands were tight around my weapon. All I needed was a second for him to look away. He was browsing, moving slowly around my clearing. And then he walked away to the cutting. I knew he couldn't walk out of my life like that, nobody in this world was as persistent as I was, and I deserved a chance if ever anyone deserved anything, but there he went.

When I was a kid and Pa was away hunting, he would call us and give a hunting report every few days. Each day Pa was gone Mom had to put up with a fat kid with a bowl cut demanding to know if that was Pa every time the phone rang. She also got the same question over and over. "Do you think Pa's gonna call tonight?"

"Well, he usually calls after a few days, and today's Thursday, so I don't know but it's probably a good bet," she'd say.

Mom would always be nice and patient, reminding me that it wasn't even dinner time yet, and so it was still light out, which meant Pa would still be hunting rather than driving to town to call us, and please stop asking me, I don't have special powers, and it's still the same as five minutes ago; I don't know.

Then, whenever Pa called and told us he got a deer there was a lot of screaming from me. I couldn't wait to see the deer he was bringing home. Each time I would tell everyone in my class that my Pa got a deer. Usually, I would tell the teacher first. Then I'd tell it to everyone else.

Every day after school, I would rush into my room, put on my camouflage, grab my bow and arrow, and head for the woods behind our house. The bow was nothing special, a fiberglass longbow with a cheap rubber grip and custom string. The arrows were a mixed bag of those found at the archery club we frequented on Thursday nights and, if I was very lucky or it was near my birthday, a few new wooden arrows. I used an old junior golf bag as my quiver, which held enough arrows to satisfy me, and the pocket designed with golf balls in mind made a perfect shelter for my makeshift camping supplies.

In my mind I was a hunter and it was time to get out to the long fabled "up north." They were my two favorite words. At only seven years old, I was deemed too young to hunt. By "hunt" here I mean I was too young to sit next to Pa as he hunted and learn to be quiet and stealthy in the woods. Every time he and my brother Nick, who was five years older than me, were leaving for the woods I protested, yelled and cried to be taken with them. They did a good job of trying to slip away unnoticed, but I always paid careful attention to the hunting gear.

“Why can’t I go?”

“Joseph, you’re not big enough yet.”

“Yes I am! Look how big I am!” I’d shout and push my chest out.

After the usual debate, they would leave and I would go inside the house to cry. Mom always understood. She would ask me if I wanted to go rent a movie, one of my favorite things to do, which usually consisted of me walking up and down the aisles of videos over and over until settling on the same one I had rented the previous dozen times. But even a free trip to the video store didn’t mean anything to me. They were going hunting and I was not. Everyone got to go but me.

Until one day. I was finally deemed “big enough” to follow Pa into the woods. I was eight years old. It was early October, before the fall colors would come out, and I couldn’t believe it. The ride up north seemed to go on forever but really took less than three hours. I was vibrating in my seat next to Pa, asking him question after question about deer hunting. How do you know when you can move, how cold will it be, how far do we have to walk, can we talk, do you think we’ll see any? I’ll never understand where my parents got their patience.

Finally we were there, parking the truck off an old two track. Pa helped me get into my new hunting clothes and told me to be quiet. I could have done just about anything else. This was my first night in the woods with Pa, and I wanted to see everything. I was straining to see everything around me, moving my head all over the place, and we weren’t even in the woods yet.

Telling me to slow down and follow him, Pa showed me how we would walk to our blind.

“Be careful not to step *on* anything that you can step *over*. This is our deer’s house, and we have to be very quiet and very careful.”

Making our way down an old deer trail with the sun lowering slowly behind us, I started really feeling the woods for the first time. I didn’t know what it was that was happening all around me, but this was where I needed to be. This was where I belonged. I didn’t notice then that I was making so much noise until Pa said, “Try picking your feet up when you walk.”

After settling into the blind only three hundred yards from the truck, we were hunting. Actually Pa was almost hunting; I was looking around and breathing a little too heavily with excitement. We were sitting in the middle of a collection of ancient fallen pine trees with a clearing to our left and another in front of us. I would later learn that there was a thick swamp not too far in front of us that was the safety spot for many bucks during the day.

The hour passed slowly. Pa reminded me to stop moving and to make less noise.

“We are hunters. We have to be quiet and we have to be still. Deer can see and hear better than you can imagine.”

It was nearly dark when I started settling down and moving slowly. I looked slightly to my right and saw antlers.

Nudging Pa in the arm, I said, “There’s one.”

That was a masterpiece of an understatement. We were looking at one hell of a fine buck, one you don’t see on state land too often. In twenty five years of hunting this area, we only saw a dozen or so bucks with this kind of antler. Watching him move like

smoke through the scrub oak and jack pines did something to me that can never be undone. He hooked me.

The Buck was broadside in a clearing. I was begging Pa to take him, not knowing that it was a long shot. He drew his bow and sent an arrow over the back of our buck, who ran off safely and slightly confused. The distance had been misjudged. From that moment on I knew what my life was going to be about. I was going to hunt until I died, and do anything I could to make this my life.

I was thinking back to that first night in the woods as sap squeezed between my fingers. The climb up the ancient pine tree was no problem, my hands and feet were always on solid, thick limbs. But when I got to the platform some thirty feet up in the air, the very slight breeze seemed to make the tree sway and shake like a row boat on white caps. Pa and Nick were waiting below me with the long pruning saws in hand. My job was to step onto the platform and see if there were any branches that needed to be cut so that I would have clear shots from my first tree stand.

We were on the final scouting trip before bow season started. It was going to be my first year in deer camp as a hunter, and it was about time. I was getting to know the woods around Clare County Michigan where we hunted, and thinking about gravity. It really was my fault. Pa and Nick both suggested the tree stand should be lower than usual since I was a beginner, but I wanted the advantage of the extra height. Deer in Michigan look up to spot hunters in trees, but they don't look *straight* up. The idea is be close, be

high, and go undetected. I demanded that my first tree stand be hung just like the seasoned hunters Nick and Pa.

It was September, less than a month before my first opening day. The ancient pine that so cruelly showed everyone that I was afraid of heights was located at the edge of a small clearing called Hogan's Alley. Years earlier, Pa had a very nice buck come close but never present a shot. On his way out of the woods, he found a Hogan golf ball. What it was doing so far from anything resembling a golf course is still unknown, but the buck had earned a name. This was the first spot I wanted to hunt.

After seeing my performance in the high seat, Pa suggested I try a ground blind or two. I agreed, and we went to the Pine Tree blind, a landmark in the area and the place where I spent my first night in the woods. This spot was an obvious one for me for a number of reasons. Pa knew I could find it in the dark, he didn't have to worry about me climbing or falling, and everyone knew where it was. Satisfied that I had two spots that would be my own for the year, our scouting trip ended, and we headed back home to continue preparing for the season.

With less than thirty days until my first opening day, I needed to get comfortable with tree stands. Pa set one up in the back yard, and it became my new practice routine. Instead of just shooting my bow until dark, I had to practice climbing into a tree stand set up in the back yard and shooting my bow from the vantage point. Not only was there the challenge of getting comfortable twenty five or thirty five feet in the air, but the mechanics of shooting changed also. From level ground, the vitals of a white tailed deer were about nine inches around, or one paper plate. Anywhere inside that circle meant a quick, humane kill and an expected easy recovery. From a tree stand, that paper plate

looked more like a half moon due to the angle. Also, the distance from the target to the base of the tree was different than the distance from thirty feet up from the base of the tree. It became a different shot altogether.

After a while, the gentle sway of a tree bending to the wind didn't bother me so much anymore. I even brought hunting magazines and hunter's safety books up to my perch to read. My ability to shoot from a tree stand was as good as it was from the ground. Pa and Nick swore you had advantage hunting from a tree, and so I had learned. I wanted to be exactly like them. Now that I was comfortable in the air and pretty good with my bow, all I had to do was wait for October first, opening day of bow season.

That year Michigan had gone to a computer system for distribution of all hunting and fishing licenses. Prior to the switch, the law stated that a hunter who would be of age during the hunting season would be permitted to hunt the entire season. On October first, Pa, Nick, and I went to buy our hunting licenses. The computer denied me a hunting license. I was eleven years old until October seventeenth. The legal bow hunting age in Michigan was twelve. While Pa and Nick paid for their tags, telling me that the beginning of October was always bad anyway being so warm, I ran out to the car to cry. I understood that the beginning of the season was never the best, but I was losing the first seventeen days of my season. Bow hunting was extremely difficult, and every second counted.

A few days later my hunting career began at Hogan's Alley, up the old pine. Pa walked me to my tree for my first hunt. He was suddenly nervous and told me he would be on the ground some sixty yards away so that I wouldn't be scared. At the base of my tree, we said goodbye for the next few hours.

“Joseph, I’m very proud of you,” he said. “You’re a hunter now, so be ready and take your time, and good luck.”

“I love you, Pa. Good luck.”

It was very close to dark when I saw the bone-white antlers heading my way. It was a small- buck, a six point, with antlers going straight up out of his head, two small points on both sides of his spikes. He came into the bait like he had done it before. The bow was shaking in my hands, and my lungs were puffing hard. For some reason, I thought all I had to do was get the bow back and everything would be perfect. I took a shot and sent my arrow over his back. To me, this was an accomplishment. The buck ran off unharmed and scared. He stopped some thirty yards away and made the sound hunters all dread-he snorted. A snort is loud blast of exhaled air, a sort of trumpet of danger in the area to alert all other animals in the forest.

After dark, Pa and I met back up and I told my story. Every time you shoot, you need to check everything in the area to make sure you know what happened and to be certain that you didn’t leave a wounded animal in the woods. We looked and looked and found nothing. Being a new hunter, I had directed our search about twenty yards from where the buck had actually been. The next morning I returned and found my arrow right away in the clear light of day. I knew I had missed, but I had the chance to tell my story around the camp fire at deer camp. I was one of the guys, finally.

For the rest of October and beginning of November, I learned by doing it all wrong. I spooked deer, I moved around too much, and made too much noise. Pa told me every time out that I would get my chance, that if I put my time in I would always get

another shot. Nothing could keep me out of the woods; I had waited too long to waste time.

It was early November when I saw the same tall tines coming towards me. It was nearing the rut or breeding season, and I had put out doe-in-estrus urine to lure a buck into my spot. The young six-pointer was walking at a steady pace with his tongue out and head up, focused on the smell. He was perfectly broadside at fifteen yards, a chip shot. I took a deep breath and drew my bow. The white arrow flew in slow motion, arching towards the buck. It came down softly, the feathers being the only part of the arrow to touch the buck. As the arrow slapped against his spine, it deflected up into the air and sailed farther away.

Standing on my platform, I watched the buck bound away effortlessly once again. He stopped and snorted at me again, letting me know that he was fine and I had lost again. Everything would have been perfect if only I could have made that easy shot I dreamed about. I lowered my bow to the ground and cried all the way down the tree. Pa was right, I had put my time in and gotten another chance only to throw it away.

Uncle Mark picked me up from the woods that night. He and I always did the fun stuff, hunting and fishing. When I was a baby he would “borrow” me for the day, taking me to the mall as bait to meet women. That night he walked into a pretty intense parenting moment.

“Well, Joe, what’d ya see?”

“The same fucking six point, and I missed!”

“Oh. Well, that’s ok. Are you sure you didn’t hit him?”

“No, I know. The arrow was clean. He was right on my bait pile, broadside and looking away, and I just shot right over his back.”

“Hey, that’s ok, the important thing is you didn’t wound him. Everybody misses, even Pa.”

“Nobody misses the same deer twice. I’m a failure. I’m not hunting anymore, I can’t do this. Pa’s gonna hate me.”

“He is not. You just got excited. You’re the best shot with a bow and arrow. You’re just upset right now. You’ll be back at it, you’ll get your deer.”

It was especially bitter to miss that night. It was the last hunt before gun season started, and I wasn’t old enough for that. It would be fifteen days until bow season opened back up.

Mark did a great job of calming me down. It was a lot easier to tell my story to Pa and everyone else after getting most of the tears out with Uncle Mark. Nick getting two deer in twenty minutes that night didn’t bother me as much as my miss. Pa told me not to worry about it, that it happened to everybody. “I know you’re real upset right now, Joe, but this is part of hunting,” he said. “It doesn’t always work out. Everything’s gotta be perfect. I know it’s hard, God knows I want you to get a deer even more than you do, but you’re still learning. And don’t forget every time you miss you become a better hunter.”

It was hard. I wanted to be the best hunter, I wanted to show them that they should have been taking me along my whole life. I wanted to be the one in camp everybody came to for advice, and I wanted to be the one with the biggest deer they’ve ever seen with my tag on it.

For the next fifteen days, I shot my bow. There would be no more missing. I shot and shot every day after school. It was cold and windy, and I thought it was good practice. The most important thing I did was in my mind. I replayed everything I had seen over the past month of hunting and looked for ways to improve. In my mind, I killed millions of deer with perfect shots over and over every night before bed. By seeing myself as successful and performing perfectly in my mind so many times, I was creating my autopilot.

December twenty-seventh was cold. The whole ride up north with Uncle Mark, the radio was giving us bad numbers. It would be a hand-warmer night. It would be painful. We met Pa and Nick up in Clare and went over the plan for the night. Pa said it was so cold he would be only hunting for an hour and a half. He told us to do the same, because he knew Nick and I would sit out in all that wind and all that cold until we couldn't feel anything. I chose to go back to Hogan's Alley.

Uncle Mark walked me to the stand and carried the corn for me. He wished me luck and told me to walk back to the truck if I got cold. It couldn't have been thirty minutes after he left that I heard deer walking. The frozen hooves broke through the ice-crusting snow steadily. I strained to look to my right where there were five of them under the low, smaller pines. The biggest of the five does walked to the base of my tree. I had never been this close to a deer. She was more gray than brown, thick and muscular. She had eaten well before winter, knowing her body would need the extra fat to survive. She had made it through some winters before. The other four were still under the pines, looking at the yellow corn sitting on the white snow. I was trying not to breathe.

In Michigan, bow season begins on October first. On November fifteenth, gun season opens. On that day some 200,000 hunters take to the woods in orange. During gun season, only bucks may be harvested, and they must have three inches of antler growth. Because a buck's antler grows with age, the smaller the antler, the younger the buck. First light on November fifteenth is usually around seven a.m. depending on the weather and where you live in the state. In the western Upper Peninsula, even with clear skies, shooting times start around 7:20 a.m., while in Oakland County 7:00 a.m. is plenty early. By noon, around 50 percent of this year's bucks are dead. That's thousands of deer in a few hours. For the next two weeks, the shooting continues. Deer who survive their first gun season take no chances. They live by their senses. Gun season ends on December first, when bow season resumes. The last thirty-one days of bow season are the most difficult time to hunt the most adaptive prey.

Of the five deer beside my tree, all but one was huge. They ranged from two-and-a-half to possibly four-and-a-half in age, save the smaller one, which was this year's fawn. I was watching several mature deer around a bait pile, and what I saw was survival. Deer know what bait is and why it's there. They will eat it, but they know death is in the smell of bait. The bigger does pushed the smaller one out of cover and towards the food.

She was to be the one to inspect the bait. I knew that if I waited, the others would come to the corn. But I had also learned one of the most valuable lessons of my young career: take the first shot you have that you know you can make.

The little doe stood broadside, just like the little buck I had missed months earlier. I never thought to shoot, and I had no idea who drew my bow for me or who aimed my arrow, but I saw it come out the other side of her. Instant red at the point of impact. There could not be anything more dramatic than the pink mist on top of fresh white snow. It was a double-lung hit, as fatal as it gets. The other deer scattered as their sentry fell over dead; they would come back under the security of darkness to eat.

These animals knew the score. They had all survived gun season and knew there was safety in numbers. The lack of available food made them come in to bait. They sent the weakest one in to investigate. If any one of those deer was going to die during the winter, it would have been the weakest, the one that I killed. What I saw was an evolving method of survival. I have no problem with any legal method of hunting in practice today. To my mind, hunting over bait is possibly the laziest method in practice, inasmuch as it requires the least physical effort. But it is not any kind of guarantee of success. Baiting is the traditional, average method of deer hunting and not a bad place for a beginner to start.

At the beginning of my second season as a hunter, I reverted back to optimism. My persistence in the woods had proven Pa right; I put my time in, and I got my chance. I

had learned that I always needed to make the most of my time in the woods, that anything could happen in a second. That's what I love the most about being a bow hunter: it will always be an enter-to-win sweepstakes.

Before we could start hunting that year, we had to address our lodging issue. We camped in a pop-up camper exclusively for hunting. Over the previous summer, the floor had rotted out of the camper due to an undetected leak. While sleeping under the stars is romantic, it snows during hunting season. I have never seen Pa work on something so hard and for so long. With school and homework, my brother and I weren't much help with the sawing, nailing, measuring, and general construction of a new floor. Pa got it done the night before October first.

Our first hunt of the year would be in a new place for me. Pa had wanted to bow hunt in the Upper Peninsula for years. He and the rest of my family had gun hunted the big woods north of the Mackinaw Bridge for years and loved the big woods the land had to offer. The trip was partly for bow hunting and partly scouting for gun season though I was still not old enough to hunt with a rifle. I was ready for a big trip to a place where there was so little hunting pressure and all that new terrain to learn.

The first two days of our U.P. hunt were very slow, no sightings of the big bucks that called the area home. It was brutally windy, gusting up to thirty miles an hour. When it's that windy out, the wind swirls and is unpredictable. Since whitetails live their lives by their noses, they don't move much when it's extremely windy. On the third day we had a break in the wind. I had a small buck with two small points about four inches long (making him a spike or "baby buck") walk by my stand without presenting a shot. It was great to see deer, and I loved the mature, old hardwoods of the land around Bear Creek.

The terrain was hilly and the woods were old, quite a contrast to the flat land of Clare County where I was used to hunting. I was disappointed that I didn't get a chance at the little buck, but I was happy to be in the woods.

That night back at camp and after dinner, there was a soft thud inside our camper. Pa was nearest to the door, and so he investigated. As soon as the door swung open a wall of flames shot out towards him. Pa yelled for help as he slammed the door shut. The six men in camp ran to get water jugs and ice bags from the coolers to put out the blaze. The durable plastic that was the pop-up walls of the camper were melted. Our bedding was going up faster than the men could get water through the melted walls. Uncle Mark swung the door open and jumped into the fire with a jug of water in his hands. He kicked out the source of the fire: a Coleman lantern had exploded, the propane tank shooting fire onto all that we had.

After the fire had been put out and the damage observed, Pa hung his head. All that he had worked on was gone in less than a minute. His eyes drooped and he didn't say anything. For the rest of the hunt, he and I would be sharing a single bed in our cousins' camper. I told him it would get better. We all had to get bucks to make up for something like that.

The next night I walked slowly to the stand Pa and I had set our first day in camp. Pa was still pretty depressed, but he told me good luck and rubbed his lucky rabbit's foot on my hair to freshen up our luck. When I was in elementary school, Pa had a rough year in the woods. At our annual pre-Thanksgiving break boutique, I bought him a yellow rabbit's foot as an early Christmas present. The running joke was that the rabbit knew

someone was going to cut his foot off and peed on himself. Pa got his buck the next time out in the woods, so he rubbed it on my hair to recharge its batteries every now and then. After a few short hours on stand, I recognized the same spike from the other day walking down the trail. Yooper deer don't stand around very much as they cover hundreds more yards daily than southern Michigan deer due to a lack of abundant food sources. They simply have to cover more ground to find their daily food. I couldn't get a shot at the little buck until he was thirty-five yards away. We looked at each other for a long time, and I knew I wasn't going to take the shot. It was just too far of a shot to take at an alert animal. It was unethical. When deer are on alert, they will react to the sound of arrow before it gets to them, making it impossible to know where the shot will hit. He walked on, and I let my bow down.

I was proud of myself right then. Some people might have taken the shot, but I knew it would not have gone well. My bow was only around fifty-five pounds of draw weight, which was light, and that meant my arrows flew slowly. He could have moved a foot in any direction by the time my arrow got to him. Feeling like a seasoned pro, I watched the little buck feed on brows and meander away. I felt great. I was appreciating the encounter and was truly grateful for a hunt that did not end with a kill. Then I saw antlers. Nice white antlers. An eight point melted out of the spruce trees and walked over to the little buck. They touched antlers, feeling each other out. I had my bow across my lap and release on the string, ready and waiting. The eight point turned and walked towards me. At twelve yards I thought *Heart Heart Heart* and let my arrow fly.

The fletching turned dark red behind his shoulder. He ran a short distance and I heard the unmistakable sound of a crashing body. I waited twenty minutes, taking the

time to savor the celebrational Pepsi I had in my pack. Then I carefully climbed down and took up the trail. It was near dusk, the light was graying but still not dark. I tracked my buck without a flashlight to where he had fallen. I knelt behind my trophy, laid my bow across his body, and softly said thank you as I pulled the leaves away from mouth and nose still sticky with blood.

I was pacing the road waiting for Pa to show up to pick me up after dark. I had the conversation all planned out. As Pa rolled his window down, I spoke first. “Well did you see anything?”

“One doe, but she was a long way away. How about you?”

I couldn’t be cool anymore. “I shot; I made a great shot.”

Slapping the steering wheel, he said, “Yes.”

“Pa, it’s a buck. An eight point, and I got him. I found him. I *touch*ed him.”

After returning to camp to get everyone, I led the way to my stand. I fell down three times.

“Take it easy, Joe, I know you’re excited, and we’ll get him, but take your time,” Pa said.

The blood trail was easy, thick and wide all the way to where he fell. We were standing over the biggest buck anyone in our family had ever taken with a bow and arrow. A new friend of ours was hunting with us for the first time on this trip. After Pa finished gutting my first buck, our new friend reached out to grab an antler and take a shift dragging my buck out of the woods. Pa’s oldest hunting partner, my cousin Perry, took the antlers out of his hand.

“Nope. I’m a relative. I get this one.”

Up until I was fifteen, I relied on the proven methods of my family-the average. We scouted just prior to the season opening, got our stands up and cleared, and spent as much time as we could in the woods. By following the trend or traditional methods, I was not taking any risks. I also realized I was doing the exact same thing that all the others in camp were doing. Aside from hunting longer, moving less, and being as quiet as possible, I was exactly the same as any other hunter. At that point in my career, I wanted to get a bit more out of my hunting.

Also, there was claim jumping going on. Many hunters tend to gravitate towards one another in the woods. One person gets a deer at a new place and everyone moves in. I did the best I could to cover my tracks and get as far away from others as I possibly could. I started stalking during the mornings. I would cover several hundred yards trying to get close to deer and soaking up everything I saw. My tracking skills got to be pretty sharp. I also learned great deal about how deer move through cover that four years of stand hunting had not taught me.

I got very close to several deer, and the rush was amazing. On level ground, stalking is the most difficult way to bow hunt. I never got a shot, but I remember every stalk. This method made me the odd man at camp. Nobody else did what I was doing, and my findings in the woods were shared at the end of the day around the camp fire. The guys at camp whom I pestered for years with endless queries about all things hunting started to ask me questions.

A defining moment for me as a hunter was the discovery of scent. Nothing made me feel more helpless than when deer winded, or smelled, me. You could do everything perfectly and then a tiny gust of wind would ruin everything. It was completely out of my control, and that was unacceptable. I started washing my clothes in scent-eliminating soap. I hung them in the woods for days. I packed them in air-tight plastic bags and dressed in the woods away from all human odors. I showered with scent-free soap. I wore rubber boots I washed with boiling water like the trappers did. I sprayed everything down with scent-killing spray, and it wasn't even close to enough.

Then I discovered Scent Lok, activated carbon in the fabric of hunting clothing that traps human odor. Along with all the other steps I had been taking, Scent Lok was the missing ingredient. Everyone in camp didn't believe me. Nobody thought I was on to something. They all said it was a waste of time. That year we had a pretty successful camp; there was no way we could be doing that much better. Everyone laughed at me when I'd break up the ice in the water bag to wash my hair every morning with my scent-eliminating shampoo. I had done the research. I knew hair was the most "humanly fragrant" part of the body.

After a while I wondered if there was anything to all this scent control. I was seeing as many deer as I used to, no big improvement there. I was getting tired of getting up extra early to wash and then completely change my clothes in the woods away from the warmth of camp and all the smells that could get on my hunting clothes with a flashlight in my teeth. Was I really reading the right books, or was I truly wasting my time and money? As I was thinking it over one morning, a coyote walked down my trail. He walked down the exact path I had taken and right by my tree. He stood and looked

over the area five yards from me. Our eyes met, and he walked on unafraid. That should not happen, you just don't get close to other, more able predators. I was convinced it was working.

I spent all my time learning about whitetails. My heroes were hunters like Myles Keller and John Eberheart. Myles is the hunter with the most bucks in the bow record book, *Pope and Young*. John has the most from Michigan. I followed every word of instruction from both of them. Their message was clear: hunters are lazy. There are truly great animals all over the state of Michigan; hunters are simply not good enough to get them. They preached the gospel of scent control and smart hunting. They told me you can't just hunt in the morning, you have to sit in the dark a few hours before morning too. I learned from them that a mature whitetail buck is a completely different animal than other whitetails. He is smarter than you, he is better equipped than you, and he will almost always beat you. He is a professional prey animal, and you must learn how to hunt better than 99 percent of hunters worldwide to even have a chance with a bow.

After my fifth season as a hunter, Pa and I had a difficult conversation. We were driving home from the woods on the last night of the season. I had told him I needed to start scouting in March to try and understand these deer better. I believed that there were fantastic big bucks around but we weren't good enough to get them yet. We had a great deal to learn and a lot of work to get there.

"Joseph, you know I love you and I want nothing but the best for you," he said. "And I've always told you it's good to have dreams, but I just can't believe it. I just can't believe there are *Pope and Young* record-book whitetails where we hunt. I just can't

believe they're that much smarter than us. The way you talk about them you make it sound like they're unkillable. If we're not getting them already, they can't be out there."

"You're wrong," I said.

I was crying. It hurt so bad to hear Pa talk like that. He just couldn't believe they always smelled us and that was why we never saw them or got shots at them. I knew he had never been anything but the solid rock of support for our family, but it killed me to hear him say I was wrong.

The next season could not have come soon enough. I had been doing my scouting since March, and I was ready. We were hunting towards the end of October and we were seeing deer. I had hunted one stand three nights in a row, seeing different bucks every time out. I wasn't worried about not getting a shot; it wasn't even the pre-rut yet and the bucks were moving.

The weary buck knew he was on the edge of an open area, and he needed to use his eyes to see where he could not smell to feed safely. He walked back into my clearing with a confident stride, familiar with everything around him, knowing he was safe. Back to where he needed to be, broadside at twenty yards. He was posed perfectly, my eyes back on the hair. I would sit here and watch him for the rest of my life happily, waiting for a chance. My body would not feel cold or cramp up, my hands would never be tired or achy holding onto my bow and arrow. I needed him to look away to have my chance.

A whitetail's eyes are almost on the sides of its head. This gives them about three hundred degrees of vision. I needed everything to be perfect. He not only had to look away, but he had to pick his ears up to cover his eyes. Something needed to grab his attention.

Further down the trail he had walked in on, four does started towards us. One of them stepped on my favorite twig in the world. He picked his head up, looked away from me, and cocked his ears forward at the sound. When you're safe to move with a deer close to you, you're playing the lottery. You have no way of knowing how long you're safe to move. The only thing you can know for sure is that hesitation has never filled a tag. Just before I drew my bow, the funniest thing happened. I remembered Grandpa Slocum

My Grandpa Slocum passed away when I was in preschool. I don't remember that much about him. I never got to hunt with him. What I do have of him is memories of watching John Wayne movies and the stories the old guys tell of him. I never get tired of them.

I used to ask Pa to tell me about Grandpa Slocum every time we went up north. He said he missed his dad a lot, and that he always knew Grandpa was with him in the woods. Then he'd remind me about what Grandpa said about me: "That kids' going to be just like Davy Crockett."

Apparently, Grandpa Slocum was an excellent shot. Uncanny, someone called it. But he also succumbed to buck fever more often than anyone. I remember Pa saying something like, "If it had horns, it was safe, but if there was a doe in the county, look out." On the last day of a rifle hunt one year, Grandpa and Uncle Loren were walking

back to either camp or a truck when Grandpa spotted a doe. “Aw, Lester she’s too fa-” was all Loren could get out before the gun went off and the doe fell over. I’m not what you’d call a spiritual person, but I have killed a lot of deer without thinking to lift the bow or aim.

As soon as the arrow stuck into the ground on the other side of the giant, I came back to reality. I tried to pay attention to exactly where he ran, what trees he was nearest as landmarks. My left hand was strangling the grip of my bow, each exhale had two distinct steps. The buck stopped in the same clearing I had first seen him standing in. His head and tail up, his ears were straining to find the source of the twang of my bow string. The four does were still, looking at the buck. He staggered once and stood still for a moment, and then his hind legs gave out, and the giant fell over.

On Sundays, we only hunt the morning, and we never disrupt another hunter, but this was an exception. I went to get Pa immediately. He looked at me like I was jerk, and I knew what he was thinking. “Pa, I’m really sorry to ruin your hunt, but I just shot a monster.”

He just did his proud dad laugh.

“Wait. Pa, he’s bigger than Mr. Buck.”

Sometime before I was born, Pa got a giant about three hundred yards from where I had been hunting that morning. It was a main frame typical ten point, almost perfectly symmetrical. It had a strange deformed hoof. That animal will forever be the definition of a trophy. He was old, his left and right sides of his rack were almost identical, his neck was swollen from the hormones of the rut; he was the boss and he knew it. Pa named him “Mr. Buck” and he is still one of the biggest bucks ever taken in Clare County.

“Go get your brother. I’m going to wait by your truck and have a cigarette.”

The three of us gathered where the buck had been shot. In my adrenaline haze, I had removed the arrow from the ground, but it didn’t matter. There was instant blood. Beautiful pink, bubbly lung blood poured out of his chest on both sides of the body and out his nose. I do not remember walking the blood trail at all. The world was spinning and I was afraid I was going to pass out. My older brother was leading the track. Generally he and I track together, and we’re pretty good as a team, but I was out of sorts and not helping much. Nick was the first to spot the downed buck.

“There he is, and holy shit, he’s a monster.” And then he shook me.

His rack was so wide and thick it held his head off the ground. Not even his ears touched the leaves under his head. My fingers barely touched when I wrapped my hands around his antlers. I just remember Nick was yelling a lot, and not much else of the next few minutes. My knees were wet from the melted frost and I just knelt there behind him.

After awhile, Nick said, “Here, Joe. Gimme your tag.” I would have severed something for sure. He also gutted my deer for me after I took a knee. He let me help pull out the heart and lungs. After we turned him over to drain, I looked up and Uncle Mark was standing there quietly. We exchanged a silent glance, and I lifted the head of the giant to show Mark. He is officially the biggest buck ever taken in Clare County with a bow and arrow.

Later that year, Pa and I took a trip to see Grandpa Slocum. His head stone has a silhouette of a tall eight point buck. We go there every year, not necessarily together, but every time we get a deer. I reached into my pocket to pull the flimsy clear sandwich bag

with hair from my buck out of my pocket and let the hair fall on his headstone, and Pa gave me a hug.

“You were right Dad,” he said.” He’s just like Davey Crockett.”

A Plan to Creating a More Complete Nature

Food: Source of nutrients, solid nourishment

Plot: Piece of ground, plan.

-Oxford English Dictionary

“Hey, fucker, get your ass outta bed and come cut me some trees,” Boons loving voice said into my cell phone very early on a December morning. I really wasn’t sleeping in; Boone just liked to get started early. We were going to try something new today since we were running out of ideas as to how to help our deer grow stronger. Boone thought it might be a good idea to give them a new bedding area.

White-tailed deer, or *Odocoileus Virginianus*, are ungulates. They are a hoofed animal with chambered stomachs, similar to cattle. Whitetails need to chew cud in order to digest their food. While eating, their mouths do little but tear food from the ground or branches, and essentially swallow everything whole. This is where a bedding area comes in.

As a prey animal, deer are prone to activity during low-light conditions. During the day, they bed down and chew their cud to facilitate digestion. If they do not have a safe place to chew the cud, they will not digest the food they have swallowed whole, and they will be robbed of the nutrients in the food. This is the daily routine of the whitetail. Their movement patterns are generally elliptical in shape, one side being a daytime bedding area, and the other side being a nighttime food source with transition areas of cover, and forage along the way connecting the two points.

Boone was the mastermind behind the plan to bring the bedding area onto our property. The long distance our deer needed to cover to get from their current daytime bedding areas to the food plots Boone had been planting for the past four years was too great, and the deer were eating our food under the security of darkness. If we could reduce that distance our deer would be feeding during daylight conditions, thus allowing us to hunt them. I was a bit reluctant at first.

“If you think about it, it works,” said Boone, taking a long drag on his Camel Light. “If you were a deer, wouldn’t you like to lie down right next to the wood in a nice, low spot? Out of the wind? Ohhh.”

“You want to make a deer bedding area?”

“Why not?”

“Dude, it’s fucking cold.”

“You move to the U.P. and you call thirty degrees cold? Come on, what else are you gonna do?”

I could think of dozens of things, but I knew Boone was going to spend some time trying something new. Only once did I have the pleasure of rubbing a bad idea of his in his face. This time I went along with him just in case.

The plan was to walk the creek that cut across one corner of the property we hunted and find a spot that looked like it would make a good bedding area. Deer like to bed in the thickest cover possible, anything difficult to move through quietly, such as boggy swamps, cattails, briars, and scrub oak, so that way they can hear a predator approaching. Our property was relatively open. So we brought a chainsaw. Juvenile hardwoods and pines would be the future covers for our new deer beds. We would cut

halfway through the trees at about shoulder height and then bending them over made a natural lean-to. Dropping fifteen or twenty trees that crisscrossed as they fell made a canopy with a wind block. On the way out I admitted it looked like a natural bedding area.

“Hope it works. I sure hope they use it.”

“It’d be nice to give them everything they need,” Boone said.

On the way out of the woods I thought about what Boone had said. We’d been dreaming of having great hunting in Michigan our whole lives. He was active in making it possible, and directly responsible for getting me involved in conservation, in growing food plots.

Many ecosystems lack the necessary nutrients for optimal wildlife growth. Food plots help to solve this problem. A food plot is an area that has been tilled and planted with crops to supplement the nutritional needs of local wildlife. The idea is to help nature after the harm human expansion has caused. Food plots lead to healthier animals and better hunting.

Hunting, despite some modern myths, is not a cheap way to eat, and only the super rich could afford to live exclusively on their harvests. The image of the hunter grabbing a shotgun from the mantel and heading out to the back forty to fetch dinner is as archaic as that of the knight in shining armor. Once costs such as gas, licenses, food, ammunition and arrows, clothing, footwear, electronics, packs, and hunting blinds are factored in, Kobe beef at \$100 a pound seems relatively cheap.

Although many people still cook what they hunt (or donate the meat to feed the homeless) hunting has instead become an elite sport. Unless a hunter happens to live very close to hunting land, travel costs alone keep many people out of the woods. Hunting opportunities are more limited now than ever due to the rapid expansion of civilization. Fewer places to hunt translates into fewer hunters. There is always the option of booking a hunt with an outfitter or guide who will gladly take you to hunt prime areas from South America to the North Pole, if you can afford it, and if you draw a nonresident tag. The average seven-day guided deer hunt in any of the preeminent deer hunting regions of Canada, Iowa, Nebraska, Illinois, or Ohio is well over \$2,000, not including travel. This limits the opportunity to hunt where the hunting is best to the very wealthy. The average hunter cannot afford to save for months or years for a seven-day trip.

Like many others, I have concerns about our hunting future, but there is a little light up ahead hidden in the shadows of desire and necessity. A true trophy-class whitetail is a mature, healthy animal. Most hunters will never have the chance to see a true trophy-class animal in the field, but we all share the desire to hunt such an animal. There are plenty of whitetails in the world, but far too few are healthy and allowed to reach maturity. The answer to the prayer for more healthy whitetails is conservation. A whitetail deer, given time to live until maturity with excellent food sources available, will grow much like a human who adheres to a strict diet-and-exercise program. In some instances this could mean a trophy-class animal. No matter how large or small a fully healthy whitetail grows, strong genetics will be passed on from a strong herd. The second generation, given the same excellent nutrition as the previous, will have a genetic

advantage over their parents; they will be born strong and in a nutritionally sound environment. They will have the ability to grow larger than their parents.

Landowners across America, concerned about the quality of their hunting, have started planting food that supplies the local whitetail population with everything it needs to survive and prosper during all seasons. An entire industry has been built around the food-plot revolution. Wildlife biologists give estimates and offer consulting to landowners who want to maximize the potential of their land. If those lucky enough to have land and the money to plant super foods can grow big deer, how does this impact the herd or the image of the hunter? Growing food for the animals is the first step that leads to the second--managing the herd.

Current estimates in Michigan put the buck-to-doe ratio is at something like 1:32. On a small scale, on a private range where food plots are being used to grow healthier deer, the ratio can be managed by harvesting more does. The state is very willing to allow interested landowners to cull their excess wildlife. The right balance of animals on a given piece of land always results in better habitat. Those willing to spend the time and money to plant food plots in an effort to enhance the quality of their hunting have no problem culling the overpopulated does from the local herd. The practices of growing whitetail-specific foods and aggressively culling the excess animals on a property is a very new development of conservation, born out of trophy hunting.

In order to have a controlled population of whitetails, hunters need to have a few hundred acres and the exclusive rights to hunt the land, as well as thousands of dollars to spend on planting and maintaining acres of food plots each year. Another necessity would be to secure antlerless permits and the time it takes to fill them. Truly managing a deer

population is a massive undertaking that, along with all other types of hunting, only the wealthy can afford.

It would seem as though sand would not have any feelings against a plow, it is regularly reconstructed into castles by children on beaches. However, our small lawn tractor simply could not pull the plow through the Allegan, Michigan sand. It was 2005, the first time Boone and I made an attempt at growing food plots. We were finding basketballs of sedimentary stone mixed into the sand just under the surface. Later it would make sense; we were just a few yards from a large gravel pit. For the time being, however, Boone solved the problem by spending the afternoon pushing the plow with a very dexterous Chevrolet.

This place, six miles west of Monteray Center, was deemed perfect to plow and seed by a combination of a great pH reading and a proper location. Our first attempt in planting food plots took place on two small islands of semi-flat land in a sea of hardwood trees. The islands were separated by nearly forty yards of thick foliage. Both mature and juvenile oak and maple trees blocked out nearly all the sunlight to the surrounding acreage save the pair of one-acre islands. The sea of thick growth fencing our islands was impossible to move through with any kind of stealth. These small circles of open land would do for the native whitetails what a dietitian does for clients. Our islands would grow into buffets.

This land was not ours and never would be; it belonged to the Aggregate Gravel Company. However, we had the exclusive hunting rights to these eighty acres. Boone belonged to a family in the gravel industry. It was through his family connections that we were granted permission not only to hunt this land but to plant whatever we wanted as long as we did not interfere with the diggings around the pit. We were grateful for a chance to create a potential thriving food source for our deer.

People uninterested in conservation might find the idea of spending time and money planting food for wild animals more than a bit unappealing. Once or twice, I asked myself why I was doing this in the first place. There were a million other things I could be doing, a million other fun things twenty-one--year-olds do on the weekends. But I had chosen to spend my time this way. It didn't matter that there was no way to know if our crops would grow. Any number of things could unexpectedly go completely wrong with a garden.

Planting crops to bloom year-round in Michigan is an inexact science at best. Plants that reach their full potential in the winter are only tender buds in the fall. Tender buds are like Krispy Kremes to whitetailed deer at any time of year. Given the chance, they will eat their winter supply months in advance if they are hungry in the present. The intention of an all-season food plot is to provide the needed nutrition year-round. In order for the food to last a full year, there must be timing and a proper mixture of plants. Crops like corn and sugar beets are plentiful in certain parts of Michigan. However, they do not offer much in the area of nutritional value, and act only as "filler." In order to replace what human expansion has destroyed, we needed to plant a variety of crops.

A warm weather plant, clover is only good as long as the hard frosts hold off. Clover grows and regenerates quickly. Rapid growth is a fortunate thing because clover is good protein, the key to the healthy growth of body mass for the whitetail. While the clover is doing its job, the other crops have sufficient time to grow and prosper. Alfalfa is a good, hearty choice for an early fall crop. It tends to stick around until the final stem has been ripped out of the garden. Brassicas seem to grow twice as fast as everything else in nature and reach impressive heights. They also provide key nutritional value for healthy bone growth found lacking in alfalfa, clover, chicory, oats, beans, and wheat.

Creating a dinner table of foods superior to those found naturally growing in the wild is a complicated undertaking. Gaining permission to use land for any purpose is no easy task in this modern age. Then, you must test to see if the soil will produce anything at all due the pH level. After that, you get to spend money on the seedlings. Planting was proving to take forever with Boone's Chevy "tractor." He did get all the crops in the ground on time that year. We had no success hunting the property that year, but the deer did look better the next spring.

In the years since then, Boone got his food plots down to a science, though he'll tell you he doesn't know what he's doing. The fall of 2008 was the most ambitious year yet for Boone and his food plots. After buying his own plow to pull with his truck, he started work on four acres of food plot. Brassicas, corn, soy beans, sorghum, peas, turnips, clover, and wheat made up the dinner table for the whitetail residence of Monterey Center. That year everything had to be planted at a different time so that the plants would bloom throughout the season, giving the deer the nutrients they needed when they needed them.

It's a lot of work, and it starts early. March is the beginning of the food plot season. Late in the month, the land will be sprayed with a weed killer and left alone for a week. After that the land is tilled and sprayed once more to ensure no weeds or rogue grasses slip into the nitrogen-rich soil. Boone follows a strict planting schedule:

- May first: soy beans
- May fifteenth: corn, clover, and turnips
- June first: sorghum
- July 15: brassicas
- August: pray for rain
- September 15: Wheat and peas

By his best guess, it took Boone around eleven hours of work a week to make the food plots happen. He took the plow to the land and created a buffet with everything a whitetail needs to survive. Last summer, we walked a field I remembered well for soaking my pant legs on my way to the stand each early fall morning. It wasn't overgrown with wild grasses anymore. It was fresh, budding greens. A soaking--wet spotted fawn was tearing into a stalk of corn. It was daylight, and she knew she was safe. We just stood and watched her, her little mouth taking the food Boone had planted, in the same place her mother must have fed while she grew her baby.

"Never thought they'd do that, eating the stocks first, but they just don't let my corn grow. The biologists say that means there isn't enough food, when they eat corn stalks," Boone said.

There is no way to know how long we will be able to keep this experiment going. I hope and wish we could see what ten years of intense herd management and expansive

food plots could do for our deer. But the land is not ours. It is part of a working and expanding business. We could lose it all very quickly.

We really don't have the time to worry about keeping the land, though. Last fall the food was all consumed by mid-November. Boone figures we'll have to plant at least twice as much, around nine acres of food, for next fall. This estimate comes from the guy who spent seventy to eighty hours and twelve hundred dollars on land he does not own.

With the economy being what it is, Boone recently lost his factory job. He wrote me an email the same day:

Did you say you could find a way to pay for most of the food plots this year? I lost my job today and I have no idea how to pay for it. My wife says just to forget about it for this year, and I told her you might as well cut my arm off. Let me know. I'll make it happen somehow.

-Boone

A Math Problem

It will be early, before five, when my phone sounds the fire alarm bell that is my wakeup call. My right thumb and index fingers will rub my eyes deeply as I sit up from the couch to start it all over again. There is no point in showering; I know how filthy I'll be soon. My legs will slide into the Mossy Oak jeans again, and I'll grab the mock tee long sleeve shirt to carry to the coffee machine. Scent isn't an issue since the slaughter will be taking place from hundreds of yards away, and I'm tired enough for a cup.

The last drip of coffee will sizzle away on the burner as I fill the cup and place the pot back. The silence will be calming at the kitchen table before work starts again. It's a short drive to the farm, but I'll take a travel mug with the last shot of coffee anyway. I'll pick up the hard case on my way to the door and slide it behind the seat of my green truck, a fresh box of Federal Premium Nosler Ballistic Tip 180's on the passenger seat.

Dew will be on the windshield, reminding me of the soaking clothes I'll be wearing again shortly. The drive will go too quickly. I'll pull in to the spot between the two corn fields, hidden in the valley between two hills. The air will be cool, in the upper fifties for now. Later it will spike up to the high seventies, no chance of rain today but it will be plenty humid. I'll put the hard case back behind the seat to keep it out of the blood after I remove the magnum and sling it over my shoulder.

My walk is too long for rubber boots and it's difficult to crawl in them. Dry feet sound amazing, but I need the flexibility of my lace-up leathers. They've been turned dark brown by the dew in only thirty short yards; each blade of the long grass on the edge of the corn field holds water like saturated paintbrushes. It's still not quite light, but it will be soon. Over the past few days I've gotten this walk down to a science. I'll be on

the high side of the field in minutes, looking down over everything once the sun comes out to burn away the fog.

A black, wet plastic bipod will prop the fore end of my rifle up, the butt of the gun in the dirt before my shoulder. My elbows will hold the binoculars to my eyes. My chest will be soaked from the wet earth, and it will feel good for the first thirty minutes. After that I'll be chilled and almost cold for a short time before the sun comes out to make me sweat along with my clothes. I'll double and triple check to make sure everything is in place:

- Flip caps closed tight, keeping water out of my scope.
- Full magazine. Two in the mag, one in the chamber.
- Barrel clear.
- Old tee shirt on the ground under the barrel to hide the muzzle blast.
- Spare rounds between the left index and middle, middle and ring fingers.
- Rang finder in front breast pocket.
- Lucky peppermint between cheek and left molar.

And I'm ready for the start.

When I think of my approaching summer, I think of the buffalo. They were the livelihood of many tribes of American Indians. The nomadic people of the plains followed the moving herds of buffalo across the nation with each season. Indians only took what they

needed, and the buffalo numbered in the millions. The American Indian was the first conservationist with a bow and arrow.

Once the railroads started going west, the buffalo was done. The seemingly endless supply of animals was destroyed to fill the demand in the East. Buffalo coats, robes, and rugs were all the rage. Occasionally meat was shipped to restaurants, but most of it was left to rot in the sun, the hides more valuable than the animal. All that I have read about the buffalo “hunters” is appalling. They would shoot everything they saw-- every day, all day. The animals would not react to the sound of a gunshot or the sound of reloading. It was murder. This summer I will do the very same thing for the animal I love the most, the whitetail, and there will be no satisfaction in the killing.

In December of this past year I met Kevin, a farmer in Allegan County, Michigan. Kevin and his family have farmed the land for generations. They own hundreds of acres of fruitful land that is currently being overrun with whitetails. Kevin is a rare landowner who allows anyone to hunt his land. There are too many deer eating his crops for him to continue farming.

He has never been a hunter. After asking the Department of Natural Resources for special antlerless permits, he shot his first three deer with the first special permits issued to him from the state. In terms of hundreds of acres, three deer amount to nothing. The application is being processed for this landowner to receive block permits. This is the final step towards managing his land. Block permits allow for the harvesting of whitetails by any legal means, at any time of the year. The application is for some fifty or sixty permits.

Assuming Kevin can fill all of these permits, the area will be on its way to thriving habitat. The land will still need to be hunted during the fall after the block permits are issued, but it will be closer to balanced. The special permits are a chance to save both the land and the species in the area. It is the kind of thing the first conservationists would have done.

During the summer months, the whitetail is recharging. Fawns are growing and learning how to survive in their first days alive. Mothers are eating overtime to produce enough milk to feed their fawns and keep them healthy. The focus for the herd is on nutrition. There has never been a scheduled, licensed hunting season in the summer. Deer know this and behave differently. It is not uncommon to see dozens of deer in open fertile fields near dusk and dawn, like sitting ducks. This time of year the DNR will allow for the filling of block permits.

Currently Michigan does not have doe permits for public land. The only permits for antlerless deer are for private land only. By definition, private land has limited access. Private land gets less hunting pressure than public land. The deer on private land require attention for landowners and conservationists. Allowed to go unchecked, the local population will grow and grow until the animals destroy their food sources and begin to starve.

In many counties in the southern part of the state, antlerless permits go unsold by the end of the season. This presents a series of problems. The number of permits

allocated for a county is determined by wildlife biologists. That number is the ideal number of animals to harvest for the best overall health of the local population. A portion of the revenue generated by the sales of antlerless permits goes towards conservation by way of planting crops for animals, staffing deer-check stations, and protecting wildlife. By ending a season with leftover permits, the state loses money and is left with too many deer.

Access may be a major part of the unfilled antlerless permits. Many landowners do not allow hunting on their property. This hurts the state as well as the landowner. The private land owners who do not allow hunting essentially turn their property into a sanctuary, bringing more deer onto the property that eat more food and use up the natural resources, leading to malnutrition and eventually starvation. Less hunting means less money from sales of permits, and ultimately an unhealthy population.

When a large enough area has a deer nutrition problem, it presents challenges to the community. In the mid '90s Kensington State Park in Oakland County, Michigan, found itself with starving whitetails on the County Park and golf courses. I remember walking the course the summer before. There was nothing natural about walking within a few feet of the animals. They were sprawled out as though they had already been shot, too weak to shake their heads free of the black flies feeding on the residue dried to the outside of their eyes like toothpaste on an old cap.

Local government officials proposed the county bring in sharpshooters to solve the problem by way of modern-day bounty hunting. A few local hunting and shooting clubs volunteered to hunt the overpopulated animals for free. Their members passed

shooting tests along with written exams about how to ethically kill an animal. Taxpayers appreciated the hunters who took on the conservation issue.

The Kensington Parks situation is a great example of hunters doing their job. There is not a great deal of hunting land in Oakland County; hunters have few places to go. The state parks are off limits to hunting; there are no permits issued for the area, and the population of whitetails outgrew the land. Hunters took advantage of the opportunity to help the land and the animals. Unfortunately access, or the lack of access, is not often the cause of overpopulation.

Where I do the majority of my hunting there are readily available antlerless permits for private land. The hunting I do in Allegan County, Michigan, is all on private land. In this county, antlerless permits are sold one-a-day until the quota is met or until the season ends. Essentially, the availability of permits allows for the proper management of whitetails. Each year there are leftover permits.

This situation in southern Michigan is an example of hunters not filling their role of conservationists. Animals need to be monitored. Their populations need to be kept in balance. Antlerless permits need to be filled, and hunters owe it to the animals to do their jobs.

Michigan summers are hot and humid. One of the things I look forward to each fall is the cooling temperatures that make long sleeves and pants bearable again. No part of me wants to spend my days sweating and stinking in the bugs and heat of June. The

mornings will soak me with heavy dew, and by midday the sun will bake me in my sweat. The heat won't be helping the kill, either.

Sun beating down on a dead animal causes the meat to taint. The longer an animal is left in the sun the greater the chance of contamination from flies and other bugs. Not to mention the smell of bodily fluids, stomach and intestinal contents cooking. It's already the end of a hunt and the beginning of work; adding heat to the picture is just punishment. For those who have turned down the offer to help fill the block permits based on gutting in the heat alone, I can understand where they're coming from. Fifty to sixty times I will gut deer in the heat, and each one will be as nauseating as the next.

Alone, I can butcher a deer in a roughly five hours. In the heat, I'll be forced to work much faster. Bottles and bags of ice will have to be handy to stuff the cavity of the gutted animal and rub on the meat to keep it cool. I'll need to spray a vinegar mist over every inch of exposed tissue to keep the flies away. There won't be the desecration and waste of an animal in west Michigan like on the early American plains but there will be no chance of aging the meat for the best flavor possible. It will be done hot, quick, and dirty. It is uncertain how much help I will be able to receive for the butchering process.

It is already March. June is getting here quickly, and I have not got much help for the summer cull. Not many people know what they'll be doing or think they can get the time off work, but they all tell me I'm doing something great. Some have suggested I write about it, get some positive press for the hunter for once. These are the kind of responses I expected, they fit the description of the hunters who let this overgrowth happen in the first place.

June, it's going to be a long month, and I don't want to do it. I'm worried about how killing all these animals from great distances is going to make me feel. No part of this will be hunting. I choose to call it "culling" because being honest with myself and calling it the senseless slaughter of beautiful, helpless, animals strikes me a sin. I call this senseless, because it should not have to happen. Hunters should have been protecting their animals all along. The population should have been managed all along. Hunters, conservationists, protectors, have failed. If I am truthful in my description of this summer vacation, I am admitting to doing all the things hunters are accused of while at the same time acting in the best interest of the animal.

I see a little one shortly after it's light enough to see. She's a small doe, only this year's fawn. That makes her a number two or maybe three shot. The little ones are so stupid; they usually don't run at the report of the muzzle or when momma falls. She's a burnt orange and might as well be waving a flag in the sea of fresh, young green. She'll stay here late. If nothing else comes I'll take her. The range finder says one-hundred fifteen yards. She's slightly downhill so I can hold dead on and be fine. She's a good reference point.

After fifteen minutes two more move out from the cover and into the field. They're eating quickly, their teeth ripping the stalks of corn with a side-jerk of the head. The one on the left is pretty decent sized; I can barely see her ribs. She's old, not the mother of the fawn--she doesn't have any milk. As they feed I can see that they're all

does, which is good. That means I can just take whatever I can without having to worry about keeping tabs on any of them.

The big one on the right is so consumed with food, she's not even twitching her tale to give the "all clear" for other deer in the area. She's so hungry she's not thinking. Since she doesn't get hunted here, the open field is a safety zone. A whitetail feeling safe as can be on a food source is still something new to me, after only four days of this killing. The other one, the medium doe, walks down a row of corn between the big one and my crosshairs. I think of the angle. For the searing hot lead to pass through the front deer and still make the vitals of the second they would have to be nearly touching shoulders. Three-thousand-fifty-nine, foot-pounds of energy hitting the body of animal would easily knock it down, and as soon as I work the bolt I could finish off the one that wasn't killed. It's just too risky, and unethical to try to line up two deer with one shot, though it would save time. There's still the little one that will likely stand around.

As the medium doe moves aside I focus on the big girl. My rest is solid, the butt of the gun gently on my shoulder. She turns slightly and her shoulder is exposed. I cuddle up to the stock of my rifle, and my thumb finds the safety. The three are close together, within a few yards, so I'm not thinking about distance. The math problem is easy here-- just execute. I'm just going to hold dead on and everything should be fine. The second shot will be the tough one.

The duplex hairs of the Nikon 3.5-9x scope settle on the center of the shoulder. The center joint of my index finger caresses the trigger. My life is the balance of the scope on the shoulder. The grooves in the stainless-steel trigger press into my skin. The 180 grain projectile spins down the barrel, the burning powder propelling it downward to

the target, and sharply jabs the stock back into my body. As I'm shoved back I just see the hind of the big doe hit the ground before I lose the picture as the scope turns. My right palm cups upward, catching the bolt and ripping it back to my face before slamming the chamber closed and locked. The medium doe is still quartering away from me slightly. She's confused with her ears up to the new sound in her life and looking away from me. The little one is looking right at me, but she can't move. I take my time. Cross the hair on top of the heart. Squeeze.

It's early still, and if I hurry it won't be so bad. The little one runs off after the second shot. I wonder if I'll see her tonight. It's June 3rd, and during the summer deer don't move too much during the day. They feed like clockwork right before dark and in the early part of the morning. By the middle of the day it's too hot for them to move if they can help it. Summer is when they feel safe since they are never hunted at this time of year. June through August is when they put on their weight for the winter and soak up all the nutrients they need to grow. Today I'll spend the middle of the day with knife in hand.

The medium and big does both fell right where they were standing. There is no tracking, and I think it's early enough that I'll be able to get them cleaned before the sun makes them bloat. I'll poke the muzzle of the rifle into their eyes, a standard test to see if they're really dead or if they need one more. Both are down for good. I unlock and unload. The bipod holds my rifle up and out of the dew while I put my rubber gloves on and get to work.

By the time both are dressed and flipped over to drain, I'm feeling the heat. I can drive along the field and only have to drag them something like fifty yards apiece. It's not

even eight in the morning. I fold my gloves off my hands so that the wet side stays wrapped up. They go into a zip lock bag; they won't biodegrade or be eaten by coyotes like the gut pile.

At the truck I toss the bag in the bed. The heat will make it bake and smell before I get home. After dragging the carcasses to the truck I break out the rope. My pulley system is imperfect, but it's easier than lifting a whole animal up to the tailgate. The rope is threaded through the hook at the front of the bed and works as a come-along for the lift. It takes awhile, and I get more blood on everything.

Today is Wednesday, and the Hunters for the Hungry people are not around. Hunters for the Hungry is an organization that helps donate meat to homeless shelters and needy families. It was born out of necessity for nonresident hunters. For many, the cost of shipping a big game animal such as elk or moose is impractical. With Hunters for the Hungry in place, the meat is donated rather than wasted. Hunters and butchers donate their time to butcher game for the organization, or for a flat rate of \$40 anyone can pay for deer-sized game to be processed. Since it is not hunting season, or even close to it, there are not a lot of processing operations open. These two will have to be done by me.

Setting the fan in the garage on high, I hoist both deer up so that their hindquarters are at eye level. The newspaper on the ground catches the slow drops of blood that falls from their noses. Starting at what we could best call the knee, I start removing the hide from the body. The tail is the tricky part. I have a method. Nothing bothers me like the sounds associated with butchering. I will happily gut a deer with a sandwich in one hand, but I cannot stand the sound of a saw blade working through bone.

When the hide gets down to the tail, the bone has to be severed. I use a thin knife to work between the joints of the tail bone and carefully separate the bone silently.

After the tail, if the animal is freshly killed, the hide can just be pulled down to the shoulders. The shoulder blades normally require careful cutting, but not this time. Through both shoulders of both animals is a hole slightly larger than a quarter. Around the hole in a five-inch circle is bruised scar tissue. It is black, what you'd call bloodshot. The meat here is not edible.

Once the hide is down, the fat needs to be removed. This time of year, there isn't much fat, especially on deer that barely made it through the winter. I feel like I'm cleaning up scraps, just pieces of fat here and there that need trimming. After the fat comes the quarters. There are two hindquarters that need to be separated and cut up into round steaks, jerky pieces, and scraps to be ground. Homeless shelters don't make jerky or grind meat, so those cuts stay with me. The rest is packaged in plastic bags for the shelters.

The Department of Natural Resources likes to take a sample of the brain tissue for testing. Before the meat can be consumed or passed on to others, the tests must be completed. While waiting to hear back from the DNR, the meat sits in the freezer in labeled bags telling the date, time, location, and sex of the animal. It will take me all day to butcher two deer and bring the heads to a DNR deer check station and fill out the paperwork for my test results. If I hurry, I might be able to make it back out to the farm before dark and maybe get one or two more tags filled.

Following Orders

The pool of water on top of the red Coleman cooler splashed onto the tongue of my left boot as I raised the top to get a Vernors ginger ale out. I walked back to the blue folding chair by the fire, cool water slowly soaking through the leather on the arch of my foot and into the cotton of my sock. The chair caught me as I fell back with just enough force to shake the plastic bottle in my hand a little too much.

The rain had let up for now, and there was nothing else to do. Even with good weather the middle of the day was boring on hunting trips. Generally I used this time to eat, split fire wood for camp, or just to regroup with the rest of the members of the hunting party. We'd had non-stop rain for the past two days of this trip, and for the previous two trips of the year. There was no more left to do in camp. As I turned the cap the volatile sugar water wet my hands before I could re-seal the top.

Split oak logs on the fire hissed water out their ends like boiling spit. The tarp over the wood pile hadn't done its job overnight. I had been awake for most of it, listening to the heavy rain drops hammering the drum-skin of the blue plastic tarp. Light rain was alright-deer still moved in a drizzle-but hard, steady rain meant the whitetails would be stationary all day. When the ground is wet deer cannot hear predators approaching easily, and steady rain washes away scent, taking away two of the senses deer live their lives by. The usually relaxing sound of rain let me know there would be no hunting in the morning.

The wispy smoke of our weak fire stung my eyes. I leaned back and looked up at the clouds. They weren't too dark, mostly white with patches of light grey, but they didn't appear to be moving. I had almost gotten used to this canopy over the past three

weeks. At least the weather had been kind enough to rain on the days when I had to go to school as well as those I should have been hunting.

Even though the morning had been rained out, I was hopeful for the night. The hard rain of the past days must have kept the deer movement to a minimum. Any break in the weather had to get them on their feet and feeding. The soaking ground worried me, though; it would make tracking more difficult should I be lucky enough to have something to track. Despite softening the ground and making fresh tracks more visible, the water would dilute blood upon contact. There would not be the rich color contrast of pink lung blood or dark arterial blood on the ground to follow, or to help distinguish the tracks of the deer I shot from those of another that passed through the area. I was hoping to get a chance to hunt, to see one single deer and get a shot.

Nick, my brother, joined me around the campfire, tossing doughnut holes into his mouth. “So, Joe,” he said. “When we get our property, do you think we should sell our trees?”

He was bringing up the idea of us as owners of our own hunting sanctuary, one of our favorite topics. What he meant by selling the trees was to let lumber companies come onto the land and select-cut whatever they wanted. Given the right mix of timber, this practice can generate a great deal of money for the landowner, sometimes paying for the majority of the property. And we knew when the time finally came for us to buy our own land we would need all the money we could get. We had big plans.

“I think that should be the first thing we do for a couple of reasons. First off, it’d be nice to get something going for the land right away. I mean, if you’re gonna cut and sell the trees, get it over with as soon as possible. It’s gonna look like shit, like we bought

a clear-cut or something, but if we can get it growing back right away, we can really make it what we want.” I took a pull on the bottle of Vernors and leaned forward in my chair. “That way, we get it going just how we want. It’s gonna suck waiting for trees to grow to the point you can hunt out of ‘em, but I’d rather get that started right away. And if everything was cut, it’d be the easiest thing in the world to plant everything we want where we want it. Without all the trees, we could get in and plant all the food for our deer where it needs to be. We could even plant the trees where we want them.”

“Yeah,” said Nick. “I think that’d be pretty neat. Set it up kinda how you want it.”

“We’d be building it, really,” I said.

We both sat and looked into the growing fire, more relaxing than watching fish swim in an aquarium. The flames were getting taller on the stacked pieces of oak, and most of the hissing was over. It looked like the logs hadn’t gotten nearly as wet as it had seemed at first. They would burn down to serve as the base coals to cook our dinner tonight. As long as the rain held off, dinner would be made the right way over an old fire with the oaks adding flavor. It was always better that way than with a fire made by lighter fluid. The chemical smoke never tasted right.

Watching the oak chips change like a hologram from burnt red to orange and back, I thought about practicing. The downpour had kept me from shooting my bow in the middle of the day down time the past few days. I was beginning to think I might get to take it to the woods tonight, and I should go over it one more time to make sure everything was perfect.

“How do you think we’ll get rid of the does?” my brother asked.

“That’s going to be just another part of building our land,” I said. “No matter where we buy, there will be way too many does.”

“I think you’re right.”

“But hey, you and me and Pa love venison. A few years of being professional doe hunters won’t be that bad.”

“Can you imagine,” I asked, “having control over what gets hunted on like, two-hundred acres? Be your own warden?”

“That’d be sweet.”

We had both been raised as state-land hunters. Our family had been hunting this section of Clare County for more than twenty years. Public land hunting had always been based on luck. Each day we’d hope nobody was hunting near us. Sometimes we spent more time scouting for other hunters to avoid than we did for the deer we hunted. More than anything, my brother and I wanted to have some control over the area we hunted. It seemed the only way to do that would be to buy our own land. There we could show what Michigan is capable of producing. Our land would be a safe place for young bucks to grow, as well as a never-ending supply of food we would plant year-- round. In our little piece of the state only the right animals would be hunted. The property would be for our children, giving them what we never had. It would be a bow-hunting paradise.

Both of us were nodding in agreement when a senior member of our camp joined us around the fire. Roy was an active Republican and member of the NRA. All his life he had been a Michigan gun hunter, turning into an archer only for the last several years. He liked his scotch and cigars. Dragging his black folding chair next to us in his camouflage, munching on corn bread, he asked, “What are we talking about, gents?”

We told him about our plan.

“Why do you want to shoot the does?”

“Because there are way too many. The DNR doesn’t issue enough doe permits for gun hunters, and they’re the majority of hunters.”

“When I was a kid, all the men in our camp would have a doe-tag bonfire.”

I had a feeling I knew what this meant, but he continued.

“They’d all sit around the fire and burn their doe tags.” He looked up, smiling.

“Gun season is for bucks.”

“But that’s the problem,” I said. “There are, like, thirty does at least to every buck in Michigan.”

“What’s it supposed to be?” Roy asked.

“In a perfect world, 1:1,” I answered.

He nodded, taking a sip to wash down the dry bread. “Well, if you have more does, you get more bucks.” He was giddy with wisdom, slapping his knee.

“Does stop having buck fawns around age six,” I shot back. “If hunting has anything to do with taking care of nature or protecting anything, we need to be hunting the right animals.”

“Gun season is buck season. Always has been.”

“Yeah, and every opening day of gun season the majority of young bucks get shot in the first few minutes,” Nick said.

“You don’t get big bucks with no bucks,” I offered, pressing my luck and trying to rub the sticky dried soda off my hands.

“Well, the DNR lets us shoot small bucks. Three inches is all they need.”

He was referring to three inches of antler growth. The Michigan laws at the time allowed for two buck tags to be purchased for the gun season. One was good for any buck with only three inches of antler growth, and the other required the buck to have four points on one side. One for the young, and one for the old.

I looked at Nick, who was staring into the fire, the endless time-waster of every camp. It was starting to spit a mist of rain on us. My brother and I had always had a problem with the Michigan gun season. It was two weeks long, and it fell during the breeding period. Michigan's season was longer than that of any other state. The breeding period is when the animals are most active during daylight hours. Both of us were disappointed that Michigan held onto the tradition of the two-week gun season. As Pa had always said, if you choose to let a small buck go, he won't go far until the next guy shoots him, because he can. As long as the little bucks are considered fair game, they will be the vast majority of the annual harvest.

As much as we disagreed with Roy, he wasn't doing anything wrong. He was hunting as he had always done, and he was doing everything legally, just like most hunters. Each fall, Roy would go out and buy his hunting licenses and pick up a new copy of the hunting regulations and read it cover to cover, looking for any subtle changes to the game laws. When the season came, he would hunt according to the book. Nick and I knew this. All of us in camp did the same thing. We were just following orders.

"If they don't want us to shoot 'em, they shouldn't keep it legal," Roy said, getting up from his chair. "It looks like the rain's coming back."

Nick and I got up slowly, folding our chairs to stow them under the camper and out of the rain. I held my hands under the run-off water trickling down the side of the

camper to wash my hands. It was starting to come down as fast as it was getting darker. We spent the evening under the awning of the camper, another rainy evening with the lighter fluid flavor.

My green Chevy S-10 was bouncing along the dirt road at a crawling five miles per hour. The foot of fresh snow on the road was making the drive interesting, and I knew the walk to my tree would be brutal, but I had left early enough to take my time. It was November fifteenth, 2008, opening day of gun season.

The deep snow kept me from parking anywhere close to my usual spot. After two years, the snow fall in the Upper Peninsula still amazes me. Wet snowflakes the size of quarters were coming down hard, and I could only see about thirty feet. Visibility wasn't an issue-I had made the walk many times before-but the precipitation was going to be a problem. It was a long walk, which meant I had to dress light in order to avoid overheating on my way to the stand. The wet snow was soaking me. Either way, from the snow or from the sweat, I was going to have a short hunt once everything started to freeze.

After making the walk and the climb up my tree, I loaded my rifle for our first hunt together. I still couldn't see very far, even from my twenty-five foot vantage point, but off in the distance I could see a flashlight swaying closer and closer. I couldn't believe I was seeing another hunter in the wide-open spaces of the UP. I exhaled through my nose slowly and waved a flashlight beam in the general direction of the hunter. *That's*

public land for you. I couldn't be sure if he saw my light or not, but he was on the ground and I was in a tree so I knew I would at least be safe. He'd have to see my orange vest and hat once it got a little lighter anyway.

Once the sun was up the snow eased to a stop, allowing me to see well over a hundred yards in any direction. The west sides of all the trees held at least an inch of snow pressed into the bark by the wind. The forest floor looked like sheet cake with an even, smooth layer of snow over top of the brush, dead falls, and ant hills. Everything looked new and clean around me. I brushed off the inch of snow that had collected on my silhouette, not wanting the falling snow to alert game should I see any.

All morning I looked at the hunter who was so close to me. He was head to toe in orange, sitting on a bucket. He couldn't have known I was there. Nobody would be that discourteous to hunt so close to a stranger. This person was close enough that if we were to see a buck it would be a race to shoot first. If I hadn't climbed up my tree and gotten settled already, I would have moved on for the day. Further off in the distance, I could make out more hunter orange. The three of us made a triangle with bright points. Seeing this many hunters would be commonplace in southern Michigan, but I never expected it in Marquette County.

Around nine-thirty, I heard a soft packing of wet snow. My ears strained back to tell if whatever was making the sound had two legs or four. It was a heavy sound, not a squirrel or beaver, the steps too deliberate and certain. I was in the right corner of the triangle, so the others couldn't have seen what I was sure was a deer walking behind me. Turning my head slowly to my left until my neck hurt and could go no further, I could see horns. I moved my body and brought the gun up in one slow pivot. He was forty

yards at best, almost close enough to shoot with my bow. Keeping the safety on, I dialed the scope into 5x to examine his horns.

On either side of his head was one single spike. Each must have been slightly over five inches long. A whitetail has ears that are at least nine inches long, which serve as good reference points when field-judging antler growth. He had the short face of a young deer, with puffy cheeks and hair that was randomly long like a homemade bowl cut. Each step he took was dainty, his hind hooves reaching up to his front, the same way a rabbit moves. The brown on his sides was untarnished with age and reminded me of a fresh coat of paint rather than fur. He couldn't have weighed more than one hundred pounds.

He made his way steadily, walking right between the closest hunter and myself. I was watching him without the gun on my shoulder. I had a smile on my face watching the little buck make so many mistakes; he never checked the wind, his head was down, and even my tracks in the snow didn't alert him to danger. After walking through the base of our hunter triangle, he made his way right to the tip, walking past his third rifle hunter of the day.

For the 2008 deer season, antler restrictions were increased. In the Upper Peninsula, a buck had to have three points on one side to be a legal buck. This means the majority of year-old bucks would not have enough antler growth to be hunted legally. The juvenile bucks were given a year-long grace period to learn about hunters before they were fair game. While the antler restriction isn't what my brother and I had hoped for, it was step in the right direction.

By noon, my wet clothes were chilling me to the bone. I was about to climb down when I heard that packing sound behind me again. My ears told me something was wrong. Too steady and loud for a deer. This had two legs.

“Hey, hunter, are you havin’ any luck?” a voice said too loudly for the deer woods.

“Doesn’t look much like it, does it?” I called back before turning around.

The gentleman must have understood my irritation. He calmly unzipped his orange jacket far enough to show me he was a DNR officer by the badge on his left breast.

“Oh. Mind if I just lower it down in my pack?” I asked, knowing he was there to make sure I was a licensed hunter.

“Sure, sure. So you seeing anything?”

“Had a spike walk by at around nine. Walked right by those two guys, too,” I said as I lowered my license with rope I used to pull up my rifle.

“Bout time, huh?” the officer asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“Well good luck to ya,” he said as he put my license back in my pack to send back up the tree. “You know he’ll be around next year.”

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