

Honing Your Skills...



# MATURING WITH A BOW

Learn to Appreciate Close-up Animal Interactions with Archery Hunting



Last spring I was out on the shooting range with my eldest son, Howard, who had recently turned 23. The range at the ranch has a 100-yard rifle area with a custom bench and an absolutely level concrete floor designed for when I used to practice for long-range service rifle competition. Behind is a steel reactive pistol range that we use for defensive pistol competition practice. Howard is the big game hunter

**By Howard Monsour**

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of my three sons. His other brother David is the bird hunter who would do just about anything to hunt ducks. Michael, my youngest, shoots targets and defensive pistol. He chooses not to hunt. Importantly, all three have been brought up to respect wildlife and conservation. They have an unyielding stand for our right to bear arms.

IT WAS AT THAT TIME I TOLD HIM SOMETHING I NEVER WOULD HAVE SAID IN MY YOUNGER HUNTING LIFE: THAT I FELT MY MOST GRATIFYING TIMES HUNTING WERE WHEN I MISSED WITH MY BOW. I'LL NEVER FORGET THE PUZZLED LOOK ON HIS FACE, THE SMIRK AND THE SLIGHT SHAKE OF HIS HEAD FROM SIDE TO SIDE...FOR HIM, THE TAKING OF THE TROPHY WAS STILL SUPREME. I HAD MATURED TO THE IDEAL THAT THE QUEST WAS THE TROPHY.

What most interested Howard that day was the new addition to the shooting range. Parallel to the rifle area was a bow range. It was set up to shoot out to 65 yards. As I worked up a new load with my rifle I would practice with my bow. I like to let my rifle barrel cool for at least 5 minutes, during which time I could get off a minimum of three arrows. The wind was dead calm that day, and so was my aim. I was placing shots in a six-inch circle at 55 and 65 yards. My son was impressed. It's very much like shooting a rifle with a peep-sight, I told him. You have to watch your hold, balance the bow, use good breathing technique and squeeze the trigger on the release. I encouraged him to shoot the bow.

"Nope," he said. "It's not for me. I want to get that big buck when I see it. It's too uncertain with a bow."

It was at that time I told him something I never would have said in my younger hunting life: that I felt my most gratifying times hunting were when I missed with my bow. I'll never forget the puzzled look on his face, the smirk and the slight shake of his head from side to side. The generation gap had just occurred again. For him, the taking of the trophy was still supreme. I had matured to the ideal that the quest was the trophy.

Four years ago I was mule deer hunting on my Nebraska ranch. It was rifle season. My usual move is to leave before sunrise. No motorized vehicles; the foot will do. It's a long walk. I had walked and glassed the Sand Hills for well over 8½ hours when I decided to head back toward the cabin. It was a long way off. I had seen lots of does interspersed with two or three small bucks. Boone and Crockett mule deer are hard to come by in Nebraska. I was looking for a nice 5x5. As it would happen, I had just carelessly crested a hill when my eyes caught a deer standing up from its bed under a cedar tree. The 5x5 stood up curiously looking in my direction. Although I had silhouetted myself against the sky, luckily my fast, careless pace had taken me just below the crest of the hill. With my camo he could not quite make out what I was at 200 to 250 yards. I slowly dropped to my knees, brought my 3x12, 56mm Zeiss scope to my eyes and studied the buck. He just stood there looking in my direction. I'll bet I took at least three minutes until I decided to shoot. It's amazing how little a .300 Winchester magnum recoils in these situations. One well-placed shot, and he was down for the count. He's mounted in my study. It's not a B&C buck, but he's still a trophy to me. It's the second



largest mule deer shot on that Nebraska ranch, and I'll never forget it!

Fast forward a year later on my ranch in Texas. It's a small place by Texas standards and located on high ground. The best deer hunting is in the creek bottoms on the ranch next to mine, where I don't have permission to hunt, but I'm hoping that rutting season will increase my odds that the big boys will stray my way. And, with good habitat management, I hope to coax the big bucks onto my place.

For the past three years, all the ranchers in the area were after one buck. He was the elusive 12-point ghost—mostly a nocturnal buck. I had patterned him. He would cross my ranch about every seven days. He always used a low draw, and if I was lucky, he would show up just before dark. I set my bow stand up in the perfect spot six weeks before the bow season started. It was along his feeding corridor. I was going to get this buck! I had never had such an obsession with a wild animal in my life. I had a chance to take him the year before on the last day of the rifle season, but he came out after shooting hours. I once woke up at 3 a.m. on a full moon night knowing he was on my feeder. I walked up to the second floor of my ranch house with my binoculars. There he was, majestic in the moonlight. I watched him for 30 minutes.

That year I set up with the bow. After two unsuccessful evenings in the stand, the next day brought a light drizzle with a gentle south wind. Perfect! I used descented clothes, showered with descented soap, put on rubber boots, and sprayed my bow down with descented spray. It was just after sunset. There he was, cautiously but steadily coming up the draw. No wind. He had no idea I was there. I went through my routine—the same one that I had practiced.. As he stepped behind a cedar tree I slowly drew my bow. My heart was beating so hard, it felt like it would come right out of my chest. Outwardly, I was calm and collected. Peep-sight alignment, good. Level in the middle. Knock in the corner of my mouth, arm slightly bent. When he comes out, I'll take him at 30 yards. Piece of cake! The next step and he's mine. He'll come out and I'll take him with the next step. The next step. The next step. He'll come out and I'll take him with the next step. The next step! Damn! Why won't he come out? Forever he stood there just behind the cedar looking ahead at nothing. Not moving. With the bow still at full draw, I carefully went over my routine again. Consciously without moving, I examined myself to make sure I wasn't doing

anything that might be spooking him. I wasn't breathing hard. I wasn't looking him in the eye. A slight breeze was even blowing in my face. The next step and I'll take him. Come on you son-of-a- ... He slowly turned around and walked back the way he came. He never appeared to be alarmed.

Neither I nor the other ranchers ever saw him again.

This was probably one of the greatest hunting experiences in my life. Bow hunting has taught me to appreciate the ability of wild game to survive. I know they have senses that we do not have. They feel it when "it's just not right." They know their surroundings and use everything they can to stay in tune with the environment. To be successful, I have to conquer that. I love rifle hunting, but you just don't appreciate the close-up animal interactions like you do with the bow.

This past Fourth of July, I took my wife to our Nebraska ranch to relax at the cabin and possibly canoe down the Dismal River. The large ranch next to us sold, and we had a chance to meet our new neighbors. They had owned a lucrative printing business and sold it to "get out in the country." (This was "the country" with three houses in 15 square miles.) They were very friendly, and we had a nice time. But what I'll most remember is their

16-year-old nephew. He looked and acted quite mature for his age. He was working on his Eagle Scout badge, which always impresses me. He lived in Rifle, Colorado. I had just been out his way fishing at the High Lonesome Ranch. He was a bowhunter, taught by his father. I had just finished telling him about the 6x6 elk that I shot with my bow in Arizona two years earlier and another deer I almost had with a bow on our ranch when he asked me what I used. A Bowtech compound, Toxonix pin sights with a peep, a whisker biscuit, Gold-tip carbon arrows and Thunderhead fixed blades, I said. He smiled slightly when I finished. I didn't know quite how to take it.

"What do you shoot?" I asked.

"Oh, I shoot a traditional long bow."

"Really," I replied. "Feather fletches?"

"Yep."

"Wooden shafts?"

He nodded.

"How the heck do you aim, let alone shoot without a release?" I asked.

"You just practice a lot and one day you 'just get it,'" he said looking at the ground.

I was silent. I thought, 16 years old! Maybe this maturing as a hunter, as you get older, isn't what it's cracked up to be.

Yeah, man. He's got it! ■

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