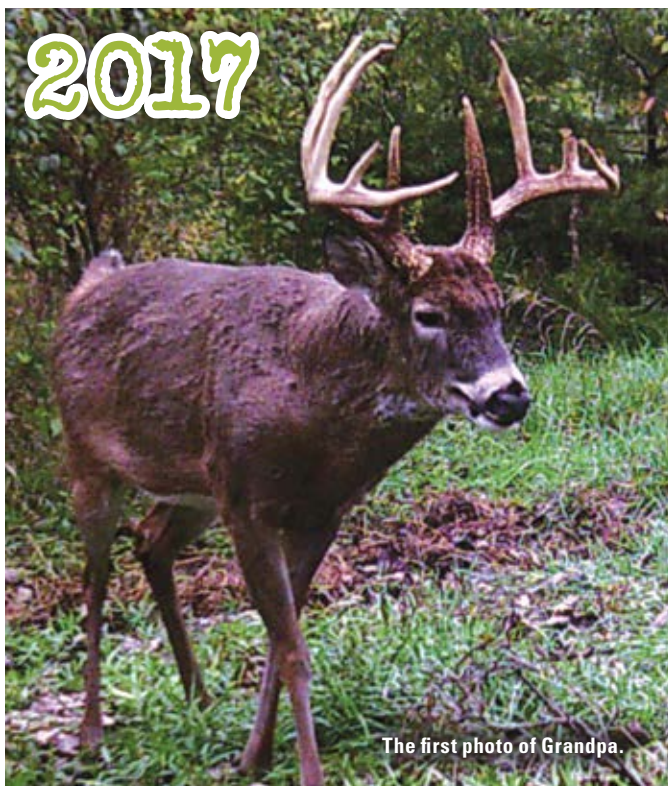


The Three-Year Journey for a Buck Named GRANDPA

At a young age, I was given the gift and love of hunting thanks to my dad and other family members. Through the years, I have passed this gift on to my son. Countless hunting stories have been told around the family dinner table, a late-night campfire, or the down time on a hunting trip. I got my start gun hunting and still enjoy guns, but I have been a bowhunter since I was 20 years old. I have experienced many different hunts—mule deer, dove, turkey, bear, hog—but my passion is whitetail deer; such an amazing, beautiful animal.

I've done lots of hunting in my home state of Georgia, but hunting has also taken me to Iowa, Maine, Oregon, Kentucky, and Canada. I have had the opportunity to guide whitetail deer hunting trips in Illinois where in 2002 I met another guide, Mike, from Pennsylvania. Mike and I have become close friends and yearly hunting partners ever since. Since 2003, Mike and I have leased various Illinois properties, spending two weeks hunting each fall, missing only two seasons of hunting together. In the early years, our sons were young, but we hoped they both would one day join us for the yearly trip. Eventually they did—Li'l Mike in 2013; my son Dylan, and Li'l Mike's childhood friend Ralph followed a couple years later.

Mike and I both have a passion for hunting: planning a hunt, when and where to hunt, tracking deer, and ethical hunting practices, including never wasting a deer simply for the rack. Together we have shared the many aspects of hunting both in and out of the stand. The comradery, the highs and lows, the excitement and frustration, the laughter and disbelief, and so much more that is hunting. We have spent cold early mornings in a roadside ditch getting dressed in our hunting gear before heading to our stand; one season in a little budget hotel with the roof leaking when it rained and a water heater that did not work, meaning some very cold, very short showers in the mornings! We had years of seeing many deer or very few and



Keith's hunting crew, (left to right) Li'l Mike, Dylan, Mike, Ralph and Keith in 2017. They have been hunting the same land together since 2013.



years with both of us heading home taking only memories of time well spent. We've let nice bucks pass, to hopefully see them the next season more mature and filled out.

And then there was the year we saw for the first time the attention-getting, illusive buck—which is where this story got its start.

In late 2012, we met Jack, a farmer in south-central Illinois. We leased his land for our 2013 hunt season and every season since then. In 2017, Jack's son Donnie gave us the opportunity to hunt his own property, another nice piece of land around his home giving us an additional 55 acres. Donnie has a great piece of property, though not many deer live on it which makes it difficult to hunt. In the off-seasons, we would leave trail cameras up around the two properties. Jack and Donnie would periodically check the cameras, changing the SD cards and sending the full ones to us.

For the 2017 hunt, Mike and I began our hunt at Donnie's and saw very few deer from the stand or on camera in the first four days. So we joined Li'l Mike and Ralph to hunt at Jack's. Dylan flew into Peoria on Saturday to hunt the last week with us. We picked him up from the airport, then went by Donnie's on the way back to check cameras. Dylan, Li'l Mike, and Ralph were checking SD cards as we headed back to the cabin. Hearing "OMG, wait till you see this one!", I pulled over to look. It was an impressive 10-point with very long brow tines, and both the G-3 and G-4 on the left main beam were broken. After looking at this deer, we decided we would pass hunting him

that season, hoping that he would make it another year. We never saw this 10-point in person—only twice on camera that season. Reviewing the pictures in the off-season, this buck was not on any of the cameras. Though the camera picture quality was not great, which can make deer at a distance tough to identify, still we didn't think we captured this buck on camera again.

Mike and I began the 2018 season hunting Donnie's property first. Within 30 minutes of sunup, at 80 yards, I saw one of the biggest deer I had ever seen. Through binoculars it was easy to see it was a 10-point. With this buck headed straight toward my stand, I got ready to make a shot. Along the way, he stopped, made a scrape, then worked his licking branch. The buck then turned and walked away from me across the property through some tall dense shrubs and out of sight.

On day two, as usual we were in our stands before sunup. Before daylight, I heard a deer running by the base of my tree. It was still dark—too early for shooting—but through binoculars, I could see the silhouette of the deer. It was the 10-point from the day before. The buck walked around, and by legal shooting time, he had moved too far out. The buck was out about 80 yards. I made several grunt calls, he turned and walked a few steps back towards me, then turned and disappeared again.

This buck now had my full attention, I hunted at Donnie's the entire two weeks. I didn't see this buck again during the daylight hours, but the camera held several nighttime pictures. He was on the

camera near my stand several times; 30-40 minutes before I would arrive, and about an hour after I had left my stand. This 10-point was elusive as well as being all-consuming; he was occupying most of my thoughts. Back at camp in the evenings I looked at the pictures; we all studied the pictures. It was then we started making comparisons of this deer and the big buck with the two broken tines from our 2017 season. Both had very long brow tines; it was certainly looking to be the same amazing animal.

During the off season, Donnie learned the locals had

named this 10-point "Grandpa." Grandpa appeared on the camera many times in the off-season up to early March 2019. In late March, Mike and I met in Illinois for a long weekend. We did lots of walking looking for his shed antlers with no luck. If Grandpa was on camera, it was difficult to identify him. Where was this elusive buck?

Then in mid-October 2019, he appeared on camera one time. The '19 hunt started with me at Donnie's, the others at Jack's. Remember, Donnie's property is challenging to hunt because there just aren't many deer that we've



Back at camp in the evenings I looked at the pictures; we all studied the pictures. It was then we started making comparisons of this deer and the big buck with the two broken tines from our 2017 season. Both had very long brow tines; it was certainly looking to be the same amazing animal.

seen, but I couldn't get Grandpa off my mind! For the first five days I saw very few deer from the stand or on camera—and no sign of Grandpa. This buck was nowhere to be found. For the next two days I hunted at Jack's with everyone. Then I checked the cameras at Donnie's to find Grandpa at my stand at 9 o'clock the first morning I had hunted at Jack's. Needless to say, I was back at Donnie's the following morning. For the next five days no Grandpa sightings from the stand or on the camera, day or night. One morning the weather was terrible for hunting: 19 degrees, 30 mph wind gusts, and snowing; Mike and I were the only two who headed out to hunt. Mike went to Jack's, I went to Donnie's. Just before 8 o'clock, Grandpa came running in, I grabbed my bow and drew back. He came into the shooting lane, I grunted, he didn't stop. I hollered, he stopped—behind a bush at 9 yards. I had no shot! He scratched his back with his antlers, looked around, then he took off running while I watched him disappear yet again.

The next morning, I had a good hunt seeing several does and a few really nice bucks. In the afternoon, I noticed movement up toward Donnie's house; three does and two small bucks. They all came running into sight, the bucks nervously watching

behind. I too looked behind them to find Grandpa at 45 yards facing my direction. I reached for my bow as he, on the same path as yesterday, moved with a steady pace toward me. I drew back, then made a grunt call; Grandpa didn't change his pace. Then I hollered, but Grandpa never broke stride as he moved right past my tree. Being very frustrated, I set down to text, Mike, Li'l Mike, Ralph and Dylan. "He did it to me again!" That was the last time I would see Grandpa for our 2019 hunt season. Again, he was on camera until mid-March 2020, then no more pictures of him.

In late September 2020, Li'l Mike, Ralph and I met in Illinois to spend a few days getting ready for our upcoming hunt in November. The three of us set stands, hung safety lines, set bow hangers, and cleared shooting lanes. I checked cameras, made repairs to one non-working camera—cleaning it, replacing batteries, then returning it to the front of Donnie's farm.

In late October, I arrived a day ahead of Mike, Li'l Mike, and Ralph. I stayed busy unpacking, checking the properties, generally getting things ready while waiting for everyone to arrive. I checked the camera at the front of Donnie's property; the one that had not been working until I fixed it in late September. I discovered

pictures of Grandpa, two at nighttime, one during the day. This amazing 10-point, still with impressively tall brow tines, one having developed a slight fork, the left side G-2 and G-3 distinctly forked, had also developed a drop tine on the right side. I quickly made the decision to hunt Donnie's the entire two-week hunt. Our hunt began with Li'l Mike and Ralph at Jack's and Mike and me at Donnie's. Mike and Ralph were seeing plenty of deer, with Ralph getting a nice deer on day two. Over at Donnie's, while actual deer sightings from the stands were infrequent, the cameras still showed Grandpa was around at nighttime. By the middle of the second week, with Ralph already back in Pennsylvania, Mike, Li'l Mike and I decided Friday, November 13 would be the last day of our Illinois hunting season. We planned to hunt Friday morning until 9 a.m., then take the rest of the morning getting stands down and otherwise getting ready to head home on Saturday.

Friday morning, the three of us were up as usual at 3 a.m. for coffee and breakfast before heading out to hunt. The weather was wicked with heavy gusting winds and freezing conditions. We talked and debated, trying to talk ourselves into and maybe even out of hunting this final morning. With our decision made, we headed out for one last

hunt of our 2020 season. Li'l Mike headed to Jack's; Mike and I to Donnie's. Driving to Donnie's, Mike and I continued to encourage one another to push through the cold, miserable Illinois morning for the last hunt. We pulled up at Donnie's, got dressed, then parted company and headed out through the weather and the dark to our own stands. With the three of us in separate stands, we sent a few group texts for check-in, wishing one another good luck, sharing news of "busting deer" on the walk to the stand, and someone even sending a joking text asking, "Are we done yet?"! We were tired and cold this last morning. In my stand, I found myself not only tired and cold, but frustrated. This was my last hunt for this season; the third season of following Grandpa, and of being outsmarted by him. As daylight brought everything



Through 2019 Grandpa was elusive as well as all-consuming; he appeared on camera one time and managed to evade Keith's bow.

around me into clear view, I found myself feeling unsure I could go another year in pursuit of Grandpa; this truly had been so consuming for me. After being in the stand for about two hours, I leaned my forehead against the tree to pray. I thanked God for allowing me to follow such an amazing animal; I also asked God if this deer not be a blessing for me but for someone else, would He please allow me to know who did get Grandpa.

At about 7:55, I turned around, leaning against my tree for the last hour or so of my last hunt of the season. In no time, a doe came running into my shooting lane; she stopped in front of my tree, panting heavily. Knowing most likely this doe was being chased by a buck, I reached for my bow when Grandpa himself appeared at 48 yards, facing the doe. He began to trot in on the same path just as he had the last two years. At full draw, while mentally reminding myself to take my time, pick a spot, and to concentrate on the shot, I waited for an opportunity. I also wondered if, like last year, I would lose another chance at him? He was trotting forward following the doe; then, this amazing buck stopped broadside, at 22 yards, in the middle of my shooting lane. I released the arrow; the shot was a great one. He spun around heading back from where he came. Not

able to make it up the hill, he spun again heading down the hill, across a knoll toward a group of cedar trees. Because of the knoll, I was unable to see Grandpa, but I did hear him fall, and I saw the cedar limbs shaking. Then everything got very quiet.

In a matter of seconds, the frustration I'd been feeling melted into an indescribable high, mixed with a big dose of disbelief! I got down from my stand, shaking unbelievably, pacing in circles but able to get a text out to Mike and Li'l Mike: "OMG drop-tine down." Texts flew from them. Mike: "OMG I'm coming," then "Seriously." Li'l Mike's text: "Sneaky Uncle Keith—Yeah." Then "I just stopped shaking that's how jacked up I am lol." Mike: "I'm still shaking!" A mix of excitement and shock! Knowing Mike was on his way back to Donnie's house and not wanting to jump Grandpa, I walked in the opposite direction from where I knew he lay. I made quick phone calls to a few family and friends.

After the calls, still trying to catch my breath, still not believing what just happened, I walked to my arrow. It looked really good, confirming a good shot. I waited on Mike to arrive from Donnie's so we could walk to Grandpa together. Mike was yelling my name as he came running from Donnie's. I heard him calling me when

suddenly Mike's tone changed, then I heard him scream, "He's dead!". In running from Donnie's, Mike had run right beside Grandpa under the cedar tree; it took no time for me to join him.

There was a blur of excitement with the two of us talking, congratulating, and pacing. It all escalated when Li'l Mike arrived. Somewhere in here, I realized I had gotten four deer on the last hunt, of the last day; and Grandpa was the second time I had gotten a deer on the last hunt, of the last day, in the last hour.

As of this writing, it has now been four months or so, and this hunt continues to be surreal and unbelievable. Grandpa has been officially measured and is awaiting final approval on the score.

My thoughts still take me to so many aspects of the last three-plus years. I continue to thank God for these amazing animals and this experience which reaches far beyond the hunt itself. The massive amount of encouragement from family and

friends has been humbling. I don't think my friends Travis, Ted, and Mark realize how much their consistent phone calls and texts of encouragement helped me push on during the difficult season of 2020. I have family and friends near and far who have been on this journey with me by all their encouragement and support. To each one of them I extend a heartfelt thank you which doesn't begin to cover my gratitude.

Mike and I have been hunting together for many years; we've become incredible friends. More than friends, we've become brothers. In addition, our families have become a family. It is an awesome extension of this to have Li'l Mike there in 2020. And my buddy Mike, I'm so thankful for him and his friendship which extends beyond hunting. This experience would not have been the same had it not been shared with him. I also thank my wife for being so understanding and supportive of this passion of mine. ■



LEFT: When Keith checked the cameras in 2020 he saw Grandpa again, still with impressively tall brow tines, one having developed a slight fork, the left side G-2 and G-3 distinctly forked, had also developed a drop tine on the right side. **RIGHT:** Li'l Mike, Jack, Mike, and Keith celebrating the end of his three-year journey for a buck named Grandpa.

