

## Deer Hunting

by Larry J Pellet

Conjure up thoughts on deer hunting, and a myriad of images arise like, well, neanderthal man with his spear, native Americans with their bows, or perhaps Mort Neff, host of the long running t.v. show Michigan Outdoors. Modern times are much different of course, with crossbows of all types and an even greater array of rifles. Depending on local municipal laws, some hunters leave bait, some track deer through woods, swamps, fields, thickets and god knows what, while others simply wait in a deer blind for their perfect opportunity to come. One thing rings true though, the more you learn about deer and hunting, the more you realize you didn't know. Razor sharp senses honed throughout millennia, woven with survival instincts and an underrated intelligence ensure deer proclivity, even though one might wonder where those talents go when deer decide to slam into your car during a long trip down the highway. The virality of deer is so prevalent that the DNR regulates their population so as to keep the breeding under control, thereby limiting crop destruction.

Bow season, which traditionally begins in Michigan on Oct 1 and follows until Nov 15, picks up again from Dec 1 – Jan1. Regular firearm season begins Nov 15 and is perceived by some avid hunters as a national holiday. It's season runs until Nov 30, with some variations by the aforementioned DNR. The climate during bow season makes it alluring, though wielding a bow is more challenging due to the higher skill level and practice required to hit the mark. Rifle season, in many cases, allows tracking through snow and more long-range accuracy, and comes without the headache of locating a lost arrow. Many hunters enjoy both, and revenue received from deer permits is allocated to fund conservation and restoration across the state.

Enter Lexi Michael, 14 yrs old and an 8th grader at neighboring Ravenna Junior High. An accomplished hunter since age 9 when she got her first buck (and 5 since), she enjoys the youth hunts sponsored by the DNR for young people up to 16 yrs. Taught by her grandpa, Cloverville native and expert rifleman Don Lockhart, Lexi enjoys her venison she earned by gutting the deer herself, something she profoundly labels as "gross...but pretty fun". She recalls her favorite story about



Lexi, 2020

hunting in her grandfather's stand up in Leroy Michigan when an 8 pt buck suddenly appeared. "I was so nervous and started breathing hard", she vividly remembered. "The deer disappeared before I could get a shot off and I was pretty disappointed, but then another 4 pt showed up right after that. My hands were shaking as the deer started to walk away, but my grandpa imitated a deer sound (something Lexi is quite adept at herself nowadays) and it came back. I dropped him right away", she excitedly recalled. "My friends at school were like 'Oh really', and 'Oh my gosh, you did'!"

To be sure, it takes many hunts to develop the prowess to snare a deer (be it buck or doe), gut it out, then either haul it to be processed - at a price, or skin and quarter it yourself. Deer have runways in which they share a well-traveled destination, rub trees and scrape the ground, as well as urinate to mark their territory. "It is an intricate ecosystem how they communicate with each other", explained Muskegon outdoorsman Jim Ashley. A well-trained human eye can spot these signs. During the "rut"

when doe are in estrogen, the bucks will follow along in hopes of producing offspring. Oft times, to a vigilant hunter, this can lead to their demise.

If you're fortunate enough to make the kill and obtain some nutrition (venison is very lean and healthy), you might find yourself, at least initially, a bit squeamish about cutting it open to remove the organs. I will leave that to your imagination, howbeit it is a good lesson in anatomy!

Once the processing takes place, steaks, roasts and tender delicious backstraps are the reward for the work, patience, and planning invested in the hunt. As there are as many ways to cook venison as there are to obtain it, one must use their own devices to bring out the flavor to their liking. However, a simple butter, onion, salt and pepper seasoning mix, with the meat served still tender, fits the bill for most. Worcester sauce also adds a bite of flavor.

Lexi's older brother Jayden, 17 yrs old and a junior at Ravenna High, got his start at 3 months old riding on grandpa Don's back, and started scouting



Jayden, 2020

when he was a mere 1 1/2 years...really. He got his first deer at 8 years old and has gotten 14 since. He uses both a crossbow and a 450 Bushmaster rifle (loud) when he hunts, and (as pictured) shot 2 bucks a minute apart while also up in Leroy. "I shot the first one and immediately called my dad. While we were talking, the second buck showed up and I had to hang up on my father. I shot the second and called him right back", he laughed. And such goes the luck of the hunt. The avid outdoorsman says what he enjoys the most is being outside - seeing mother nature- and getting that thrill of seeing the buck he'd been tracking since the beginning of the year. His ideal buck would be a "solid 10 pt with 8" tines". He has also learned to gut, skin and process the deer himself, something he calls "a little weird, but you get more meat that way". Jayden's challenge is to manage the hunting property (which someday will be his and Lexi's) year-round with food plots and the elimination of weeds and beavers, which can alter and destroy the landscape.

To the hesitant spirit, the hunting experience may sound a bit harsh. But, observing a doe with her fawns, or young yearlings playing in a field, can be satisfying enough without the kill. One can marvel at the variety of wildlife that randomly saunters their way, and many breathtaking photos have been taken in the sanctuary of nature. However, to the budding woodsman looking for food, the solitude can turn to exhilaration quickly and is a feeling unparalleled...the "spirit of the wild", as Michiganander Ted Nugent dubs it.

As for deer camp, it is always a time where stories are made, tales grown taller down the line, and family, friends and nature are forged together away from the mundane routine of daily living. As Lockhart so aptly puts it, "A bad day of hunting is better than a good day at work". Camp can be ridiculously out of control and rambunctious, or joyful, relaxing and reminiscent. With Lockhart and his grandkids, the experience is beyond priceless.

One thing is for certain, deer hunting brings out the primitive person, one our ancestors were very familiar with. While it may not be for everyone, those that venture out and taste the offerings that nature provides come back with a deeper appreciation of the cycle of life.