



MY FIRST DEER

N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission staff members recall memorable experiences that helped turn them into hunters for life

“The best thing about hunting and fishing,” the Old Man said, “is that you don’t have to actually do it to enjoy it. You can go to bed every night thinking about how much fun you had twenty years ago, and it all comes back clear as moonlight.”

-Robert Ruark, “The Old Man and the Boy”

Illustrated by Gary Palmer

RUARK'S SENTIMENT PROVED TRUE when we asked a handful of N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission colleagues to share stories of their first deer. Like the Old Man predicted, the tales came back with remarkable clarity and passion. Some date back nearly 50 years while others happened just a few years ago. Yet they all seemed to share one quality: The fondest memories are for the people who participated in the experience and helped make it possible.

What follows are several "My First Deer" stories from Commission staff. Additional stories can be found in the online and digital edition version of this article. To view, visit ncwildlife.org/winc and click on the sample article for this issue. Magazine subscribers can add a digital edition subscription for just \$3 by visiting ncwildlife.org/winc or by calling 800-786-2721.

PAYING IT FORWARD

Growing up in east-central Pennsylvania in the 1970s, hunting and fishing was a birth-right and a rite of passage. At age 12 (1972), I became a hunter. I didn't realize it then, but it was the beginning of the rest of my life. The facilitator of it all was Uncle Bill (Mom's brother) and he single-handedly introduced all the males in my family to hunting, including my father, brother and me.

Small game dominated early hunting excursions with squirrels, rabbits and pheasants. Deer hunting didn't enter the subject early on likely due to the interactive and ubiquitous nature of our small game hunts.

In 1975, Uncle Bill purchased a Shakespeare 45-pound fiberglass recurve bow for my 14th birthday; I still retain it. The recurve cost \$25 and shooting began at targets in preparation of my first deer hunt in September.

Although many details are sketchy, I do remember Uncle Bill parking his old black Plymouth sedan along an unfamiliar country road that cool, fall morning. Following a brief walk, he placed me on "stand" where a cornfield intersected the woods and emphasized that I be still and quiet. He would be a short distance away. The hunt location provided a natural corridor between deer feeding and bedding areas, as I would discover.

Daybreak came quickly, as did a lone deer making its way right toward me. The

deer (a doe) was about 20 yards away when it stopped. It looked huge. I was nervous and excited but had already drawn back the little recurve and, shortly thereafter, released the arrow. Everything seemed to happen so quickly, but I vividly remember seeing the arrow find its mark in the doe's vital area. Following the shot, the deer bolted forward and succumbed no more than 25 yards to my right. It turned out my first deer was not huge at all. In fact, it was a yearling doe with spots fading, yet visible, and I could almost drag it to Uncle Bill's Plymouth by myself, and proudly at that.

To me, it was an awesome deer, but even more importantly, the entire experience would culminate in a lifelong love of nature, a passion for wildlife and habitat conservation, and ultimately, a wildlife career allowing me to pay forward Uncle Bill's contributions and passion to all I have had the pleasure of meeting. ♦

—Walter "Deet" James
R3 Hunting Specialist

DEER LOST, LESSON LEARNED

Mother Nature has a way of teaching us lessons that are poignant and can last a lifetime. One such lesson was presented to me at 12 years old when I was white-tailed

deer hunting with Dad on land that my family had hunted for decades.

A commotion over the ridge caused by other hunters was loud enough that we became aware of it and I was directed to a small rise to watch for deer that may be spooked our way. My excitement was amplified by Dad's own level of anticipation; if he was full of anticipatory energy then this must be a chance to harvest my first deer. I stood on the remnants of an old logging road watching for a twinkle of white that could be an ear or the outline of a tail. I was taught to search for small hints of what could be a larger body. Instead, I was met with loud crunching of leaves and a whole deer not more than 40 yards away.

I quickly raised my rifle, released the safety, settled the front sight in the notch of the rear sight and aligned them just behind the front shoulder of the small buck. I breathed, squeezed the trigger and ... emotion exploded throughout my body. I felt confident and full of pride for the step I'd just taken as a hunter, but also scared and worried. It was a cocktail of emotions.

Dad met me with a hug and we moved toward where the deer had been. We searched and searched before finding a spot of blood on a leaf. My shot had hit the deer, but we weren't confident in the placement of the shot. We continued to search. Although we found a sign of the wounded deer, there was no deer to be found. My

confidence was wounded now as well. After a couple of hours, my uncle let us know that the deer I had shot was ultimately shot and claimed by a different hunter. My shot was high and back toward the midsection—not a good shot.

I was sad, sick and worried. Maybe I wasn't cut out for this. I recovered after a long sit and pep talk from Dad. I was comforted in the fact that the animal was found and harvested, but still, the what-if's wouldn't stay out of my head. I went home with a blood-stained leaf and an empty ammo casing, but also with a moment that shaped me as a hunter and a human. ♦

—Chet Clark
R3 Outreach Manager

THE DECISION OF A LIFETIME

"Can I really do this?" That thought played over and over in my head as I sat in the

stand waiting for a deer to come within range. Sure, I had sighted in the .270 Winchester rifle and felt comfortable shooting. But a paper target is completely different than a living, breathing animal and I had just become hyper-aware of that fact.

As I sat there wondering if I would be able to pull the trigger on an animal's life, she walked out. A dainty doe was cautiously walking a nearby path and heading straight into my zone of fire. It felt like she and I were the only ones on the planet at that moment. I watched her sniff the ground as she eased her way through the forest, choosing every step carefully as her eyes surveyed the landscape. My actions were going to have to be deliberate, slow and controlled if I was even going to have a chance at taking my shot. But how was I going to pull that off if my entire body felt like it was shaking?

I grew up in a non-hunting household that didn't own a gun, let alone use one to harvest an animal. My high school boyfriend introduced me to the world of hunting and fishing. After school, I would make my way

to his house and we would venture off into the woods or to a pond. These days of running fence lines looking for turtles and checking for deer signs were where I fell in love with the lifestyle that I would make a career out of one day. They also led me to the deer stand when I was 17 years old.

As everything came together, I knew it was decision time. She was a comfortable distance from me and had paused to look back. If I was going to make my move, now was the time. I pulled my gun to the rest, steadied it and got ready. At this moment, the world seemed to pause. I took one final breath with her and slowly squeezed the trigger. The decision was made. She fell to the forest floor and never took another step. That meant everything to me because she deserved an accurate shot. I sat in the stand for some time, recounting everything that had just happened. I felt no regret in my decision, only gratitude and respect that she was my first deer. ♦

—Casey Williams
Northern Piedmont Hunter
Education Coordinator



FUN AND GAME

To country folk, hunting is as much a part of life as spitting and shelling peas. I genuinely believe it's woven into my DNA. And for hunters, the harvest of one's first deer is a rite of passage, when we become a legend in our mind. My experience was no different and I remember it as if it happened this morning, not more than 20 years ago.

I anticipated this since my father first invited me afield—it was never a mandate, only encouragement. I enjoyed hunting because he made it enjoyable. It seems like each trip was cut short because I either got too cold or I ate too many snacks, but that was part of the fun. Rarely was the hunt about the game.

My first deer began months before the hunt. I remember tuning in my first rifle (a 30-06 with a simple scope) while my dad supervised and offered advice. I even did some scouting for places to construct ground blinds. Growing up in Alabama exposed me to different sets of game laws, and hunting with the aid of any bait wasn't allowed. Many landowners and hunters planted winter wheat, what we called "green fields," where many hunters took their first deer. The 5-acre winter wheat field my dad planted would be no different.

It was January 23, 1997, I was 13 years old and it was cool and cloudy. I came home from school and traded my civilian clothes for surplus camo, an orange hat and a rifle that I had more trust in than any seasoned hunter could ever imagine. My dad and I cranked the old Chevrolet pickup and slipped across the road, bouncing through red clay, before quietly slipping out and walking up the hill. It was always an ominous walk, one that had previously been a path to eventual disappointment.

An hour later, a deer stepped out into the wheat. I'd seen hundreds of does bound out, with little regard, but this deer was

different. This one was cautious and seemed to materialize from thin air. It took me a couple of blinks to identify his basket-sized rack, half of it missing. I centered the crosshairs and squeezed the trigger. The buck dropped instantly. If there was ever a miracle, this was it, since I was shaking uncontrollably!

Moments later, my dad and I approached the downed animal, both sharing quiet smiles for a job-well-done. My dad and I have taken many deer together, but none as important as my first. ♦

—Chase Luker
Northern Coastal Hunter
Education Coordinator

**"The buck dropped instantly.
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TRY, TRY AND TRY AGAIN

My brother and I started hunting, with a gun, at 11 years old. It was part of growing up. Our first hunt was on doves, but it got serious on our first deer hunt. This was in the early 1970s and there were few deer and no deer hunting season around our home in Guilford County. Stand hunting was in its infancy; hunting deer with hounds was the norm.

Early on, before joining a dog club, my dad paid a daily fee for us to hunt with a group of dog hunters on timber company lands in the Southern Coastal Plain. Successful hunters got their choice of cuts, with the rest going into a community pile for

everyone to take home venison; an early example of sharing the bounty.

My brother killed his first deer at 11 years old, a second at 13 and a third at 15. He then stopped deer hunting regularly. I started when I was 11 years old and didn't kill my first deer until I was 26. It certainly was not for a lack of trying. Every fall when the Eastern deer season opened in mid-October, my dad would make weekly weekend trips "down east," and he always took me along. There was no hunting on Sunday, and he would not have allowed anyway. Dog hunting was very different then, before 4x4s, cell phones or GPS collars on dogs.

Hunters gathered in the morning and were taken out to stand lines, usually demarked with numbered signs, and always through the interior of the property being hunted.

We took our lunch and had to stay in sight of the stand marker until we and any deer that had been killed were collected at the end of the "drive." Anticipation, and communing with nature, was a large part of this hunting as few of us saw or killed a deer. But when the dogs were bawling and headed

your way, anticipation was the adrenaline of the day.

Dog hunting was a great social event and an opportunity to hunt with my dad, but I was always on the wrong stand. Nevertheless, I hunted religiously with him until I went away to graduate school; there was always next time. I moved to Martin County in 1986 to begin my doctoral research and was befriended by several locals. I mentioned my 15-year quest to one of the locals. He told me about a ladder stand on a soybean field where I was welcome to hunt. Because I hadn't killed a deer, he offered for me to take any legal animal (a philosophy I have applied to many new hunters since).

Those days were my introduction to stand hunting on the edge of large agricultural fields. This was a new approach, but

I have always liked to explore different hunting opportunities. I climbed up the ladder stand at 2 p.m. that October afternoon and, as the sun set, I saw a deer walking down the edge of the field toward me. The leaves were not off the trees yet and I saw that I would have one hole through which I could shoot. I was able to see that it was a basket-racked six-pointer, a legal deer I planned to kill when the shot presented itself.

Using my new Weatherby 270 (a recent gift from my wife), I shot the deer perfectly from above through the spine at the base of his neck at 40 yards. He dropped in his tracks. I climbed down, confirmed the kill, attached the tag to his antlers, and went to get my truck, so that I could go home and celebrate with my wife, call my dad and process the deer. All the while I was thinking about how 15 years of effort culminated in one quick opportunity, finally, I had killed my first deer. But just as important were all the gifts I had been given through those years in peoples' time and attention, the wonderment of family and friends, and the knowledge that hunting is truly so much more than killing; an elation that remains today. ♦

—Dr. David Cobb
Research Director

'THE AGONY OF DEFEAT'

I still remember the hunt that was almost my first deer harvest. I was a young boy, around 10 years old. I knew deer season was in because I would listen to the hunters talking on the CB radio. My father had some old ones in his building, and I would wire one up to an old 12-volt car battery and listen in, sometimes even join in the conversation.

For several weeks I had been paying attention to several deer coming into a soybean field across the road from my

childhood home. The field was split in two by a mature hedge row and the deer would often come out just to the right of it, where the field joined the woods. So, one afternoon I talked my dad into letting me take an old 12-gauge single shot and try to get one by myself.

I had never gone hunting by myself, so this was my test! I walked into the field following the row and made my way to where it began in the corner of the field about 200 yards from my house. I sat down against a large tree on the hedgerow so I could see both corners of the field. The location was about 30 yards from where the deer had been coming out. It was around noon and I soon fell asleep against the tree.

I woke up to light rain and fog, and I was getting cold! About 20 minutes later, a doe popped out. My heart was racing. Right behind her was a bigger doe. They were both about 50 yards away. I was ready as they walked into my zone of fire. I pulled the gun to my shoulder and took a shot at the

biggest doe. She dropped into the 2- to 3-foot high soybeans. The other doe took off running into the woods. With my inexperience, I immediately jumped up and took off running toward the deer. To my complete surprise, the doe jumped up and ran off! I forgot to reload so I couldn't get another shot off in time.

I ran to my house and told my dad I just got my first deer. He asked where it is and I told him it ran away! We both walked into the field where I had shot, and I showed him where I was sitting and where the doe was when she ran. We looked for that deer for several hours and never found it. By midnight we were back at home, where I suffered the agony of defeat. I learned several good lessons that day—shot placement, patience, dress for the weather, be ready for anything—that have contributed to my future hunting success. ♦

—CP White III
Southern Piedmont Hunter
Education Coordinator

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15 years of effort culminated in one
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my first deer."**

'LIFT AND WIPE'

I killed my first deer three days before my 17th birthday. The deer was taken along the western rim of the Great Dismal Swamp just east of Sunbury on Granddaddy Paul Rountree's farm. My cousin, Scott, had placed a platform in a fork of a tree so we would have a tree stand along "the point path" where he had shot his first bear.

Most of the deer hunting done in northeastern North Carolina at that time was with hounds, but occasionally we would sit in a stand and still hunt after school. I wasn't much of a deer hunter. My granddaddy liked to eat squirrel and raccoon, and hunting deer from a stand meant you

had to be still. This never worked out well for me. Looking for squirrels allowed me to explore the edges of the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge.

On December 13, 1995, I finally sat still long enough to catch a small 6-pointer sneaking down the point path. I shot the deer with my Winchester 1300 with a load of 12 gauge double-aught buckshot, or at least I pulled the trigger. The deer ran straight for the stand and fell at the base of the tree. I headed down and to the four-wheeler.

Scott helped me load the deer and I was off to Granddaddy's house smiling from ear to ear. I pulled up to his side door and asked, "Granddaddy, how do you clean a deer?"

Granddaddy walked away and came back. He tossed me a roll of toilet paper and said, "Just lift his tail and wipe, son." After a good laugh, he told me that Uncle Earl would be more helpful.

Uncle Earl, Scott, my brothers and I got the deer dressed and cut up and

we all realized there were no pellet holes that we could find in the deer, so they all figured I scared him to death. There were a few laughs at my expense.

Fast forward a few weeks, I had grilled some of the meat with Italian dressing to Granddaddy and Grandma's liking. In January 1996 we had a bad winter storm that knocked the power out for a couple of weeks. Grandma took what she thought was my deer out of the freezer for me to grill. There were a lot of funny looks and hard swallowing before we realized we had marinated beef liver. Again, everyone laughed.

Granddaddy Rountree had his stroke not too long afterward and we lost him that spring. He got to see my first deer and tell me how to clean him by lifting his tail and wiping. The antlers hang by my gun safe and my Winchester 1300 is the first gun inside the door with a box of double-aught on the top shelf. ♦

—Travis J. Casper
Operations Manager, Wildlife
Education Division

A FAMILY TRADITION

In my 21-year career with the Commission, the greatest reward professionally and personally has been the excitement and enthusiasm of new hunters. I have been a good witness to the joy of many hunters' first deer, including those through our Special Permit Youth Hunts. It thrills me to hear the stories about "my first deer" made possible by our program.

My daughters, Atlanta, 24, and Alex, 16, grew up hunting alongside me from an early age. I am so proud to have been a part of their first deer. They have learned that hunting is not always about hunting. It is about spending time together. Hunting has taught them responsibility, safety and ethics. Hunting often teaches us all other useful skills such as patience, respect, endurance, coordination, but most often—HUMILITY! What follows are their "My First Deer" stories. ♦

—Wes Blair
Northern Mountain Hunter
Education Coordinator

There is something about watching the sunrise on cold, crisp autumn mornings, and something even better when you finally hear the low crunch of leaves on a quiet morning in the woods. One morning will always be my favorite: when I killed my first deer.

I was 12 years old and it started off as most November mornings do in the mountains of Virginia: cold! Waking up in a warm camper only to go hunt in 17-degree weather would make most people a "not so happy camper." Not me!

As we pulled away from the other hunters in our club, we started down the long gravel road to an oak and beech hollow where we had previously placed our blind. Another 10-minute walk and we were set up well before daylight. With Dad to my left and my

gun across my lap as the sun began to shine light into the hollow, I could tell I had the perfect view from all angles.

The sun didn't even have a chance to peek through before we heard the subtle sound of footsteps coming through the woods not far from our blind. As we sat there listening and looking, not yet able to see anything, my excitement kept building. Finally, we saw them, a doe and a spike had come down the hillside in front of our blind. I eased my gun up and out the front window, put the crosshairs right behind the shoulder and pulled the trigger, all the while shaking with excitement. All of a sudden, we're high fiving,

"They have learned that hunting is not always about hunting. It is about spending time together."

hugging and yelling with enthusiasm. We step out of the blind and walk toward the creek, and there he lay, my first deer. ♦

—Atlanta Whittington

There are many mornings in the woods to remember, but the one that I cherish most is the morning of my first deer. My story starts on a crisp November morning at the Commission's annual special permit youth deer hunt in the mountains of Tuttle Educational State Forest. I was 14 years old. The week prior to the hunt, we selected our hunting areas, set up blinds and stands and walked the surrounding area for a good shooting lane. We decided to set up our blind on the edge of the tree line in a field. We were confident this was a good spot

because it was an ideal place for deer to come feed in the early morning.

My dad was the coordinator of this hunt and unable to hunt with me. My brother-in-law Patrick agreed to sit with me in the blind. As sunlight began to break the sky, Patrick and I set up in the blind. We heard a couple of shots in the distance just after daylight. We figured it was some of the other hunters in surrounding areas.

We knew it was the magical first hour of daylight, so we were extra alert. I had fixed my eyes on the field but every so often I would carefully look into the wood line to see if any deer had shown up. This time, as

soon as I refocused on the field, I saw what appeared to be three does approaching from the far side of the field. My heart dropped and my adrenaline went through the roof. I kept calm and gently tapped on Patrick's knee to alert him. He told me to get ready and get my gun up. I steadily rested my gun on the blind window and waited until I had a good shot. A few seconds later I found myself looking through the scope at the first deer. Shaking with excitement, I

slowly squeezed the trigger and before I knew it, I saw the muzzle flash from my shotgun slug. With all the adrenaline I didn't even feel the recoil. I looked to my left and knew from the smile on Patrick's face that I had made a great shot.

We waited a couple of minutes before walking out to get the doe. She wasn't the biggest, but it still meant a lot to me because I had just killed my first deer. I was so proud of myself! ♦

—Alex Blair

Have a comment or a story of your first deer that you would like to share? Please send it to letters@ncwildlife.org to be considered for publishing in our Letters from Readers section.

