

GRAY GHOSTS

I Have Known

By Bill Bynum

The sight of a massive whitetail buck is one that enchants our dreams of ultimate success. Only a chosen few will ever encounter the moment of fulfillment. Blessed are those who know the rewards of success, as success can only be determined in the heart of the hunter when encountering the ever-elusive whitetail deer.

The author walking up on a whitetail deer... a ghost that didn't get away.

Dawn had birthed cold and wet with a foggy drizzle engulfing the woods. Tiny droplets of water patted the top of my hat as I listened intently for any indication of an approaching animal.

Involuntary chills shook my body as I tried to restrict the chattering of my teeth. Only the strong fragrance of cedar penetrated the congestion of my youthful nose. Hours would pass before I would accept what I had so many times before, and head for home.

Within moments of unloading the battered single shot shotgun of its rifled slug, I lowered the gun onto the wet leafy floor. Now the sounds of the water droplets splattered on the wooden board that served as my tree stand. Cautiously I lowered myself down the slippery limbs until my foot touched the stock of the shotgun. Now I would begin my mile-long hike through the dense woods in the intensifying rain. Beads of water hung from the brim of my hat as I walked with a lowered head. Disappointment fueled my anguish as dreams of a successful deer hunt melted in the rain. It was during this moment of self pity that a sudden disturbance jolted me.

Instantly my eyes met with those



of a buck and paralysis seemed to overwhelm me. Only my eyes could respond to the moment as the tarnished ivory antlers captivated my every thought. Even today, the sight of his long tines rising high above heavy beams haunt my recollections. Then, with a single bound, the buck became a phantom of the woods—a ghost that has haunted my soul and dreams as I hope it always will. For it was during those brief moments I felt the true spirit of the hunt fall upon my heart.

OL' MOSS

Many years had passed and many bucks had fallen when my next encounter with another truly magnificent whitetail occurred. The encounter began one unseasonably warm morning while hunting a remote area in the middle of Tennessee. This encounter has often found me questioning the unknown powers we all have questioned at some point in life.

The encounter began with me spending the morning perched in a portable tree stand armed with archery equipment. The only exception to my solitude was the passing of a skunk. So with the temperature rising, I elected to retreat to camp and soak up some Z's before the evening hunt. While en route to camp, I suddenly detected a strong odor and immediately thought I had again encountered my striped friend. After sniffing the breeze for a few seconds, I realized my olfactory device was detecting the scent of a buck.

Stunned, to say the least, as the rut was weeks away, I remained calm and proceeded to ready an arrow. It was then that I suddenly detected movement through the leaves that I instantly recognized as a buck's antlers moving up and down a tree. Cautiously I began lowering myself into a kneeling position thinking this might present a shooting opportunity. However, after gaining visibility, I realized I was facing the rump of the buck. The antlers I was seeing were those exceeding well beyond the common boundaries of most deer. I instantly began shaking as if someone had poured a truckload of steroid-fortified fire ants down my pants. Sweat poured down my face as the bow shook in my hand as though a lightning bolt had just found its mark. Due to these untimely emotional reactions I knew the only thing I could do was to watch and pray—pray that this was the day I had longed for and that all powers were smiling upon me.

Time seemed to stand still while I continued to watch the buck. Fear, confusion, uncertainty and just plain anger ruled my emotions. Then, as if on cue, the buck

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raised its head and granted me the first real view of its enormous antlers. Astonished by the sight of the massive rack, I counted 10 long tines adorning the massive beams and also took note of how the right brow tine curled on its end. I also observed strands of moss-like velvet and tree bark dangling from the crown. Slowly I began moving my string release into place, my eyes never leaving the buck. Thoughts of grandeur filled my brain as I slowly started drawing the bow. Never had these actions seemed so exhausting. Only the sound of my pulse disturbed the silence as the arrow slid into a halfway position.

Then, as if a silent alarm had sounded, the buck snapped into a state of attention. Posed in a slight crouching position, the buck remained motionless. Hardened muscles bulged beneath its dark gray coat. Only the slight motion of the animal's ears screening the area denied its statuesque posture. Tension mounted. Sweat began trickling from my brow as droplets of the secretion filled my eyes. Now a burning pain cluttered my sight as my muscles began to ache from the bow's resistance. The agony of defeat was upon me as I began surrendering to the bow. It was at this moment that the buck confirmed its suspicions and bolted away.

Like a victim of an evil trance, I remained staring at where the buck had been standing. Only the tattered bark of the tree confirmed I had not been experiencing a bad



dream. Exhausted, it was several minutes before I stood up. Reality strengthened my composure as I stepped the 23 paces to investigate the tree. Weeks would pass with me spending every available minute hunting the buck. I discovered numerous clues I felt were sufficient evidence of his presence in the area. But no clue captivated my attention than that of a single scrape that was located less than 50 yards from where I had encountered the massive buck. The scrape contained a strong pungent odor much like the one I had smelled before, and I elected to gamble on staying in a single location.

Dawn would break numerous times while sitting in my tree stand overlooking the scrape. In the final moments of one memorable day, I again saw the massive rack of the buck coming toward me. Like the monarch he was, he portrayed himself proudly as he traveled along the trail. Only a dark silhouette outlined what was beneath the wide and heavy antlers.

Cautiously, I began preparing for the shot, never letting the buck out of my sight. Nervousness began seeping into my thoughts as I slowly inhaled an assuring breath. Tingles of electrifying excitement surged through my legs as I began drawing the bow. Then, with completion of the draw, a state of calmness fell upon me.

Time had no meaning as I tracked the buck's lungs with the pin sight. This continued for several seconds, allowing my intended target to reach a designated point. Then, as if it had been scripted, I calmly moved my lips and produced a soft whistle. Upon hearing the disturbance, the buck stopped in its tracks. This time, the buck's head was raised high. My finger drew the release's tension and bolted the arrow from the bow. My eyes followed the bright orange fletch as it sailed toward the deer. Seconds became an eternity as the speedy arrow appeared to crawl through the air, finally disappearing into the blur of the escaping buck. Long seconds of anticipation mounted while I listened to the fading sounds of the fleeing deer. My emotions caused my knees to weaken as I stepped from the tree stand.

Quickly gathering my bow, I hurried to where the buck had been standing. Expectations of greatness generated an uncontrollable nervousness as I examined the area. The examination soon produced the sight of the arrow's fletch buried beneath the leaves. I began searching for evidence of a hit. Cautiously, I removed a leaf after searching for a strand of hair, a drop of blood, or any clue to deny my growing suspicions.

Desperately I examined and re-examined the arrow and the immediate area. Carefully I followed the path of buck as a sickening feeling fell upon me. Leaf after leaf was examined in the glow of my flashlight as I trailed the heavy imprints. Then there was nothing, as if the deer had vanished into thin air.

Darkness surrounded me as I ventured from the woods. There was no question—the arrow had not connected. The buck had escaped unharmed and that was the only satisfaction I could savor for the time. I was haunted by this for the rest of the season.

During the following hunting season, I hunted that same area as I have now for many years. The memories of that buck often penetrate my thoughts, combating the boredom of a tree stand. I now wonder if those memories are of more value today than that trophy would have been. I cannot say, but I wish I could.

COPING WITH PHANTOMS

I began hunting the magnificent whitetail on the soil of my native western Tennessee. I cherish the fact I have stalked among the hunting grounds of the great Davy Crockett. I have sat in many of nature's classrooms just as he had, and relished in its pleasures. I often wonder about his experiences and how it must have been. I often ponder if that great hunter ever encountered the phantoms of the hunt—the gray ghosts—or the unexplainable that often occurs at the precise moment we release an arrow or squeeze the trigger . . . only to miss.

What of the phantoms that cast their spells over us and cause us to dream of harvesting a massive rack, only to be awakened? What of the phantoms that hide beside us and make us cough without warning during an encounter with massive horns? Are these phantoms figments of our imagination that we use as reasons for failure?

And what of the phantoms that silently tell us to look over our shoulder and see the game we might not have seen . . . those times when we suddenly detect a minute detail hidden in the brush that places the trophy in our hands? How can we explain why a creature of the wild suddenly appears from nowhere to reward us for a lifetime? Could these experiences be the result of some "great hunter" manipulating our hunting experiences? Is it possible that cosmic-like spirits exist within those who cherish this sport we calling hunting? These are questions I silently ask every time I enter the world of the gray ghosts. ■

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