

THE DREAM BUCK

The buck lay before me, shot through the heart at seven paces. It was a beautiful buck with graceful, high, white antlers. There were eight points if counting one short brow tine—a point “you can hang a ring on,” my uncle explained to me when I first started hunting. According to the official Boone and Crockett criteria, it was only a seven-pointer. Still, it was so satisfying to have this fine buck. It was my first New Hampshire buck. It was déjà vu. I was living out my dream.

I found the deer population in the mountains of central New Hampshire to be a far cry from the Pennsylvania woods of my youth or the southern Ohio hill country that I was used to hunting. The year was 1989, and I entered my fifth season in my new territory. The four prior seasons yielded no bucks in the freezer. I needed a buck. Hunting was in my blood. I

grew up in a hunting family in a hunting community in a hunting state. Deer and the deer woods were an integral part of my life. I was still at an age when having a buck hanging overshadowed other aspects of the hunt. That would change over time, but it had not yet.

A wildlife biologist from a Midwestern university was offended when I disagreed with his statement that a whitetail deer has a one-square-mile home territory for life. I mentioned how the deer where I grew up would migrate from the high plateau in northeastern Pennsylvania to the Delaware River valley in winter, 15 miles or more to the east. He knew the published literature and informed me with an air of total expertise. I was quieted by the tone of his words and their religious acceptance by the room full of scientists. New Hampshire deer studied from a different

textbook, traveling miles from ridge to ridge, dictated by seasonal food distribution, mating season, and coyote densities.

These big woods deer were challenging and required serious commitment to patterning their routine. In Pennsylvania and Ohio, I was accustomed to seeing runways that rivaled the caribou migration trails of the far north. In New Hampshire, I did not find the hint of a runway. These woods held their secrets well.

One of my prime early fall scouting spots was just across the river valley from where we lived. A couple of years before, I had purchased a small parcel of land on which to build a house eventually. There was a modest level area not far off the dirt road, but the rest of the land was the very steep side of a ridge. Immediately to the north were many thousands of acres of undeveloped land

managed for timber. This continued into the White Mountain National Forest. They were big woods in every sense of the word. I wandered near and far. Slowly, feeding areas and travel routes registered in my mind. One pre-season outing, just below the ridge, I had the strong premonition that someday I would shoot a buck right where I stood.

Those were busy years for me, prepping for a heavy teaching schedule and setting up an ancient, used electron microscope. Like an old truck, loving care was needed to keep it running. Other duties aside from college were there, too. I had a family, and I still needed to clear trees at the future building site. I would spend an hour or two at the lot with the chainsaw in the evenings. I'd park the truck along the dirt road, grab my chainsaw and fuel can, and walk up the old, faint tote road to the clearing.

Modern life can pull us away from our connection with the natural world. Sometimes, nature has a way of pulling us back in.



This column is dedicated to the system that supports the public hunting of public wildlife for all fair chase sportsmen, and the stories and trophies that are the result. Theodore Roosevelt strongly believed that self-reliance and pursuing the strenuous activities of hunting and wilderness exploration was the best way to keep man connected to nature. We score trophies, but every hunt is to some extent a way of measuring ourselves.

Once, before deer season, a deer spooked ahead of me. I saw the body well, moving through the thicket, but did not see the head. I knew that the deer would dress close to 300 pounds. The tracks in the ground added an exclamation point!

The 1989 deer season came, and I spent more time hunting than clearing. I had learned much about my new hunting territory but still lacked pieces of the puzzle. The wilderness character of the country was taking root in my being, though, and I was aware of a growing feel for the woods. This was a good sign.

After a couple of weeks of taking a stand until dusk without any sign of a living deer, responsibility caught up to me. I got back to work.

THE DREAM

The night I shifted my focus away from hunting, I had a vivid dream, which would prove a vision. The buck came to me out of the darkness, walking into daylight. He was so close. All my attention was on the rack with high white tines and narrow spread. It was all so clear, except for one hazy brow tine.

Morning came, and my plan for the day was to cut trees. I packed my old .30-30 with iron sights. I had recently purchased a new .308 with iron sights, but I've had the .30-30 since I was 12 and felt a bit out of place in the deer woods without it in my hand.

I drove to the lot, parked in the usual spot, and followed the now well-worn trail up to my modest clearing, chainsaw in one hand and .30-30 in the other. I rested the rifle on a log, picked up

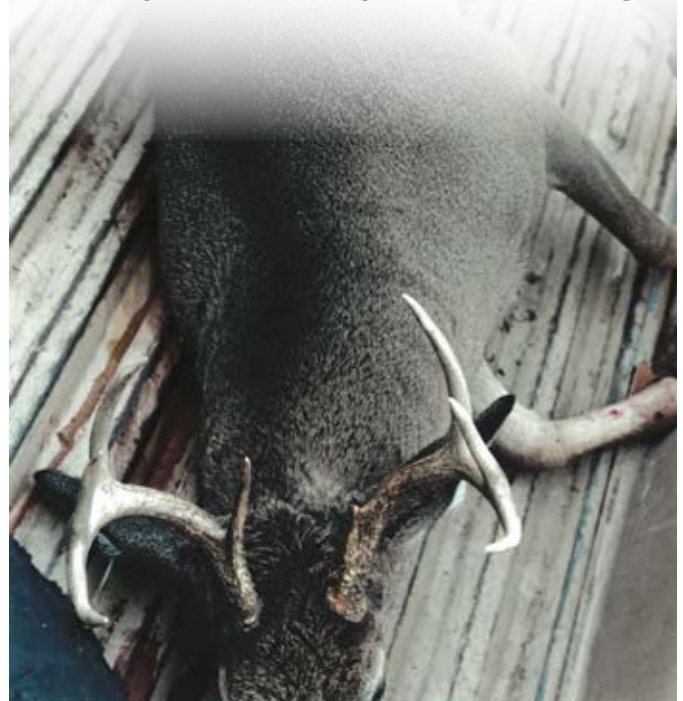
the chainsaw, and grabbed the handle to start it. Then I stopped. I straightened up and gazed toward the ridge to the north, the boundary of my land. I took the .30-30 from its rest and put in the clip. For some reason, the clip would not feed a round into the chamber, so I slid in a 170-grain soft point by hand, checked the safety, and started up the hill.

It was mid-morning, the frost fading as the sun broke out from the early overcast. The smells of fall surrounded me. I walked slowly until reaching a narrow, previously logged shoulder beneath the cliffs of the ridge top, dense hemlocks to my left and open hardwoods to my right. It was the exact spot where, a month previous, I had the premonition that I would shoot a buck. I stopped, listening.

No time passed. I heard the deer, hidden by the hemlock thicket. Its pace was betrayed by the fresh, fallen leaves of autumn. The approach was steady, rhythmic, and in my direction. It was the movement of a buck in rut. I put the rifle to my shoulder with the barrel pointed toward the ground before the thicket.

White antlers broke through the hemlocks into daylight only 30 yards away. I raised the sights to the buck. It was large-bodied, with a swollen neck, and steadily walking directly toward me. The antlers swayed from side to side, and its body bobbed up and down with each step over the uneven ground. I could see the eyes clearly, intent and focused. I stood there in the open but remained undetected.

It was the buck in my dream. I was flooded with emotion but also strangely calm. I understood I had experienced something primal and accepted the buck as a gift.



The buck was so close it seemed an apparition. I felt like a ghost. At seven paces, the buck turned left, and my iron bead settled behind the shoulder. At the shot, I saw hair part over the heart, and the deer fell almost at my feet on bloodless leaves.

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LOOKING BACK

I cannot explain the experience. The distractions and routines of modern life clouds our senses, blunts perceptions and dulls our minds. Being alone in nature hones the senses and develops an awareness, a finer sense. Perhaps this relates to

magnetic waves, which birds utilize as they navigate the planet with their biological GPS. Over time, a union of all the senses can produce a vivid appreciation of one's surroundings.

I believe intuition is very real and results from a synthesis of sensation and past experience stored within the brain's infinite possibilities. Intuition has been part of my personal experience my entire life, most strikingly when hunting or fishing.

A vision is transcendent and hard to understand, like the moon pulling tides from a quarter million miles away. One can only wonder. Primitive people were acutely aware of their place in the world. In their cultural landscape visions did exist. As a witness, this I know to be true. ■