A Look at Life from a Deer Stand

Steve Chapman
A LOOK AT LIFE FROM A DEER STAND
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Have you ever noticed that there is something about “firsts” that intrigues us all? We find ourselves spellbound by them, and for some reason we focus on them and often refer to firsts as the highlights of our lives. Consider the importance we place on the following:

Firstborn
First step
First word ever spoken
First grade
First date
First kiss
“First time ever I saw your face”
First car I ever owned
First man on the moon
First cup of coffee
First impression

On and on the list could go. As I pondered our affection for firsts, I began to realize that we are drawn to these initial events because
they seem to have a unique ability to set the course for the journeys we take, whether good or bad.

In my 30-plus years of avid hunting, I still look back at my first morning in the woods as my most favorite outdoor experience. To this day I truly believe it put me on a path which I hope to travel as long as I’m able to get around. Maybe you have a fond memory of a similar experience that set you on the same course.

For me, the journey began when I was 14 years old. My dad was pastor of a church in the rolling hills of West Virginia, and among the members of his congregation was a gentleman named Kenneth Bledsoe. One Sunday after the service, he invited me to join him on a squirrel hunt the following Saturday. I could hardly wait for the end of the week to come. Finally, Friday came and my folks took me to his home. It sat along a rural highway on top of a ridge surrounded by gently rolling hills. His land was graced with large patches of woods and beautiful meadows. It was the middle of October and all the leaves on the trees were ablaze with incredible autumn colors. The red, brown, orange, and yellow hues seemed to glow in the bright sun with an invitation to simply stand in awe of God’s ability to paint a scene. The view that spread out before us was like a huge canvas, and we were fortunate to be living creatures on it.

I went to bed that night and quickly drifted off into a deep slumber. Little did I know that from that evening on, I would never go to sleep so easily on the night before a hunt. For the rest of my life, the anticipation of a repeat of the morning to follow would always make me anxious for the alarm to sound.

At 5:30 a.m. we were sitting down and having breakfast. It hadn’t happened often that I was up at that hour. Perhaps Easter sunrise service or leaving early to drive with my folks to Grandma’s house were the only reasons you would find me up before daylight. But there I was, wide-awake with anticipation and already dressed for the day.

In the dim light of the carport, Kenneth handed me the gun he
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had shown me how to use the night before. It was a .22/20 gauge over and under masterpiece. He put a half dozen 20-gauge shells in my hand, and we walked across the paved road at the end of his driveway and headed down a hillside into the darkness of the woods. My friend knew his way very well through the forest. Nearly every step of the way, he gave me instructions that would ensure our safety. When we came to the first fence, he held out his hand to take my gun. He said, “Never cross a fence while holding your gun. Too many guys have died that way.” Also, he warned me about choosing my steps carefully in the dark. He said, “Falling with a gun is no fun, especially for those around you!”

I was getting my first safety course that day, and I felt secure with such a veteran hunter as Kenneth. I couldn’t have chosen a better teacher. Many times throughout my hunting life, I have applied the lessons I learned that morning. Years later, when I finally did take an official hunter’s safety course here in Tennessee with my son, I was amazed at how much ground had already been covered by my friend who had never seen the textbook. Someone had taught him well, and I was grateful that the heritage was handed down to me.

About 20 minutes before daylight, we stopped by a large oak. Kenneth took his foot and with his big boot he scraped away the dry leaves on the forest floor to reveal an area of dark, soft ground about three feet wide and three feet long. He said softly, “You’ll need a quiet place to sit. You don’t want to be making a lot of noise while you hunt. You’re in the critters’ territory. They know sounds. Unfamiliar noises are a sign of danger to them. Now, have a seat here and try to move only when it’s time to take a shot.” Then, as if I were being left on a deserted island, he walked up the hill behind me and out of sight. Just before he left, he whispered, “I’ll be around the hill. Stay here till I come back and get you.”

It was the next 30 to 40 minutes that forever sealed the joy of hunting in my heart. There I sat, outside, under a tree as the world came to life. Creatures began to respond to the rays of the sun that
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crept over the top of the ridge. With each passing minute, an excitement started to build inside me. I heard all kinds of sounds I had never heard before. Crows were cawing in the distance, speaking an unknown language. Leaves were mysteriously rustling on the ground somewhere nearby, a hoot owl made its call, and an amazing variety of birds began to sing their tunes. Like a city going to work, the animals that didn’t work the night shift (like raccoons and possums) began their foraging for food. It was absolutely amazing to me that such a kingdom existed and that I was sitting in the middle of it.

All my five senses seemed heightened that first morning. The wonderful taste of an early breakfast of eggs, bacon, toast, and jam that Evelyn Bledsoe had prepared still lingered on my tongue. The crisp, cool October air felt refreshing on my skin. The scene of the growing light made me grateful for eyesight, and my hearing was experiencing a virtual orchestra of new sounds. For a young city slicker, I found the experience brought a sense of great joy. For some odd reason, however, the fifth of the senses that was blessed seemed to be the one I remember the most. It was the incredible smell of the autumn woods. There is no other aroma like it in the world. There’s no way to explain it. To this day, the smell of the forest floor triggers more memories and a stronger desire to head to the woods than any of the other senses.

An hour must have passed as I sat there. I never did see a squirrel. Perhaps I shifted around more than I should have and scared them off. Also, it’s possible that a dozen squirrels may have scurried right above me in the canopy of branches and I just didn’t see them. I was still sitting in my quiet spot that Kenneth had prepared for me at the base of the tree when suddenly I got a tap on the shoulder. It made a shiver race up my spine that took years to go away. It’s a wonder I didn’t fire the gun I was holding across my lap. I quickly turned around to see the bear before it ate me and felt greatly relieved to see it was Kenneth standing there. He saw what he had done to me and chuckled as he softly said, “The hunt is over.”
First to Last

“How did you do that? I never heard you coming!” I said in much too loud a voice for the great hunter.

He simply whispered, “I can teach you to do that.” And so he did. On the way back to the house, he began to teach me the art of stalking through the woods. He showed me how to pick a place void of fallen twigs, put the toe down first, and then set the rest of the foot down gently. He instructed me to not forget to stop often and keep the eyes moving like radar across the woods. The techniques I gleaned from his seasoned wisdom that morning have yielded some impressive mounts that hang on my walls today.

That first morning in the woods opened a door to a whole new world and left pleasant and permanent tracks in my memory. When you think about your initial hunt, there’s a lot more to it than one has time to share. Yet, all who hunt will cherish the “first,” and it will always hold its rightful place in your thoughts. I know this is true, because there is a head mount hanging over our son’s fireplace. It’s a white-tailed deer. The six-point rack is not large, but the plaque beneath it makes it a huge deer. It reads, “Nathan’s First Deer.”

My first deer had even a smaller rack, but was nonetheless important. I had it mounted, and it still brings just as much joy as the six-by-six elk rack I brought home from Montana. The memory is as sweet. I’ll never forget that day. Not only did I enjoy taking my first whitetail, but there were other firsts that I treasure.

For example, my very first ride in a four-wheel-drive vehicle took place the morning of my first deer hunt. It was frightening, but I survived it. The driver was an elderly gentleman whose flame was fueled by the fear in his passengers. He seemed to be intoxicated by the challenge of getting that olive-green used Army-issue jeep up that steep West Virginia mountain. I repented of every sin I could think of, and even started in on the sins of my friends as we bounced up “death road.”

Another first I experienced that day is what is known as a “drive.” It’s a hunting tactic used most often in the later part of the season.
to push the deer out of the dense brush into the open woods by driving them with a line of hunters walking through the thickets. A deer usually heads for the low gaps in the ridgeline called a “saddle,” and that’s where I was standing when I took my first shot at a buck. What an incredible moment it was. It’s as exciting to think about it now as it was when it happened. If it’s a memory you share, you understand the rush of feelings I can still remember years later.

Also, with the help of my host, Max Groves, I gutted a deer for the first time. (I should say “field dressed” the deer for those who are squeamish.) It’s a disgusting but necessary process.

That wonderful day ended with another first. Mrs. Groves prepared the evening meal using venison that I had “harvested.” It was a gastronomical jubilee! She panfried the backstrap and then made a gravy to pour over it. She graced the tender meat with mashed potatoes, green beans, corn, hot yeast rolls, and a steaming pot of fresh-brewed coffee. (If you can, please try not to drool on these pages.)

It is true that we humans are enamored with firsts. However, as wonderful as they are, I do have one problem with them. The fact that there are firsts indicates that there will come a last. A beginning represents an ending that must follow. It would be hard to number how many mid-morning departures from a deer stand I have dreaded to make. With a reluctance that tempts me to forsake all other responsibilities, many times I have stood up, gathered my gear, and headed to the truck. I often whisper to myself as I’m walking away, “All good things must end!” As much as I would like to be able to, I can’t keep the curtain from falling on a great day afield.

Life is a lot like a day in the woods. It has a beginning and an end. We take the alpha with the omega. The firstborn will leave home. Someday there’ll be a final step. There’ll be a last kiss, a last word, a graduation, a good-bye, a sunset, and—brace yourself—there’ll even be a last hunt. When will it be? Who knows?

What we do with all that is between the crib and the casket is an awesome opportunity and an incredible responsibility. Maybe some
of us have deviated from the course that had a great and worthy beginning. Maybe we have forgotten our “first love.” Perhaps some of us have given so much attention to other interests that we have forgotten how much we would enjoy an autumn sunrise or a quiet November deer stand. How easy it is to get caught up in the cares of this life and forget to go “outside.”

For some of us, there are other things besides hunting that had a wonderful and true beginning but, because of various distractions, we have forgotten how to enjoy them. For example, how long has it been since we enjoyed a date with a spouse that resembles the first date? What about those first hours with a new baby? Have we hugged our children like that since? Perhaps a friendship needs to be rekindled. For some of us, maybe it’s been a long time since we communed with our Father in heaven the way we did when we first gave our lives to Him.

May I suggest that you stop for a moment and take in a deep breath? In the way that the smell of an autumn morning brings back the precious memory of a first hunt, perhaps you could catch the aroma of another part of life that had a wonderful beginning. I pray that if you do, you will once again enjoy it. May you do so before time slips up behind you, taps you on the shoulder, and says, “The hunt is over.”