

## **The Deer I Never Killed**

**By Randall L. Eaton, Ph.D.**

Growing up along the Illinois and Sangamon Rivers where deer have been evading human hunters for over ten thousand years, seeing them was a rare delight. Before I began hunting, I never got closer to them than most people. I might spot some next to the levee six-hundred yards off, already watching me and fading into the undergrowth, and every once in a while I saw one closely along the highway at night. Only when I became a hunter did I learn what it means to hunt deer—but not kill them.

My values about wild things were much influenced early on by my grandfather, Gomp. He grew up on a farm in Indiana when deer were at their all-time low. The hardwood-prairie grass savannas had been converted to croplands and deer became rare throughout much of the midwest. Thanks to state subsidized reforestation programs that sprang up during the 1930s, thousands of acres in central Illinois were planted in pine. From the shrunken but never fully conquered river bottoms, deer reestablished themselves throughout the county, including Gomp's farm seven miles east of town. In the corner of his back eighty acres, Gomp had let feather-leafed locusts invade the field from the intersecting rows of sage orange, planted as wind-breaks. Within four years there were twenty acres of immature forest cover just waiting for whitetails to take up residence.

Weekly around the year, Gomp looked for tracks, and when he found some he followed them to see whether the deer was passing through or settling down on the farm. Eventually, he told me with great pride, a doe inhabited the locusts, and since I was starting to hunt then, he made it absolutely clear to me that I was not to shoot any deer on the farm and neither were my friends. In time, he said, if the herd grows, then we may hunt them, but not until then.

On hundreds of quail and pheasant hunts I passed through the locusts and paused to study deer sign, including tracks of fawns with adults, but every time I reported my observations to Gomp he already knew what I was going to say. He'd been there more often and for longer periods than I had, and he didn't simply read sign, he hid, stalked and directly watched the deer.

Then Gomp decided it was time to get a tag and hunt deer for the first time in his life. The Illinois deer season was but a few years old, permitted only in some counties, and it lasted three days. Gomp knew the daily movements and activities of the deer on his farm, and I was certain that he'd bag one the first day out. But, he didn't. Why he didn't was something we never discussed. I listened to his stories about the deer and how he got close enough to shoot a buck, not only that first season but every season after it for five years. I knew that he relished hunting the deer, which brought him into their normally secret lives, and that he didn't want to kill one was a secret he and I shared with the deer. That I had no interest in killing a deer was no secret to anyone.

Then I accepted a job with the game department to check deer in northern Illinois. For three days, I was surrounded by deer hunters and dead deer. We got up at five-thirty, early enough to eat the equivalent of three breakfasts in the only 24-hour-a-day restaurant. We worked indoors without heat all day in the middle of winter, where it was below

freezing and windy. As each vehicle pulled up, the townsfolk gathered round to see the deer, and as one of us lifted it onto the scales, the farmers shouted out their estimate of its weight. It was a contest between them and us, so before weighing the carcass we had to announce our guesses, too. After lifting a few dozen deer and weighing them I learned to guess their weight within two or three pounds. We almost always beat the farmers who misjudged deer weights because deer are thinner boned yet denser owing to well-toned muscles and lower fat than livestock.

Here in the heart of Dixon, Illinois, we encountered the full spectrum of human attitudes toward wild animals and hunting. There were the no-nonsense farmers who didn't want to dally around with heroic stories; they wanted us to weigh the animal, age it, ask them the standard questions, check their license and tag and be done with it. They hunted in farming uniforms, blue-gray coveralls and brown Boss gloves set off with bright red or orange caps for safety. They wanted to go home, to show the wife and kids, then butcher the body for the freezer. I got the distinct impression that these men needed to take some familial pride in having killed a deer, and were it not for the incessant comments about what good eating the animal would make, it would never have dawned on me that to the farmer-hunter, sharing deer-food with his family was his way of forgiving himself for killing it. Beneath his supreme practicality, which he projects as a kind of atonement, the farmer knows that the deer is something more divine than a cow or sheep. Each fall when he gets "his deer," he is reminded that hunting is more akin to farming than either one is to city life. That much he overlaps with the sentiments of wildlife biologists, once-a-year shamans of his county's courthouse lawn.

There in the cold and wind under the dim light of the sheriff's parking garage, amid the sloshing of blood and the recounting of deeds, develops a brotherhood more ancient and predictable than one may find except among hunting companions. The same men stayed for many hours, their women and children appearing for only a few minutes, long enough to see a dead deer or two before delicately informing their men that there's shopping to tend to, that they'll meet them later for coffee "whenever" they're through here.. A woman dare not interrupt this fragment of an age old rite, the oldest rite of them all, a sacred homage of the men to the wild animal.

When a city man brought in a deer, the farmers spied him with suspicion; this was a farming community where townsmen survived because of farming or came from local farms themselves. Big city men unofficially trespassed upon the local state forest to kill their deer, and the farmers resented them for that and as a matter of general principles. Men from Chicago symbolized everything corrupt and degenerate that threatens farm life, and when it came to animals, what did they know? The deer was just a trophy for most of them who were too rich to eat anything but the farmers' corn-fattened steers.

I'd like to think that it wasn't because they were black that the fraternity of farmers gave them such a hard time. Certainly, racial prejudice was not why I notified the sheriff about their flagrant violations of the game code. I suppose there weren't any blacks living in Dixon, and these four men appeared to be from the Chicago area. They seemed nervous as they walked up to me and the fifty staunch farmers standing inside and around open doors of the garage. "Hey, man, where's all the deer?" Dumfounded by their question and trying to maintain an atmosphere of decency in the face of racial bias, I said, "What do you mean?" The man's eyes were understandably jittery. "Hey, we drove down all the way from Chicago and never saw a deer. Not one deer. Where are they?"

His comments communicated to everyone present that these men knew nothing at all about deer, a signal of cultural difference which was intolerable to the farmers. Instantaneously, the farm men had seized upon justification for their racism. I felt the

tension mounting, and the terrible visions I had carried since a boy of whites lynching blacks danced in my head. "I'm not surprised you didn't see any deer along the highway," I replied while the farmers and a few boys burst out laughing to themselves. "The deer are hiding in the woods during daylight, especially now with the hunting season on." "Oh, so they're out in the country. I guess we can just go out anywhere, that right?" No ethical hunter would enter land without first asking permission, but these men lacked any background in hunting etiquette. "No," I cautioned them, "you'll need to ask permission first. Or, you can go to the state forest to hunt."

While I explained where the state area was on the map and how to get there, I noticed that the shotgun shells, fifty of them wrapped around his chest in two belts which gave him the appearance of Pancho Villa, were not slugs, the rifled, solid projectile required by law for hunting deer. They were instead typical upland bird loads, small shot, which wouldn't kill a deer except at extremely close range. "You're not going to use these shells for deer, are you?" "Why not?" he asked. "Because these are for pheasants or ducks, not deer. You need slugs for deer; it's the law." His companions told him to hurry up so they could go get some deer, and as he turned to leave, thanking me for all the help, I asked if they had hunting licenses and deer tags. Their frowned foreheads suggested that they had never heard of such things, which is why, when the sheriff stopped by, I alerted him to where they were going.

After the black men left, about half the farmers went on and on about how they sure hoped they didn't end up on their place and shoot a cow or horse thinking it was a deer.

Late on the second day a town lawyer walked into the garage amid sighs and exclamations galore. Dangling from one hand was a small, spotted deer fawn that weighed only 24 pounds. He stood straight and spoke firmly, "I know what you're all thinking, but I would like to explain to you what happened. This fawn's mother was shot by somebody, and when I saw that its leg was shot and broken," he raised the body as proof "I knew it wouldn't survive the winter so I killed it and brought it in." Immediately my colleague, Dave Casteel, spoke up to say, "I would have done the same thing. Congratulations, sir, for having the wisdom to do what you did. It took a lot of courage for you to bring that little animal in here. Most men would have let it suffer, and if they'd shot it, left it there. You were right."

Then there was the farmer who brought in the largest whitetail deer ever killed by anyone, according to the record books. He had already gutted the animal in the field but it tipped the scales at 404 pounds. With its stomach, liver, lungs and intestines, it might easily have been 500 pounds, but it topped the record anyway. Here was quite an astounding event for everyone but the man who killed the deer. My partner kept encouraging him to enter his deer in the Boone and Crocket Club book, but he wanted nothing of records. This deer was killed for one reason only, food, and if it happened to be exceptionally large, that was all the better for his family's larder. To this day the record we entered of a 404 pound, field-gutted buck lies hidden somewhere in game department files in Springfield.

Altogether, the sacred ritual was serious. Not once did a person laugh at a dead animal or in anyway demean one. These men participated directly in the food chain, and for them, it was a love chain. There was much laughter over certain stories, like the one that came out when we couldn't find a wound on the deer's body. The man said that the deer was a hundred yards away and running when he shot in front of it and high to account for trajectory. He saw the deer fall but when he got up to it there was no hole to be found. The deer was dead though, killed by concussion from a slug striking and breaking off an antler.

My experiences of farmers, city men and three-hundred dead deer opened to me a veil behind which hides western man's deep love of the wild animal, the transcendent deer and the ways of nature on which he turned his back when he left hunting. There in the sheriff's garage were immigrants reminiscing Cro Magnon hunting rites. To this day, the German farmers' kin in the old country pray over their first deer. A man learns in hunting and killing the beloved deer that he should not kill another man. Not for a deer or anything. That is the old code that haunts the ancestral memory of the modern hunter, proud to have offered their sons up in sacrifice for the war to end all wars, and the wars after it. Somewhere, somehow things went wrong; these are the deepest thoughts of men who partake in the hunting rite.

The ritual of the dead deer takes a man back to his roots in the earth and conjures forth the original and purest sacrifice. Now men kill deer out of a commitment to perpetuate within themselves the memory of what it means to be a true hunter, one with Nature. On the afternoon of the third day I resonated with enthusiasm for hunting deer. Dave kept mentioning that it was all right for me to go as long as I arrived back by dark and the big rush. He assured me it was okay, that he had done it the year before. I managed to round up a gun, license, tag and transport to the state forest of gorgeous white pine. Most of the men had quit; there weren't many still out. For a couple of hours I silently stalked through the pine, but after sitting on the bed of needles and listening to the wind sing, I could see that the line of vegetation was too high: deer could see hunters looking for them. After being scoured by hundreds of hunters for three days, the deer wouldn't be anywhere except where you'd least expect them in the briars. They were crawling in under the thick, impenetrable clumps of blackberry bushes still blanketed with leaves and surrounded by shrubs and tall grasses. I would have sworn that nothing larger than a cottontail rabbit could crawl into spaces that small, but tracks don't lie. The deer were curled up and hidden, waiting for dark.

I had prided myself on my ability to use my body as a bulldozer to flush pheasants out of the same kind of cover, but these vines and thorns were the toughest I'd tried. After twenty minutes of bulldozing and wearing myself out, my back, arms and neck were stuck in the brambles when, from behind, I heard the explosion of a deer's body erupting against the vines. Out of the side of my eye I barely glimpsed the head and neck of an eight-point buck emerging through the jungle, its body still trapped. For a moment I saw him looking back at me, and at a distance of five feet our eyes met. I jerked free, pulled my gun up, which tore my face with thorns, and with my arms pulling taught against vines, got him in my sights. I was just about to fire at the back of his head, about fifteen feet away, when an image of his death was framed like a still picture in my mind. My trigger finger relaxed and I watched him go. I didn't want to kill him, but never had I enjoyed hunting as much.

Not many college men drag themselves out at four a.m. to tromp into a central Illinois forest and crawl up into a tree to sit on a hard limb when it's twenty below zero and the wind is blowing hard. Only the hunter's affection for the deer, for the hunting of deer, brings out the best in a man, allowing him to do things that normally would kill a person. From hunting as in sports, a young man or woman has the right to learn the value of positive attitudes, which the hunter literally embodies.

My friend and I hunted slowly, meticulously, attuned, but never saw anything but tracks until our fourth morning out when, as we were moving quietly up a hillside, a huge buck jumped right in front of me, paused and looked at me, then disappeared into the pucker brush. My sixty pound bow had been drawn, aimed at his chest only fifteen feet away, but seared in my mind for almost 35 years is a perfectly indelible image of that deer

looking directly at me looking at it. The moment of truth, as it's said, has a much older and universal origin than has been imagined. That moment of truth for me was: no. My friend ran to my side to ask if I'd seen the huge buck. I stood there speechless, still in awe, moving my head up and down and squinting skyward as though I had spied some illustrious truth transforming itself mysteriously among the clouds. I told him that I could have hit it but didn't, and he told me that the deer stood up right in front of him, and before it leaped, looked straight in his eyes at the moment he released his arrow.

At fifteen feet, a 250 pound buck standing broadside is as easy a shot as a bow hunter may ever get. Mike was a very fine shot, but his arrow missed the deer. It passed just over the deer's back, about an inch above the spine. As we recovered our wits we set out feebly to track the buck, neither of us hoping it would give us another chance, and probably communicating that non-verbally as we stalked. Maybe another deer, but not that one.

On the way home, after repeating every little detail over and over between spans of silence and introspection, we admitted to one another that the reason we didn't kill the deer was simply that we hadn't felt right about doing it. It was a mutual confession of having faced and acknowledged truth despite expectations, a humbling experience which teaches a man much about life. Having shared a sacred sacrifice, the yielding of ego to the silent voice of another being, our brother the deer, Mike and I became brothers, too. That is the secret hidden deep within hunting: the state of being that puts us in touch with our natural self, and in that condition one discovers that, with or without killing, to hunt a deer is a religious ceremony.

My third deer hunting season was in Georgia. I hunted from a tree-blind that a student loaned me: a sort of seat which I fastened to the tree then fastened to myself. The contraption was supposed to relieve the discomfort of being tree born and motionless for six hours non-stop. I was never more alert than that day when I sat among oak leaves being totally quiet and watching and listening to the world wake up: first this bird, then that one, and, accompanying the rising sun, a chorus of song. The mere sound of a leaf falling to the ground was enough to expand my senses everywhere at once with finely attuned alertness. When a squirrel ran between two trees I mistook the sound for a herd of deer charging toward me. Super-sensitized and completely observant, man achieves transcendence as a hunter.

As the sound of her hooves approached, I bent slightly to one side, enough to be able to pull my bowstring as she ran underneath the tree. This was a commonly used trail, and after I had waited eight hours, the mature doe headed down it to escape another bow-hunter a half mile away. As she came closer my heart pounded harder than I'd ever felt it, yet I was frozen, perfectly quiet, ready to kill. She slowed down to a trot and then stopped in complete view of me right in the only clear opening between me and the ground. She was panting and her tongue hanged as she glanced one way then another. My arrow was drawn before she stopped, and I pointed it straight at her chest twenty feet away. Without any movement or sound from me, she looked straight up into my eyes. Something inside me said, Now! But I was too enraptured by her eyes, and something else would not let the arrow loose. Then she reared up on her hind legs, leaped straight ahead and ran away fast. For a long time I sat there as my body and mind raced with excitement and wonder. At the most thrilling moment of my life before or since, I had chosen not to kill her. I felt quite fine about being there and tolerating aches and pains to come face to face with another being. From the uncharted depths of my soul I learned that a Voice guides the hunter. He listens to the birds, the leaves, the deer and his heart.

To be a true hunter a man must trust his heart. Because he is totally alert, he trusts the Heart of Nature, and so he listens with a different ear, sees with a different eye. He who is most outside himself is also furthest inside. Zen is all about the art of hunting. To this very day, after hunting deer for 40 years, still I haven't killed one. Ted Nugent would say I am in denial about the facts of life, and yet I have killed many other animals. And if anyone is a proponent of getting beyond denial, it's me. So why haven't I killed a deer? It doesn't feel right, which is what I mean by listening to my heart. That doe under my tree stand in Georgia gave herself to me alright. She looked straight up into my eyes and nowhere else, and then she blinked. I knew then, as many hunters know, that the animal was offering itself to me, and still I let her go. It is a common event among hunters. I lectured in Toronto two weeks ago on "Is hunting good medicine for bad kids?," and asked the five hundred delegates in the audience how many had let a suitable animal go for no apparent reason when they could have legally killed it. Three out of four raised their hands. Which means that 75% of those hunters listened to their hearts. It simply didn't feel right.

As for me, I have searched long and hard to understand why it has not been right for me to kill a deer. I love venison and think it is superior food for myself, and my family, and I like to provide food by own effort from nature. I live among many deer and God knows I've had many opportunities, some of them downright gifts. So what's going on?

A spiritual healer in North Lake Tahoe told me that in a past life I was a shaman who killed another shaman when he (his spirit) was in the body of a deer. According to him, I did it deliberately.

You can imagine what my scientific colleagues would say to that! The same healer gave me precise directions, by the way, to an aguada, a pool carved out of limestone, between two pyramids in Coba, ancient holy city of the Yucatan Mayans. He had never been to Mexico, but he knew exactly where to send me on a mission to connect the energy of the Yucatan with that of Lake Tahoe for the healing of both.

The reader might think that the healer got lucky. Maybe he had read somewhere about the aguada, but the aguada is not on the maps of the archaeological park of Coba, and the local Mayan guides deny any knowledge of it. But it is there exactly as he described. He also told me that I needed a psychic enema before visiting the aguada because the water was so charged that it could cause karma to surface all at once which could be harmful. He used an acupuncture technique he had learned days earlier in Berkeley from a living treasure of China.

When I arrived at the pond with my friend, a Mexican archaeoastronomer authority on the Maya, we put our feet and legs in the aguada. I felt nothing but as soon as Adalberto's feet touched the water, he lurched backwards, yelled and grabbed his right side in both hands. Apparently he had an energy block in his liver. Within days his sideburns turned white.

I mention these "Illinois Smith" adventures because they and many similar events lend credence to the healer's explanation of why I didn't feel right about killing deer.

After the last hunting season as I sat with my wife bemoaning my deer-less fate, she said "Don't worry. If we ever need the food all you have to do is go out there and a deer will come to you."

Until that day I'll keep buying licenses and delight in hunting deer I'll never kill.

*"The man who sat on the ground in his tipi meditating on life and its meaning, accepting the kinship of all creatures and acknowledging unity with the universe of things was infusing into his being the true essence of civilization. And when native man left of this form of development, his humanization was retarded in growth."*

—Chief Luther Standing Bear