*Back Home by Chris Hardie*

**A sweet end to a successful hunt**

The trees were silhouetted by the light of the waning but still large Beaver Moon as I slowly made my way down the hill toward my hunting spot.

It was shortly after 6 a.m. Saturday, Nov. 20, the opening day of the Wisconsin gun deer hunting season. The temperature was in the mid-20 degrees and the woods were still.

My 46th whitetail hunt began where it has been the past 16 years, in a ground blind on our family farm. I settled my back against a tree, poured myself a cup of coffee from a thermos that once belonged to my grandfather and settled in.

Morning comes slowly in my hunting valley as nature awakens. It’s one of my favorite times of opening day as I soak in the surroundings and enjoy the stillness.

About 6:45 a.m., I heard two short hoots from a barred owl that landed in a nearby tree. I took a photo before the avian predator flew over the hill into the next valley, where it launched into several choruses of its easily recognizable call “Who cooks for you? Who cooks for you-all,” which carried across the quiet morning.

The squirrels started to stir about 7:30 a.m., including one that chattered for several minutes in a tree above me before scurrying down the trunk. The birds — including red-headed woodpeckers, chickadees and blue jays — searched for food.

Part of the challenge of hunting whitetail deer is being quiet and patient — two virtues I had little of as a youngster. There is no perfect place to hunt, but if you understand the lay of the land and observe deer behavior and patterns, you can put yourself into a spot favorable for seeing deer. After all, one has to see deer to have a chance at success.

At 8:30 a.m., I saw my first deer of the day. On the hillside to my left, about 150 yards away, four does ran through. I watched them go, knowing that sometimes they are followed by a buck. Sure enough, at 8:45 a.m., a small fork-horned buck walked the same trail. He was in no hurry, stopping several times before disappearing over the crest of the ridge.

It’s always much easier to stay put when you see deer, and I always hunt my stand for the entire opening day. Besides, I had my little wood fire to keep me cozy and warm.

My patience paid off at about 10 a.m. when I spotted a large-racked buck following the same path as the deer before him. I shouldered my rifle and waited for him to clear some trees. It wasn’t the perfect shot — there seldom are when you hunt in the woods — but I lined up the crosshairs and fired.

The buck flinched, ran a few feet and briefly stopped. I fired again. The buck disappeared from my view up the hill but I heard a loud crash.

Carefully lining up some trees where I last saw the buck, I walked up the hill to the spot. The loud crash that I hoped was the sound of the buck collapsing was confirmed when I found him under a tree.

It was a 9-point buck with a slightly atypical rack and an 18-inch antler spread. He had a big body and was probably 3 1/2 years old. It was one of the largest bucks I’ve shot.

I was luckier than some. Overall, the opening weekend registration numbers were down 14% this year, according to the Department of Natural Resources. The central farmland region where I hunt had a drop of 16%.

I sent a text to my son Ross and field dressed the buck. I dragged him for a few yards up the hill when Ross appeared. Together we each grabbed a side of the rack and pulled the buck about 100 yards to the edge of a field next to a wild apple tree.

Last year was the first time I hunted after my father died, but I was sick with COVID-19 and struggled to enjoy the hunt. Dad never missed hunting and we spent many hours together in the woods, sharing stories and enjoying the special bond between father and son.

Ross and I went back to my stand, toasted some sandwiches over the fire and told a few stories. I was thrilled with getting a nice buck, but time spent with my son was by far the best part of the day.

Later that afternoon, we lifted the buck into the back of the pickup, and Ross was able to reach a couple of apples still on the tree. They were a little frozen, but it was a sweet taste to end an even sweeter day.

*Chris Hardie spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and publisher. He was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and won dozens of state and national journalism awards. He is a former president of the Wisconsin Newspaper Association. Contact him at chardie1963@gmail.com.*

***Photo cutlines:***

*Apple tree: A wild apple tree still had a few late November apples to sample.Buck: Chris Hardie’s 9-point buck.*

*Buck2: Chris Hardie and his 9-point buck and an 18-inch antler spread shot opening day, Nov. 20, 2021.*

*Coffee: Chris Hardie enjoys coffee while sitting in his hunting stand.*

*Sandwich: A toasted sandwich cooked over an open fire is a special deer hunting treat.*