

from bambi TO BUCKS

WRITTEN BY MIKE ZLOTNICKI



Introducing a child to deer hunting is an inexact science that must be tailored to the individual. **However, the work can be worth it in a big way.**

You could have knocked me over with a feather last spring when my oldest daughter Caroline told me she wanted to go turkey hunting on Youth Day. After weeks of preparation—gun safety, turkey habit study, calling practice, gear acquisition—we had a great first hunt without killing a bird, topped off by chicken and biscuits on the way home (another first). Now she wants to go deer hunting. This one is a little trickier.

Happy hunters, young and old (from left): Ryan Graves, Caroline Zlotnicki, Keith McCafferty and Tom McCafferty.



RUSSELL GRAVES



MIKE ZLOTNICKI



COURTESY OF McCAFFERTY FAMILY



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Teaching children to look for animal signs such as tracks and rubs is a good start to raising a confident young hunter such as Taylor Thomas (right).

It may sound oxymoronic, but though you don't have to kill to say you've hunted, **there's still nothing more natural in this world than killing and eating an animal.**

Young minds are exposed to anti-hunting messages almost from birth. Disney has cast the hunter as a villain in "Bambi" (must have been doe season), "Beauty and the Beast" (antagonist Gaston is a hunter and leech), and "Snow White" (at least he killed a pig instead of the star). Children are inundated with television fare such as Animal Planet and "Zoboomafoo" with personified animal hosts, and I've yet to hear the talking lemur espouse hunting.

Back in the day, my introduction to hunting was a freezing pheasant hunt somewhere west of Omaha, Neb. It was rough trekking for a 5-year-old kid, but when Dad shot a rooster and beat a setter to the retrieve, I was hooked. When we moved to South Carolina, we started to hunt deer, but there weren't very many in the '70s, and we weren't real skilled. A "successful" deer hunt meant seeing one, usually through the window of our Volkswagen bus, and usually that bouncing backside and white tail as the animals vacated bean or fallow fields on the state forest we frequented.

Times are different now, and since my oldest daughter has expressed an interest in deer

hunting I want to expose her to it in the best possible fashion. She's fished since she could walk and has no problem killing a fish, and we talked about the chance that if she pulled the trigger on a gobbler, it might die. But deer are mammals with big brown eyes, and they leak when they have holes in them, something fish and birds aren't as prone to do. As much as I want Caroline to embrace deer hunting in terms of protein acquisition and quality time afield, I fear that the total ownership a hunter has in killing game might put her off. One can choose not to pull the trigger, but there's no catch-and-release in hunting, unless you use a camera, and you can't eat pictures. It may sound oxymoronic, but though you don't have to kill to say you've hunted, there's still nothing more natural in this world than killing and eating an animal.

But how do you convey that to a child? I talked to three hunters who are fathers—two in the Tar Heel State and one in the Big Sky State—to get their thoughts.

Chris Douglas of Lemon Springs is a freelance videographer who's followed the likes of Tom Miranda, Michael Waddell, Jim Shockey, and Lee and Tiffany Lakosky around



COURTESY OF THOMAS FAMILY



the planet. His early experience as a hunter helped shape his plans for his son Hayden.

"It was everyone for himself back then," recalled Douglas. "There weren't many deer. They'd say 'go up that tree' and there were some 2-by-4s leading up to a 2-by-6s perch. My boots were my Dad's tennis shoes stuffed with socks. I remember crying up in a stand. It's a wonder I even want to deer hunt now."

He killed his first deer at age 11 after three years of trying. He took Hayden on his first deer hunt at 4. "I didn't stick him up in a tree," he said with a laugh. "His momma wouldn't put up with that."

Instead, Douglas hunted a terraced field, placing Hayden on a sleeping bag behind a weed row to play with toys or nap while he waited for deer. "I didn't see any deer, but he didn't get bored," said Douglas, "and I wanted him to be imprinted with good experiences. There's just too many other things tugging at kids these days."

Four years later, in Chatham County, Hayden used a Thompson/Center Encore single shot in 7mm-08 to take a three-pointer right after Douglas returned from a video shoot in Texas. The pair sat in a ground blind and talked about various nonhunting topics, but also practiced hunting scenarios such as mounting the gun and holding it steady. When the buck stepped into the lane 67 yards away, Hayden was ready. Douglas said that the pair's reaction was a "heavy mix of accomplishment and ownership. It's more than a ball game, hitting a home run or scoring a touchdown."

Hayden said there was little downside to the event. "I was excited, happy," he said. Did he feel remorse? "Not really, his time was coming anyway."

Douglas' advice for parents is to think long term: "Make every experience positive," he said. "My Dad and I had blowouts on other issues, but hunting wasn't one of them. We shared that. Hayden may end up more of a bird guy, and that's fine. Not everyone is going to be a big-game hunter."

Douglas noted something that made an impact on me the first time I saw it: the damage a bullet does to flesh and bone. "We had a chance to see what a bullet does to an



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The author spends time well before the hunt teaching his daughter Caroline about firearms and other important aspects of hunting.



The goal of your hours of hunting preparation with a child is that when the time to shoot comes, the youngster will be mentally and physically ready to pull the trigger.

animal,” he said. “It put the fear in me as a child. It’s real.”

John Gasiorowski of Apex raised daughter Amanda, 24, and son Will, 30, to be deer hunters. Amanda started sitting in her father’s lap in a tower stand when she was 7 years old. One day she leaned forward and saw a doe and whispered, “Kill it, Daddy.”

“I knew I had her then,” said Gasiorowski with a chuckle. Amanda killed her first deer — two deer, actually — in December of 1999. Gasiorowski wrote a missive for *Buckmaster* magazine describing the experience. In the story, he wrote, “As I looked at Amanda while going to the truck I noticed a quietness and sadness of killing two beautiful animals. As we talked through it she understood her feelings were natural and [she] probably would have the same feelings with future hunts when she harvested any legal wildlife.”

“If they shoot to please you, they don’t need to be hunting,” he said.

Amanda has now taken up bowhunting, and Gasiorowski believes early introduction to guns and shooting is an important part of the deer-hunting process, started at first by creative target shooting. “We shot cardboard

silhouette targets with heart, lungs, liver and kidneys outlined,” he said. “We highlighted the areas she needed to shoot at.”

Another value of the targets that carried over to field dressing and butchering was the study of anatomy. Cardboard examples became real-life examples in the field.

Weapon familiarity and confidence were also things Gasiorowski preached.

“Teach them not to doubt themselves,” he said. “When you pull that trigger you’re in charge of that gun; it’s not in charge of you.”

If you read *Field & Stream* magazine, you probably know who Keith McCafferty is (hint: survival editor). He’s a 1975 graduate of Duke University and has a passion for big-game hunting. He also introduced a child, his son Tom (now 28) to hunting, and along the way penned two articles on the subject. “I never forced him to hunt. I never even really suggested it,” said McCafferty from his Bozeman, Mont., home. “I wanted to introduce him to it slowly.”

So young Tom followed McCafferty on hunts for elk, mule deer and whitetails, with the father making sure to kill a doe to expose his son to a potential end result. When Tom

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was 12 he was old enough to carry a gun under Montana law. Tom passed up several deer with his Remington Model 7 until one day. “He kept passing up shots until one day in the Bridger Mountains he shot, it ran off, and he started to cry because he thought he wounded it,” said McCafferty. They found the deer and McCafferty recalled his son handling the antlers and stroking the fur. Today Tom is a chef, writer and artist, and still hunts.

The soft-spoken McCafferty advocates taking kids at a young age and attending hunter education classes. “I exposed him to the whole process of hunting through me without any pressure on him,” he said. McCafferty also had an interesting observation. “You don’t always know what makes them [children] afraid,” he said. “I hunted with one young hunter who was afraid of the cows in the field we crossed.”

That’s a good point and one many men — often less sensitive than the moms — often don’t think about. What may be common to you, veteran of many days afield, might be completely foreign to your child, especially in dark and unfamiliar locales. Dew-coated weeds that stop at your boots can soak shorter pants legs. Throw in some vocal coyotes, cold rain or distant owls, and things can get dicey fast. Step amid a covey of predawn quail underfoot, and a change of clothes might be in order.

Caroline and I will hit the deer woods this fall and see what happens. She’s got some turkey hunting behind her, and we’ll practice the deer stand scenarios and partner in gear selection. In time there will be a .243 or 7mm-08 with her name on it if we get that far. I don’t think she’ll shoot this year, but I want her to enjoy the ritual of it and maybe I’ll kill a deer for her when she’s with me. Maybe I won’t; I’ll make that call at the time.

We’ll spend time together, communicate and partner in the process. She’ll strive to act mature, and I will do my best to think like a kid. And above all, we’ll have fun, venison or not. ♡

Mike Zlotnicki is the former outdoors editor for The (Raleigh) News & Observer. He lives in Garner with his wife, three daughters and a German shorthaired pointer.

PROPER PREPARATION

There are more than a few things to consider to make the deer woods a positive experience for children, starting with proper clothing and equipment.

Pleasant weather is easy to dress for, but for cooler temps make sure the child has wool or wool blend socks, boots that fit (insulated boots for colder weather) and camo clothes and jackets that fit. Getting them involved in the gear selection process promotes unity and gives them some ownership in the hunt.

Stand selection is another often overlooked area. A big tower stand is ideal, but make sure the child isn’t intimidated by the climb. Inside, a rug helps deaden the inevitable scrapes and thumps of boot soles and gear. The walls obviously help with scent control and movement masking. Don’t overlook a big ground blind for the same reasons. Easy ingress and egress, and commercial pop-up ground blinds are portable, lightweight and inexpensive. They allow for naps, book reading and (sigh) portable video games during long waits. (Remember, they have to have fun if you want them to return.) Don’t forget snacks (foil wrap and zip-loc bags are quiet) and drinks. For modest hunters, bring a bucket, trash bag and toilet paper for the Call of Nature. If the child is the gunner, a shooting stick (rest) of some type is a good idea.

Two-man ladder stands are nice, but make sure they have a cloth skirt for more camouflage and movement protection. Facemasks are de rigueur for woods hunting, but face paint is more fun to apply and generates less movement and fidgeting.



ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID WILLIAMS