

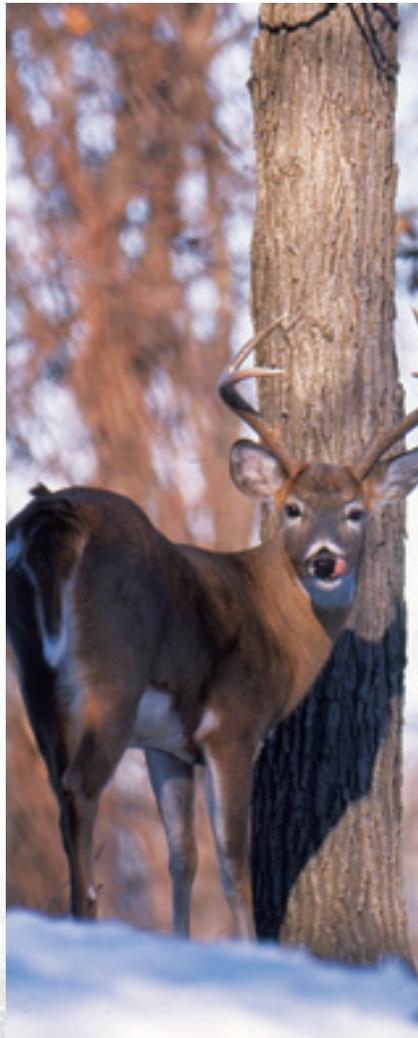
HOW ONE DEER SHOWED THE AUTHOR THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HARVESTING AND HUNTING, AND WHY HE NOW PREFERS THE LATTER.

Ron Weber

A light snow was gently falling as I moved through the almost pitch-dark woods toward the ladder tree stand, which waited for me on a balsam-laden ridge above the edge of an expansive spruce bog. The excitement of the impending hunt was not the only reason I could feel my heartbeat racing. For me, and probably many other hunters, walking alone in dark woods conjures childhood visions of creatures of the night on the prowl, though many would be hard pressed to admit it. It is always a good feeling to reach the relative security of a tree stand, safe from all manner of beasts, real and imagined.

After securing my safety harness to the tree, I carefully hauled up my bow. Knocking an arrow, I settled back against the hemlock to wait for the dawn, which, because of heavy cloud cover, was slow to come. A pack of coyotes broke the silence — their excited yipping confirming that I was not the only hunter on the move this morning.

As the gathering light slowly won



The author has hunted since he was a teenager and still gets excited for the nine-day gun season each year.

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the war with the dark, first shapes, and eventually images, became visible. A couple of inches of fresh snow covered the forest floor, appropriate for the second week of November in northern Wisconsin. The peak of the rut was in full swing and like many hunters at this time of the season, I felt as though something memorable may happen today. But little did I know just how true that would be.

The first few hours were uneventful, save for the regular visits of some of the neighboring red squirrels and blue jays. A pair of gray jays moved through, quietly flitting from one tree to the next. It is funny how nature designed them to be the alter ego of their more obnoxious and raucous cousins. Just as I glanced at my watch at a quarter to ten, I caught movement 60 yards or so along the edge of the bog.

From out of the shadows, a deer emerged and began walking up the ridge that I was sitting on. I could see that it was a doe and it appeared to be alone. It quietly browsed on sedges and grasses passing within 20 yards of me, oblivious to my presence. Though a legal target, I had no interest in bringing any harm to the doe and she eventually moved down the ridge and out of sight.

Around 11 o'clock the cloudy skies began to break and the sun made its first real appearance. The warmth it brought felt nice. By noon, the clouds were gone and beautiful, clear blue skies remained. I hoped the change in weather would also bring a change in deer activity. My answer came around one o'clock.

A buck in the balsams

Encountering a buck in the balsams about five years ago, though, convinced him that today, his passion is in the hunt rather than the harvest.

As I looked down the ridge in the direction the doe had walked off to, I saw a horizontal figure that seemed out of place 75 yards away. As my eyes locked on the shape, I noticed a quick flash of white. With the flick of its tail, the deer began to walk across the ridge and down toward the spruce bog. From my vantage point, I could see that the deer carried a small rack — maybe a four- or six-pointer.

Though not a trophy by many hunters' standards, I decided that if I got the chance, I would try for this deer. Through my bow hunting career I had traveled a long and winding road. As a boy I was willing to shoot at any deer that came within my 20-yard range. But as I got older, and after harvesting a few deer, I entered a stage in which I desperately tried for big bucks. I was glad that I recognized after just a few seasons that trophy hunting really wasn't for me — at least, not the trophy as defined by many hunting magazines and television programs. Eventually, I settled into a place where the interpretation of trophy was a little more broad and subjective. I felt comfortable there.

A couple of low grunts from my grunt call stopped the buck's descent toward the bog and turned his attention in my direction. He stared down the ridge looking for what he must have assumed was another buck. After about a minute he turned and began walking toward my stand.

I slowly raised my bow and got into position for a shot as the buck closed the distance between us. Forty yards, 30 and then 20. At 15 yards his head went behind a large basswood and I came to a full draw. My eyes concentrated on his chest as I instinctively lined the bow up with my target. My fingers slowly released the string and in an instant the arrow disappeared into the buck's chest with a dull thud.

The deer bolted forward for about 20 yards and stopped. He looked around trying to figure out what had just happened, seemingly unaware that a four-bladed broadhead had just passed through him. He began to walk off slowly as if nothing was wrong and for a moment I wondered if I really had hit him. Of course, I knew I had. After walking for about 15 yards the buck stopped and looked around again. Thirty seconds later he lay down on his side and never moved or made a sound again.

After lowering my bow to the ground, I sat back for five minutes to say a prayer. As I did, I noticed a red squirrel running down the hemlock limb above me and a chickadee noisily moving from one branch to the next. Everything around me seemed the same as it was five minutes earlier, but something inside me felt very different.

As I walked the short distance to my buck, my eyes met the blank gaze in his soft brown eyes and I noticed my legs beginning to tremble. As I knelt beside the deer and ran my fingers along the length of his five-point antlers tears welled up

in my eyes and began streaming down my face.

As a lifelong deer hunter with bow and gun, I had killed many deer and though there was always a touch of sadness, it had never bothered me like this before. I remembered something I had read when in my teens by the great Wisconsin author Mel Ellis. In the piece, Ellis had confessed that it was getting tough for him to kill. Though I had thought about that from time-to-time throughout the years, I never really knew what he had meant. Now I knew exactly what he felt.

It has been over five years now since that November day. I still bow hunt regularly and am as excited for the nine-day gun season each year as I was as a teen. I have not filled a tag since that day but not for lack of opportunity. In fact, though I have seen many bucks — including many others would consider trophies — I have not drawn my bow or raised my gun at a deer.

I love every part of the hunting experience except the killing. In his song "Jack and Diane," John Cougar Mellencamp sang about life, but for me the hunt goes on long after the thrill of killing has gone.

The trail we are on as hunters leads us into many places we never expected to be. Maybe I will pass through this phase as I once passed through my trophy phase. Or maybe I will continue to hunt by the mantra that adventure author James Curwood suggested when he wrote, "The greatest thrill is not to kill but to let live."

This season, as another buck walks past me down the ridge on a steely, cold November day, my bow with arrow nocked will remain resting on my lap. With that, I am at total peace. That may be the lasting legacy of the buck in the balsams. 

Ron Weber writes from Weyerhaeuser, Wis.



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