

THE GHOST OF Autumn

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Photos by Author



THE BIG BUCK AS SEEN FROM THE AUTHOR'S TREE STAND SEVERAL MONTHS BEFORE HUNTING SEASON.

The tree stand was built by father and son in a half grown walnut tree, just one of many in the riparian habitat bordering the Cedar River. The father, born and raised during the depression was a natural recycler and so the stand was pieced together from the flotsam that only a flooded river can produce.

Illegitimate chunks of 2x4 steps climbed up the tree to a plywood and barn door platform where a five gallon bucket

provided a seat. It was the boy's second stand. The first stand had already positioned him to shoot his first buck a couple of years before.

They were sitting in the tree together on the second night of that very first bow season when the father, who had a different vantage point, leaned over and whispered "I see a deer." He found his binoculars and took a long look, "I think it has one antler."

The deer was leisurely bounding across the open meadow and soon drew even with the tree stand the boy drew and released in one instinctive motion. Perhaps some luck was responsible, though a summer of practice certainly helped, the arrow flew true at that bounding deer and hit the heart.

The deer swapped ends and ran furiously back the way it came before piling up. It did indeed have only one antler. This first buck "made" the hunter. Successful and barren years would follow, but the instinctive need to hunt would seldom wane.

The woods change with the passage of time, trees grow, browse patterns change and once used trails may turn vacant. Thus was born the need for another stand.

A couple of years passed and the boy grew into a young man, shot several deer, studied deer habits and even took to photographing them from the tree stand during the long

summer months before the deer season. And while nothing will ever replace the first buck in memory, the hunter longed to get a big buck.

June evenings were something special as the young man would sit in the walnut, on his five gallon bucket and watch the sun sink below the horizon. The rich, spicy aroma of walnut foliage become indelibly ingrained in the hunters memory, so that whenever he smelled a walnut, his minds eye would be snapped back to images of the tree stand, the woods, and the deer.

One evening three bucks stood beneath the tree. All had fuzzy velvet covered growths of antlers sprouting from their heads perhaps in partial suggestions of what the fall would hold. Two were small, their velvet antlers just nubs of growth, but the third was already impressive by comparison.

A brow point was emerging from a developing main beam that showed good thickness. The camera in the boys hand was momentarily forgotten but he soon recovered and the first snap of the shutter made a loud clack and a once fluidly moving deer stood stiff as a lawn ornament. Two or three more clicks and it had enough and with a snort and a few bounds it vanished.

That deer developed a distinctive personality. In the evenings



after that first time, it never acted like the other deer who marched right out into the clearing. The others would scamper around, only briefly checking for danger. It never really relaxed and would often emit a whistling snort that pierced the evening sounds and caused the other deer to jump. It would snort, look around, then decide it was being foolish, shake its head, then go back to feeding.

It was a long summer, partly because that buck stopped showing itself just as its antler growth was reaching full development. Its big tracks could still be found in the mud by the river, and as fall approached, large trees were stripped of bark by its rubs.

There weren't any good opportunities for the young man to fill his tag in the first couple of weekends of hunting. Does and small bucks came and went, nothing that really tempted him to shoot, but helped pass the time in the wait for the big buck. Halloween eve came, the peak of the rut in Iowa, and a large scrape had been made by a buck beneath the tree stand. The hunter was waiting above.

Large white antler tips suddenly appeared, seemingly floating above the low brush at the clearings' edge. They soon attached themselves to the buck as it slowly ghosted out of the concealing woods and made a quiet approach straight to the scrape.

The hunter drew his bow when the buck stopped at the scrape. The instant before release the buck turned its head and looked up, straight at the young man as if sensing the game was up.

The arrow centered in its chest and it burst into flight across the clearing. The buck never passed from sight once the arrow was cast, and the young man saw it all, the explosive burst into motion, the straight-line-dash-regardless-of-obstructions-flight, and finally the buck's hind legs quit working, and the hindquarters sagged to the side, and it toppled, struggled briefly and was still.

On the stand, the young man felt the surge of adrenaline catch up

to him. Buck fever came a little too late to hamper the shot.

The hunter climbed down the tree, walked the short distance to the still form, and ran his hands over the antlers, too excited to count them but knowing that this was a big buck. He was certain the buck was dead, so he left his bow and quiver and lit out for the farm house.

They came back, driving the pickup over the rough path to where the buck lay. Father and son field dressed, then struggled to lift the buck into the box.

It was a few months later that the young man found a scoring sheet in a magazine and tried to score the buck. For lack of instruction, his calculations ranged in the 180's.

He called a state biologist, who seemed a bit dubious but arranged a time to score the buck. It wasn't quite as large as anticipated, but broke the 170 barrier. At the time, entering a minimum rack in the Boone and Crockett books seemed a bit frivolous, and he settled for recognition in Iowa's record book where the buck ranked number eight in the all-time records for bow killed deer.

The mounted buck hung on the wall for fourteen years before I (the boy) decided to enter it in the Boone and Crockett Award's Program. I knew it was just over the minimum score but never found sufficient reason to put it in the book.

Then one day I talked to a man named Bill Lilienthal. He was wandering a gun show with a tremendously massive shed antler in his hand. It worked beautifully as a conversation starter. Carry around something like that, and other people are bound to come up and try to tell you about their big buck. I was no exception.

"You owe it to the buck, the

state that grew it, and yourself to preserve the record of its existence." I thought about that for a while, then made some calls and arranged a scoring.

Dave Boland was the closest official measurer and he and Bill came by my office. After all measurements were added up, the buck scored 172-6/8 points.



Bill had a scrap book of buck photos, some scored at his urging and others gleaned from people and old newspapers, the current whereabouts of the actual bucks unknown in some cases. He hunts for these "lost bucks."

There was a newspaper clipping of a buck shot long ago in Missouri, and that's about all he knew about it. By its faded appearance it seemed larger by far than any of the number one bucks I've seen photos of and I've also been privileged to hold a reproduction set of antlers from the Jordon Buck.

That Missouri buck has long since disappeared from existence and memory. We will never know its score so its kind of like "the one that got away." A real tragedy for the deer hunting community.

The Indian would place a few leaves in the mouth of his kill, a last meal for the deer's spirit. To me, recording my buck has that same feeling, I've given it a kind of immortality.

DAN BLOCK WITH SOME OF HIS BUCKS TAKEN ON THE FARM. THE MIDDLE BUCK SCORES 172-6/8 POINTS AND WAS TAKEN WITH A BOW.