

Looking Back, Looking Forward

By Claude Jenkins, AWF Land Stewardship Biologist

Looking back on all the deer seasons in which I have participated, the 2006-2007 season will undoubtedly be the most memorable. This deer season was marked with outdoor experiences shared with my daughter Jessica that will never be forgotten. Jessica got her first buck, experienced her first quail covey rise, had close encounters with wildlife, and of course, endured many lessons on wildlife behavior, identification, and biology.

Last January Jessica and I were invited to hunt deer with Mr. Danny Strock on his property in Dallas County. The goal of the hunt was simple: to get Jessica her first buck. We met Danny at his hunting camp a few hours before we were scheduled to hunt to evaluate a habitat conservation project and a few other habitat improvements. After arriving at the camp, we were greeted with a plethora of deer mounts, pictures of deer, and stories of big bucks that had been seen, but had eluded hunters. This intensified Jessica's excitement and heightened her expectations of the day's hunt! After seeing several deer (one was a buck) while evaluating the habitat projects, we couldn't contain our excitement any longer, it was time to hunt!

Danny had implemented buck harvest restrictions a few years earlier, including no harvest of yearling (1.5 yr old) bucks. I was aware of this as I had been working with Danny through AWF's Landowner Assistance Program. I had informed Jessica of the restrictions; however, Danny made it very clear that the restrictions did not apply to Jessica, and dad (me) had no input into the decision! He was looking at Jessica while explaining this, although the message was directed to me.

I was unsure of the success that we would have that day as the temperature was in the mid to upper 70's and a cold front was expected to move through the area a couple of hours before sunset, bringing high winds (10 to 15 mph) and rain. These meteorological conditions probably explained why we saw so many deer earlier in the afternoon. I thought that our only chance for success would be to get into the shooting house earlier than planned, since the deer seemed to be moving well in advance of the cold front. I made sure that Jessica was unaware of my pessimism, as she was very optimistic by what she had seen at the hunting camp, the stories that had been told, and the deer seen earlier.

After receiving instructions from Danny, Jessica and I left the camp and drove to our hunting location. We parked the truck and headed out toward the shooting house. Before reaching the shooting house however, we had to cross a creek. The water was relatively shallow, but the slippery rocks made crossing very difficult. Although we both crossed with only wet boots, we had joked about who would be the first to fall.

Finally, unscathed and relatively dry, we arrived at the shooting house at approximately 3:15 p.m. Because deer were already very active we hurriedly, but safely, climbed into the shooting house. The next few minutes were spent going over the typical check list of preparations: adjusting the height of the shooting rest, scanning the food plot in front and to the left, and going over the "what if..." scenarios. Not long after we had gotten settled, the dark clouds, rain, and strong winds began to appear. Although these conditions heightened my pessimism for a successful deer hunt, I was determined not to let it show. We passed time by quietly laughing, reminiscing about past hunts and pondering future hunts, and occasionally scanning the food plot looking for a deer. Then suddenly - no, not a deer - I realized that I had forgotten to bring a flashlight. This led to more laughter as we imagined having to cross the slippery, rocky creek in the dark without a flashlight. Certainly, someone was going to "get wet!" Our only hope to stay dry was for Jessica to get a deer before dark.

As more time passed, the laughter and hope for a successful hunt began to wane. I tried to sustain Jessica's hope by reminding her that we still had time, but her posture and facial expression revealed her fleeting optimism. I can remember the excitement associated with my first buck and I wanted desperately to experience that with Jessica. But I could clearly see that in her mind, the hunt was over, we were just waiting on darkness to make it official. Then, unex-

pectedly, at approximately 100 yards, a deer walked into the food plot...hope was instantly restored! The deer appeared to be a young buck, but we were unsure. I asked Jessica if she wanted to wait, hoping a bigger deer would come into the plot. After thinking about it for a while (less than a second), she made the decision to shoot. She carefully raised the rifle and positioned it in the window as we had practiced earlier. After taking a moment to calm ourselves and discuss shot placement, Jessica aimed carefully and made a perfect shot.

We carefully exited the shooting house and headed towards the deer. After walking about half the distance, we saw antlers. Our suspicion was now confirmed, Jessica got her first buck! The excitement intensified as we hurried towards the deer. After taking a moment to admire it, we took a few pictures, and recapped all that just happened. Because light was fading fast and we had no flashlight, I had to hurry to reach the truck before dark - Jessica chose to stay with the deer and savor the experience.

Driven by excitement and the desire to get back to Jessica before "pitch-black" dark, my pace never slowed when I reached the creek. I took a straight path across and didn't even attempt to avoid the deep spots. Now, instead of just wet boots, I was wet up to my knees.

After loading the deer into the truck, we began the slow drive through the property. Jessica wasted no time sharing her hunting experience with others. The first cell phone call was to her mom. Jessica disguised her voice to sound as if we had no luck. After realizing that her mom was falling for the disguise, she shouted, "I got a buck!" Following a brief celebration with Mom, she made calls to grandparents, uncles, and other relatives. The celebration continued the next morning with hugs, smiles, and by downloading and printing pictures for Jessica to take to school to show her friends. Clearly, much more had taken place than a simple deer hunt.

The 2006-2007 deer season was much more than about Jessica getting her first buck. It was also about providing opportunities for Jessica to enhance her awareness of the natural world. Such opportunities occurred while hunting on Dr. "Bud" Cardinal's farm in Montgomery County. While walking to our ground blind late one afternoon, a large covey of quail flushed just a short distance away. Jessica was startled as she had never experienced the explosive burst of a quail covey rise. We watched as the covey flew into thick cover on the edge of a field. Then, just when we thought it was over, a few more quail flushed and joined the others in the thicket. Glancing over at Jessica, I was met with a broad smile. She quietly summed up what she had just observed by saying, "That was cool!" I couldn't help but wonder what my verbal response was to my first covey rise. Although I don't remember my first covey rise, I'm sure it was just as "cool."

About an hour after settling in our ground blind, I heard

a constant rustling in the hardwood leaves a short distance to our left. I could not immediately identify what was making the sound, but I knew that it was moving in our direction. It wasn't long before I identified the sound as a covey of quail - perhaps the same covey that we had flushed earlier. I shared this with Jessica and instructed her to be very still. On their way to roost, the covey passed single file approximately eight feet from our ground blind. This provided the perfect opportunity to share a brief lesson in quail biology and behavior. Although we did not see a deer on that hunt, I'm sure that the quail-related experiences will be etched into Jessica's memory for years to come.

I still recall the sounds of chorus frogs coming from a temporary pool a few feet from our blind, the Carolina wren that flew into our blind unaware of the two hunters, the raspy chatter of gray squirrels in the distance, and the whistled song of Carolina chickadees. For me, these distinct virtues of the natural world offer an antidote to crowded schedules and overwhelming professional demands. For Jessica, I hope that these virtues stir an ecological consciousness that will never be lost. I look forward to sharing with her time and again, the sights, sounds, and scents of another deer season. Although hunting alone is a blessing in that it provides solitude from a rush-away world, hunting - and fishing - with Jessica provides some of the richest blessings of all.



above | Claude and his daughter Jessica work together to remove brush from one of their favorite ground blinds.

right | Jessica proudly displays the antlers from her first buck harvested with her dad.