

# FIRST HUNT

A passion to learn leads this novice from the classroom to a box blind

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I was a newbie. I didn't grow up around hunting and I didn't know anyone who hunted. The only gun my father kept in the house was the fake replica Davy Crockett gun leaning against the wall behind the grandfather clock in our living room.

Yet, I still caught the hunting bug, probably from my grandfather. When we would visit him, I often found multiple bullet holes in the window of the room where I slept. He used to shoot through the screen at deer bold enough to invade his garden. Grandpa was a pretty good shot, given the numerous antler racks that hung in his garage. But he never taught me to shoot.

Since I didn't learn to hunt when I was young, my goals were simple: I was going to pass a hunter safety course, get a license, learn to shoot, kill a deer and process it. The biggest psychological hurdle was the first one—going to hunter safety training. A few years passed; I looked up dates for local classes several times but never registered. I wasn't afraid of hunting. I wanted to go. I wasn't queasy at the thought of shooting a deer. But I was nervous that I would be treated differently in the class as a woman. I was afraid that I would get a license and never go hunting. And I was terrified of being a bad shot.

Deep down I realized that I could never even miss a deer without attending hunter education class, so I finally got the nerve to register. One month later, I walked in the door of the Wake County Wildlife Clubhouse to a room filled with long rows of empty tables and folding chairs. I was early. The room filled in; I was in a class of about 60 men, a lot of young sons and four women. Some of them had hunted their whole lives and simply wanted a North Carolina license. Others were novices—like me.

The first day of class consisted of instruction in every possible subject concerning hunting. I furiously scribbled notes about fall-arrest harnesses, bolt-actions and break actions, centerfire versus rimfire, pivot safeties, cross-bolt safeties, shot patterns, quartering toward versus away and the different shooting positions. It was like trying to drink straight from a blue water cooler jug; most of it spilled past me. The second day we were tested on the information. After the test, we separated into two parties and trekked across the rolling, woody property out to the firing ranges to practice shooting under supervision to demonstrate that we could not only identify the parts of a firearm, but safely operate one. My first attempts at skeet shooting with a shotgun and shooting a bolt-action rifle were satisfactory. Despite my misgivings, I passed the range and written tests.

About a month later, I received my hunter safety card in the mail. I tore open the envelope with such enthusiasm that I nearly



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ripped a corner off of the card. Now, all I needed was my license. That was easy. I bought a one-year license at the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC). But in North Carolina, one can also walk into many sporting goods stores around the state to get one.

Now, with credence that I would go hunting, I began to imagine shooting my first deer, hitting it just behind the shoulder into the heart. It would drop instantly—a clean shot. But I also knew there were at least a few steps between that moment and jerky and steaks. So I was off to learn how to butcher and process meat in preparation for taking my first successful shot.

#### Dressed For Success

The NCWRC provides educational events for beginning hunters. I attended a class called "Deer Processing, Field to Freezer." The single-evening, indoor clinic was taught by instructors from the Cape Fear River Branch Quality Deer Management Association (QDMA) and provided instruction for field dressing and processing harvested deer.

The appeal of the clinic varied for different people. Like the hunter safety class, experienced and novice hunters attended. Retired Army Chaplain Wilbert Harrison, from Hope Mills, came with his friend James Carter, a retired master sergeant. They were forming a group of military friends to hunt together

and planned to share the information from the clinic with the group.

"We can listen and learn how other folks are doing things and make sure we're doing it to the best of our ability," Harrison said. "We're doing something we enjoy; we're just trying to learn more about it and we're enjoying our retirement."

Tina Niece attended the clinic with her husband, James. "We're more interested in the butchering," she said. "We want to have our own meat to freeze ourselves." She also planned to teach her children to hunt and process game. "My kids, I want to be outdoorsy and self-reliant. I want them to know it's not just a grocery store aspect."

Howard Walters, one of the QDMA instructors, did a hunting tool kit and field dressing demonstration. He used a full body mount on stage to show where different cuts of meat come from. People put their feet up and took iPhone photos of the presentation slides. Even newbies felt comfortable asking questions. The clinics were not all lectures and note-taking either. We enjoyed samples of hot venison chili and deer jerky in the lobby during the break.

The second half of the evening featured instructors Guy Gardner and Judy Gardner teaching meat processing and explaining the benefits of butchering meat at home. "You have control of the chain of processing," Judy Gardner said. "You took it, you know you

have handled it properly in the field. That meat is cleaner than anything you're getting at the grocery store."

The instructors emphasized several key hunting practices that are not intuitive for novice hunters. These include:

- Field dress a deer as soon as possible. The goal is to immediately cool the meat. With the organs intact, the body retains heat creating a bacteria-friendly environment.
- Don't handle any brain, spinal cord, eyes, spleen, tonsil or lymph node material because contagious illnesses like chronic wasting disease can be transferred through it.
- If you want to use the hide for taxidermy, the steps of the field-dressing process differ significantly and must be careful and deliberate. Take your time. It's difficult to sew up a hole in the hide.
- If bow hunting, work slowly and carefully until the broadhead is retrieved.
- When transporting a deer, leave evidence of the deer's sex, such as the head or external sexual organs on the carcass, in case you are stopped by wildlife law enforcement for a routine check.
- It is illegal to sell any part of a game animal in North Carolina.

#### Dirty Boots

The clinic made me aware of how little I actually know about hunting, but the instructors emphasized that the fastest way to learn to hunt is through firsthand experience. To that end, the NCWRC and QDMA promote hunter mentoring for newbies by pairing them with experienced hunters, which is extremely helpful for people who are not comfortable going on their first hunt alone.

**Opposite:** Guy Gardner speaks about the importance of wearing hunter orange during deer season, even if one is not hunting. **Left:** Gardner demonstrates rattling antlers for attracting bucks during the rut.



*“...THE FASTEST WAY TO LEARN TO HUNT IS THROUGH FIRSTHAND EXPERIENCE.”*



**Willow Oaks Plantation in Eden was the location for a youth hunt sponsored by the Quality Deer Management Association. Here youth are paired with adult mentors to assist them on their deer hunt and to help skin and butcher any kills.**

One such opportunity is a mentored hunt, often scheduled in mid-December at Willow Oaks Plantation in Eden. I attended a weekend hunt supervised by the same QDMA instructors from the clinics. It gave students a place to go hunting, an opportunity to practice shooting on a range and a chance to work with an instructor on several hunting trips.

The plantation lodge was decorated for Christmas, with wreaths hanging outside and greenery draping the giant stone fireplace in the great room where a warm fire burned all night. Trophies of deer, bear and turkeys hung on the walls, and a colossal antler chandelier dangled from the high, vaulted ceiling. The glow of the lights indoors lit up the house like a lantern sitting at the top of the hill. The lodge was fully outfitted for hunting.

"Just a little bit of thought went into this place," property owner Arthur Dick said. Everything was taken care of—from boot warmers, a locker in the mess room for each hunter and comfortable beds and bunks.

The first night at Willow Oaks, I jostled around the plantation in a World War II Pinzgauer, a six-wheel-drive troop transport, with Dick picking up the hunters and mentors from their stand sites and collecting the harvested deer. My head almost hit the dashboard at the first jolt of the vehicle. "You gotta ride with it girl," Dick said. A stack of paper towels served to wipe the windshield as the glass fogged over in the humid evening air. Dick's radio crackled with static as the hunting parties called in reporting their statuses. Dick knew every gully and hill on the property—even in the pitch dark—which was comforting because it didn't take long for me to get turned around.

I hopped out at first stop from the high cab and sunk deep in red-clay mud, which made sense since it had poured for my entire drive up to Eden that day. My suede leather boots were instantly sodden, but it was either pull myself out and keep up, or climb back in the truck. I pulled out and kept up. We joined the hunter and mentor in the field. With flashlights, we admired a dead doe in

the high grass. Dick and the mentor lifted the deer into the transport. We all climbed into the truck and circled back toward the house.

Having delivered all of the hunters and their bounty back to the lodge, we began processing. We weighed and dressed five harvested deer in a fully equipped processing shed. There were stainless steel sinks and counters, an electric scale and pulley lift system to clean the deer with ease. There was even a heater on the wall to warm frozen fingers while working in the cooler. The first deer weighed 121 pounds and, with it hanging from the ceiling, Dick demonstrated field dressing for the new hunters. Afterward, they each worked with QDMA mentors to dress their first deer.

#### My Turns Arrives

After going to hunter safety training, attending the processing clinic and observing that first night at Willow Oaks, it was finally my turn to go hunting. My party walked along a road through a soybean field. I picked a few small beans, as we went, just to taste them. The ground was barely visible in the predawn light. No streetlights illuminated this gravel road.

Our two parties split, and my mentor led the way through the woods to our stand. After climbing up into it, we settled into two comfortable black leather office chairs—an unexpected luxury. Then we sat. We sat there all morning. We left at noon to eat lunch. After lunch, we were back until evening. We didn't see a deer all day.

Twenty minutes before the shooting hour closed, a doe stepped out of the woods and strode cautiously to the corn pile. It was dark, but I could see her form through my scope. She was facing me head-on. I waited. It got darker. Ten minutes passed. I was squinting through my scope when I felt a tickle in my throat. I'd been battling a cough for the last month, but I hadn't coughed all day in the stand. "You're kidding me," I thought. I coughed, reached for my water bottle and took a swig. I knew the deer would be gone. I looked back through my scope; she hadn't run. In fact she hadn't moved much at all.

But now she was half turned and quartering toward me.

"She's in position," whispered my mentor, who was hunched next to me peering out the stand window through binoculars. "You can take the shot if you're comfortable."

The flash from the barrel surprised me. I was shaking. My eyes snapped shut. Through my scope I'd seen the doe leap into the air. The sound of the shot died away. "You missed," I thought. I opened my eyes, vainly hoping to see my first deer downed. But I knew I'd jerked a little. We climbed down from the stand, and began the search.

"I think you must have gotten it in the leg," said another hunter who had joined us to help search. I heard the disappointing report after close to 30 minutes of searching in the thick, dew-drenched grass around the corn pile for any sign that I hit the doe. The hunter had found a few spots of blood. We tracked them dot by dot about 45 feet from the edge of the field into the woods with everything from professional hunting lights to illuminated phone screens to iPhone spot-lights. And then there were no more dots. The tracking was good experience for a new hunter. The outcome was difficult to accept.

Back at the lodge, late in the evening, seasoned and novice hunters stood close around the fire pit on the patio. The glow of the flames lit up faces from below, and our visible breaths floated off in front of us. Bandit, the plantation's black Labrador retriever weaved in and out of the group, seeking anyone willing to play fetch even at that late hour. Inside the lodge, in the kitchen, a feast of hot cheesy casserole, vegetables, peach cobbler and the largest cut of meat I'd ever seen in my life were roasting away. As we waited for dinner, the mentors shared stories about past hunts and the good and not-so-good old hunting dogs. We newbies listened in rapt attention. For now, deer season was closing out; New Year's was just around the corner. I would have to wait until next season for another shot. I couldn't wait. ♦

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