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
PAYING IT FORWARD
Growing up in east-central Pennsylvania in the 1970s, hunting and fishing was a birthright 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 1973, Uncle Bill purchased a Shake speare 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 hunting 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 vitals 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 a blood-stained neck and an empty ammo casing, but also with a moment that shaped me as a hunter and a human.

—Chet Clark
R3 Outreach Manager

Death, 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 tumble 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 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, what’s-dit wouldn’t stay out of my head. I went home with a blood-stained neck and an empty ammo casing, but also with a moment that shaped me as a hunter and a human.

—Walter “Deet” James
R3 Hunting Specialist

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.

—Cory Williams
Northern Piedmont Hunter Education Coordinator
Fun and Game

To country folks, hunting is as much a part of life as spitting and shelling peas. I genu-
inely 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 leg-
end in our mind. My experience was no dif-
ferent 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 tun-
ing in my first rifle (a .30-06 with a
simple scope) while my dad super-
vised and offered advice. I even did
some scouting for places to con-
struct ground blinds. Growing up
in Alabama exposed me to differ-
ent sets of game laws, and hunt-
ing with the aid of any ban 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 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
approached the downed animal, both sharing quiet whispers
for a job-well-done. My dad and I have taken
many deer together, but none as important
as my first.

“The buck dropped instantly.
If there was ever a miracle, this was it,
since I was shaking uncontrollably!”

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. Success-
ful 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.

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-Octo-
ber, 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 demarcated with numbered
signs, and always through the inte-
rior 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 end. 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
befriendied 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
and training on the edge of large agricul-
tural fields. This was a new approach, but
I have always liked to explore different hunt-
ing 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-
backed 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,
attracted the tag to his antlers, and went
to get my truck, so I could go home and
celebrate with my wife, call my dad and
process the deer. All the while I was think-
ing 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 people’s time and attention,
the wondernment of family and friends, and
the knowledge that hunting is truly so
much more than killing; an elation that
remains today.

“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 hunt-
ers 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 after
another, I had killed my first deer.

“...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
dozer 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 ex-
perience, I immediately jumped up
and took off running towards the doe. 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 mid-
night we were back at home, where I suf-
ered 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.

“...and I told him it ran away!”

Try to Make the Most of
Every Opportunity

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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 north-eastern 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, 1993, 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 peller 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 wiping. The antlers hang by my gun safe and my Winchester 1300 is the first gun

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.

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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 the dark, so we were extra alert. I had fixed my breakfast and looked out the window for any deer that had shown up. This time, as soon as I focused 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. I gently 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.

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 as the Commission’s annual special permit youth deer hunt in the mountains of Tidewater 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 woods 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. I gently 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.

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