Nature's way

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Immerse yourself in the timber with this hunter and read about what some consider to be a sacred sport.
The moon has set and the only light breaking through the forest is the glow of the infinite stars above you. Your only indication of whether you are on track is the difference in the forest floor and the memorized map of the land that resides in your mind. As you step down, your oversized boot meets with a hard surface that doesn’t give way to your body: you’re on the trail. You take a few more steps with the same result—hard, unmoved ground. Your next step feels different. You sense something solid but your foot continues down farther than it should: you’re off the trail. What you’re feeling is a mixture of long grass, weeds and decomposing leaves piling up like compost over the years. Correcting your direction, you make your way back onto the pressed path.

Your mind knows exactly how long it takes to get to the tree stand. When you have gone far enough and taken the correct turns in the trail, an alarm goes off in your mind warning you that your destination is near. You begin to squint your eyes, looking for the solid figure until it materializes right in front of you. Climbing the ladder slowly, reaching blindly for each rung, you finally make it to the top and position yourself onto the hard wooden plank.

The trek to the stand is only the beginning of your struggles with darkness. It is an experience on its own that makes you really focus on sensations in your body you wouldn’t normally draw on—an experience that has become a Saturday and Sunday morning routine for me.

Once in the stand I begin to set everything up and check all my equipment. I place my bow in the two-pronged holder and pull out the fourth arrow from the left in my quiver, a ritual that is the result of a superstitious hunter. I fumble in the darkness to find the knock and the hen feather—the different colored feather that must be pointing straight up when you knock your bow in a horizontal position. I pop the knock into the knocking point on my string. I strap on my release, a device that connects to the string of my bow to offer a smoother release and more accurate shot. I check my pocket for my buck call and my right hip for my knife. Everything is in order, so I lower my head to the back of the tree and gaze up into the sky at the stars, a sight many people will never see in this magnitude in their lifetime.

As I rest quietly against the tree, my mind wanders to the many confrontations I’ve had with friends and acquaintances who just don’t understand hunting. I wish then that they could be here with me now seeing the spectacular blanket of stars above me.

The sky is beginning to lighten and life is awakening in the forest. It is still much too dark to see anything around me, but my ears substitute what my eyes can’t see, painting a picture in my head. Leaves crunch all around me as raccoons, opossums and other nocturnal creatures move through the foliage. The first time I sat in the stand, these sounds seemed to be getting closer, frightening me to the point that I had to pull out my knife and clutch it strongly in my hand. It’s something every new hunter experiences and must learn to come to terms with.

The scenery gets lighter with every passing minute. There is a point just before dawn when the forest is light enough to see shapes moving around me. The large ones are more than likely a deer, and hopefully not a cougar, but I can’t tell if it’s a doe or a buck, which leaves me curious as to whether the monster buck our neighbors sighted has wandered into the territory.

Then over the top of the mass of orange, yellow and red of the trees, the sun begins to poke its head into the brisk morning air. The sun evokes the many sounds of the forest, and I begin to listen intently to a symphony of creatures. The birds are chirping delightfully
and flying around to stretch their wings in the warmth of the morning sun. Squirrels are scuffling around trees and chattering endlessly. The whoosh of the air under the turkeys’ wings is coupled with a clucking noise as they leave their nests high in the trees to search for breakfast. Every time I experience these things I wish even more that my critics could experience the forest as I do.

“You hunt?” they will exclaim in disgust. “How could you ever kill a poor animal?” “That’s cruel.” “You’re a killer.”

These are all comments I’ve gotten used to over the years. People who don’t hunt don’t understand; they see it as black and white when unbeknownst to them there are so many shades of gray. Now that I am in college the issue has gotten worse. Where I grew up, hunting was nothing out of the ordinary, but at Iowa State University there are so many people from different cultures. I am not alone in receiving criticism, though.

Cole Tanner, a senior in journalism and mass communication, has so many of these experiences he can hardly keep track of them all. He was telling me that one day in his broadcasting class he mentioned in conversation that he couldn’t wait to get out of class to go sit in the stand. This caught the attention of a few girls in his class. Much like my experiences, they began ridiculing him and telling him that it was terrible of him to shoot “such a cute and cuddly black bear.”

To Cole, these people are narrow-minded; he attempts to give them a lesson in wildlife management and the marvels of nature, but usually they refuse to listen, focusing solely on the kill.

What people don’t understand about most hunters is that they do it for the love of nature and the experience it brings them. Of course, there are many hunters who are just in it for the thrills and adrenaline rush, but many hunters who share my perception will tell you those aren’t true hunters. True hunters internalize their experiences in nature and get to know and respect the world around them. For me, it is, in a sense, therapy. It’s a way for me to escape the stress of college and work and forget about the problems in the world. It’s my way to immerse myself into something so different than my everyday life that I begin to heal.

I have to admit that I haven’t always been this “true hunter” that I speak of. The first time I went out was a failure. I brought my cell phone and a book I was reading for an English course. I flipped through each page, ignoring the life around me and worrying only about the assigned pages I had to finish by
Monday. I pulled out my phone to check text messages and e-mails from work. I wrote myself reminders for my story that was due to my boss by Tuesday. I checked over my calendar making a mental note of the handful of projects I had to finish this week and then looked it over once again. I didn’t see a single deer that day, but I’m sure they were there watching as my phone glowed brightly on my face.

Back at the cabin I listened to a conversation with my dad and boyfriend about all the things they had seen that day in their sections of the woods. Guilt overcame me in an instant. I began asking myself how I could have been so absorbed and how I could completely ignore the purpose of me dragging my butt out of bed at 5 a.m. I made an oath to myself from that point on that I would leave school, work and the outside world behind.

After that the only belongings important to me were my call, knife, bow and arrows. It’s amazing the things that I saw once I finally opened my eyes and paid attention. Cole once said to me after describing the sight of a doe and her two fawns in the early morning, “You come into nature and you feel like a trespasser, but then all of a sudden you become a part of what’s going on.” Cole’s words hit right on the target.

Each time I sit in the stand I experience something new that amazes me. I’ll watch as a small button buck runs through the trees kicking and bouncing through the leaves. He’ll play like that for hours, making sure to annoy all those around him and then run elatedly out into the field as his mother approaches. Off in the distance I’ve seen two bucks fight for their territory, clashing their racks together in an unending display of dominance. I have a chipmunk near one of my stands that likes to jump over logs and into holes in the ground. He makes much more noise than one would think a creature of his size could make. In fact, the chipmunk and the squirrels leap through the forest making quite a racket while the deer carefully plan each step, making only the slightest noise.

Then as the morning grows late and the sun rises higher into the sky, the deer will scope out safe locations to bed for the day. When I look around me and see a handful of deer lying in the foliage no more than 10 yards from me, I begin to feel like nature has

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finally accepted me. It is these times when nature envelopes you that you experience unforgettable moments.

It was a cold Sunday morning; the sun had risen just before seven. Like most mornings, the forest was bustling, paying no attention to me at all. My hands were tucked underneath my arms, my toes ached and my body was tight from the crisp morning air. It was all I could do to keep from shivering. I tucked my head into the cavity of my Scentlok suit looking like the headless horseman. 

"Crunch."

I quickly poked my head out to investigate. Southeast of me down the trail I spotted something: it was the buck I had passed up just a week ago. I quickly deliberated in my head finally deciding that this must be a sign.

He continued walking toward me as I
slowly rose to my feet. He stopped. I froze into a statue as he sniffed the air. I was sure he caught my scent, but he continued on his path and turned right in front of me. I took my time reaching for my bow, gaining distance little by little. I clipped my release onto the bowstring and raised my bow as I slowly pulled back into a full draw. By this time my heart was racing and I could hardly breathe. He was quartered away from me, changing the logistics of the shot.

I began to recite in my head all that my dad had taught me over the years: Put my fingers to my anchor point. Close one eye. Position the white dot on the bottom of my sights. Aim at the vitals. Wait for him to stop. **SHOOT.**

My arrow cut through the air in an instant, hitting the buck a little further back than I had anticipated. He jumped and turned back to the southeast bounding, into a full sprint toward the ridge. I watched him run off, thinking to myself the shot should hit some of the vital organs, but I was still unsure. I heard a crash of sticks, leaves and pure power just over the ridge and then silence. I sat back down as every bit of my body was shaking uncontrollably from the excitement of the prospect of my first deer.

After I sat for 20 minutes, long enough for him to bed down and drift away, I climbed down my stand so quickly that I almost slipped off the ladder. My heavy boots pounded against the ground as I ran back to the cabin to get my dad. He would want to be there for this.

We went out as a family, my dad, my mom, my boyfriend and I, to go pick up a blood trail and track my deer down. I had wished only that my sister could have been there, too. Despite missing one of the crew, we trudged back into the forest.

The blood trail was easy to follow. There was so much blood we could practically run alongside it and keep track of the direction of my wounded buck. Behind me I could hear my dad whispering to my mom and boyfriend. He had found it. I turned to my left and on the top of the hill I could see the sun's rays shimmering off the white belly of my deer. I got him.

I was so excited I practically skipped up to my deer. My dad followed closely behind. He took no longer than a few seconds to look it over before he raised his hand for a high-five and congratulated me. He scooped me up into his strong arms and embraced me in a long hug, chattering about how proud he was of me. My mom and boyfriend stood silently until our poignant father-daughter moment had passed.

That was not the end of my season. After dragging the deer out of the woods, gutting it and skinning it with the help of my father, I returned to the forest that evening. Although my tag was filled, my soul was not. I wanted more. I needed more. So, I sat in my stand looking more closely at nature that night.

That night I felt even more a part of it. I had contributed to the ways of nature. Life and death were everyday occurrences in the forest, and as I harvested my first deer I become a part of that.

The wind pushed at me and I began to sway like a tree high above the forest floor. I closed my eyes and filled my lungs with fresh air and the smell of autumn. Nothing could be more relaxing or therapeutic.

As the sun sinks onto the horizon the forest becomes still; the crickets and frogs begin their songs, the squirrels settle into their nests, and the turkeys return to the trees.

All is calm.