

OUTDOORS

DEER HUNTING by Steve Ramirez



I knew that this was the last of the "Great Texas Sausage Hunts" and I was there to see it! It all seemed adventurous as we pulled up to the ranch gate late the first evening. There was the knowledge that Fred, Tom, Merle, and Jerry had done this every year for many years. For these four old friends it was a post-Christmas tradition in the deepest sense. Jerry had just sold the family ranch, so after many years; this was the last year of their great tradition. Somehow out of the kindness of their hearts I was invited. It was like being let into a secret and noble society; the illuminati of deer sausage making. I awaited instructions on the indoctrination process with its chanting and hand signals. There were none. It seemed the recipe was to put together one part long time friendship with equal parts sportsmanship, tradition, good humor, and plain old elbow grease, and the outcome was a spicy deer sausage and life-long memories. How cool is that?

In Texas, deer hunting is sacred. Deer hunting sits along side other Texan icons as The Alamo, The Lone Star Flag, and traditions like football and barbeque, Christmas and tamales, (gee... I'm getting hungry) and ideals like that word that seems lost almost everywhere else in modern America- HONOR. Deer hunting done right is conservation of the land and the species that depend on the land. It helps pay for the hill country to stay natural instead of paved. What is cemented is friendship, sportsmanship, responsibility, and a love of nature. Deer hunting also means venison bubbling in chili, warm in tamales, or smoking over a mesquite fire. (Ok...now I'm hungry)

After getting situated at camp Fred and I rode in the back of the truck and were dropped off at a ground blind on an adjacent

ranch. Evening was just starting to settle in, and I could hear coyotes calling to each other in the distant brush. A caracara soared overhead and the song birds were at work in the live oak trees. It was a perfect evening.

As I began to settle into the blind Fred saw movement just beyond the tree line. I froze my position, half seated, half standing, and fully alert. Two does began to work their way out of the live oaks and toward the feeder that was in a clearing not more than fifty yards from the blind. Although hunting from a blind near a feeder is both legal and traditional in the Texas Hill Country, it feels more like harvesting to me. I prefer "spot and stalk" hunting whereas I must be as fully connected to the wild as my limited human senses will allow. Still, hunting from a blind either over feeding areas, water sources, or deer trails has its own charms including many hours of silent watching as all around you nature lives and breathes.

As the first doe approached the clearing I placed the cross-hairs on her chest and squeezed the trigger. The recoil of the rifle changed the world, for a moment I was transported to a time when my father first taught me to shoot a rifle. The truth is at 12 years old I was a little afraid of the blast and the recoil but I didn't want dad to know so I concentrated on the target and the squeeze of the trigger. The little bit of fear helped me to concentrate and the concentration helped me to hit black every time. Dad was proud of me because he could see the shooting but he couldn't see the fear.... Or did he? After the shot, I saw her lying on her side not ten feet from where she last stood. I walked over to her, stroked her neck and thanked her for her life. My father taught me how to shoot, but it was my best friend from the Marine Corps, a member of the Lakota Sioux tribe who taught me how to respect the spirit of the deer. It was the way things should be. I was responsible and grateful. It wasn't a matter of paying for something that was wrapped in plastic and wedged in the bag between the cheese and a frozen pizza. Later in camp I would spend hours butchering the deer we had taken, grinding the meat and forming it into the sausage casings. They would hang and smoke and over the next year each time they were used they would bring back the memories of the evening we met; our lives' paths meandering until that moment.

It's true that here in the Texas hills as elsewhere, deer hunting has become a business. The search for the deer with the largest rack with drop tines and kickers and height and spread can become all consuming for many hunters. And, there is value in hunting for that mature old buck that has seen his best days and passed on his genetics to the future. I could have told that story. But instead, I wanted to share the story of friends connected with and through nature in the effort to bring food to the table as their forefathers had done. It is also the story of a young boy afraid of his gun but learning to overcome fear and to be a man. And, it is the story of that boy as a man, sitting in a blind with his daughter in his arms trying to keep her warm against the morning chill. We never saw a deer that cold morning, but we did gain memories together. I remember how I worried about how cold she was and how proud I was when she said, "Da-da-don't worry da-da-daddy, I'm have fun being here with you." That is the true story of Texas deer hunting. I thought I should tell that story, to share with those of you who have never known it... and to remind those of you, who may have forgotten. steve@hillcountryexplore.com X

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