

# I'd Rather Be Hunting

STEPHEN W. SORENSON



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## **I'D RATHER BE HUNTING**

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*To my father, who graciously allowed me to  
buy my first rifle when I was 13.*

*To my hunting friends, especially Roy (my father-in-law) and Walt,  
who have shared so many adventures with me and positively  
influenced my life more than they'll ever know.*

*To Amanda, my dear wife and hunting companion,  
who has always known how much I need hunting adventures  
in my life. She played such a key role in making this book happen.*

*And to Caitlin, for her encouragement,  
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*Readers*, I know I may not be privileged to meet many of you in person but I thank you for reading these stories. It is indeed a privilege to share them with you. I hope you enjoy them.

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## My First Deer Hunt

I started hunting rabbits, woodchucks, and pheasants during my early teens in the Midwest.

I started hunting big game when I was 25.

Nobody in my immediate family had ever hunted; I was the first. In fact, I learned several years ago that my aunt and uncle had given away rifles and shotguns they inherited because they didn't know anybody who'd use them.

When my first big-game hunting opportunity came across my path—or the sidewalk, actually—I jumped at it. I'd noticed my neighbor Pete was outside, so I wandered over to say hello. A few minutes into our conversation, he announced, "I'm taking my older son hunting for the first time."

"What are you hunting, and where are you going?" I replied, trying to stifle my immediate enthusiasm, which was usually reserved for special times with my wife or dining at all-you-can-eat places that serve prime rib and coconut cream pie.

Pete's face lit up as he described his special deer hunting spot.

Then I blurted out with all the subtlety of a giraffe in a shopping mall, "Hey, can I go with you?"

“Sure,” he responded. “I have everything we’ll need for hunting, but you’ll need your own tent, food, rifle, and personal gear.”

That sounded great to me. I had a little backpacking tent, a summer sleeping bag, and no idea that I’d need much else. “Okay, count me in!”

As I walked those 50 or so steps back to my house, several thoughts smashed into me head-on. *Okay, I just agreed to go deer hunting. I don’t have a deer rifle. I don’t know anything about big-game hunting. And I don’t have much money. Wow, this trip will be great!*

I immediately called my father-in-law to tell him the exciting news. He’s been a pistol, rifle, and shotgun enthusiast for many years, and he’s a lifetime NRA member too.

“That’s great!” he exclaimed. “What rifle do you plan to use?”

“I have no idea,” I said. I didn’t know a .243 from a .300 Winchester magnum. “Maybe I can borrow one.”

Roy paused briefly and then said, “You know, I’ll give you a Springfield A3O3 .30-06 rifle that I bought through the NRA years ago for 20 dollars. It’ll do the job. Do you want it?”

“Great!” I exclaimed, not realizing what a gift it really was. I found out later it had a Mauser action—one of the best ever made and prized by people who “sporterize” rifles. It was a truly magnificent gift.

A week later, I picked up the rifle Roy had sent to a licensed firearms dealer (a legal requirement at the time) and brought it home.

Several weeks later, I passed the state-required hunter’s safety class. Then I waited expectantly for another six weeks until deer hunting season opened. As I put my gear into Pete’s four-wheel-drive at 3:30 in the morning, I kept trying to hide my exuberance by yawning. It didn’t work. I said hi to Pete and his son, Michael, as I climbed into the vehicle. The four-hour drive was an all-about-Pete private session, and I had a front-row seat. Pete bragged about his hunting prowess and told us hunting stories. Michael remained

pretty quiet. He and I didn't ask many questions. Since Pete apparently knew so much, I hadn't read up on hunting lore. I just expected that he'd help me if I shot a deer or needed help with something. I knew for sure that I could skin out a deer, having done taxidermy on a possum and pheasant on my parents' dining room table years earlier.

Pete parked at the end of a dirt road in a remote foothills area filled with pine and aspen trees.

"You go to the right," Pete said, immediately taking charge. "We'll go someplace else."

I loaded five rounds into my rifle and headed up the side of a hill, clueless what to do next. As the first rays of sunlight touched the treetops, I imagined that a herd of deer would greet me around each bend. In the distance, I heard a squirrel's chirp as I walked on a game trail that weaved around and up the sides of various hills and near small meadows. Before long I learned firsthand why hunters avoid wearing nylon jackets. Again and again branches brushed against me, and the fabric trumpeted my presence.

Fifteen minutes later, I found myself moving into timber that was more dense, and then the trail I'd followed branched off in several directions. *What do I do now?* I wondered, my frustration growing. *Which path should I take? Or should I just sit down here and hope a deer wanders by?*

Conflict arose within me. On one hand, I realized I didn't need to worry about proving anything to anybody. I could just enjoy all the beauty around me and view today like walking around in a park. On the other hand, I wanted to prove to myself—and to Pete—that I wasn't just a wannabe hunter. I desired to demonstrate that I really could be a hunter—like other guys I knew—and perhaps have my own hunting stories to tell someday.

I chose the right fork without any idea why, and I walked more slowly because my sweat was making me cold. I knew about the dangers of hypothermia from my Boy Scout days, but I'd never learned

about the dangers of cotton clothing—how it retains moisture rather than wicking it away from skin. As a cold, west wind penetrated my clothing, I tried to remember what I'd heard a friend say about using wind correctly. *I want to be downwind of a prime hunting spot*, I thought.

Several hundred yards farther, as I rounded a bend, I sensed something was watching me. I stopped and tried to figure out why I felt that way or if I were just imagining things.

Then I saw him. A nice-sized buck stood at the edge of a meadow! He seemed as puzzled as I was. He stared at me from 150 yards away as though I were the first human being he'd ever seen. Maybe I was.



My adrenaline pumping and my hands shaking, I aimed at the heart area and squeezed the trigger.

Down he went!

I stood there dumbfounded, realizing this was a milestone moment in my life. I even forgot to work the bolt and put another round into the chamber in case the buck got up and started running. As I walked up to the deer, I felt elated...and sad. Elated because of what I'd just done; sad because until moments ago this majestic animal had been experiencing life in such gorgeous country.

Then a loud, piercing thought screamed for attention. *Now what am I supposed to do?*

I remembered from my hunter's safety class that I needed to gut the deer, so I straddled it and started cutting. It took me a while to figure out where to cut. Not having a small saw to cut up the center of the ribs and at his back end made my work harder. But my knife held up, and I completed the job in about 45 minutes. (I did everything right except I forgot to take out the windpipe.)

*Now what?* I looked at the deer as large snowflakes started to fall. *If only Pete were here.* Then a new thought emerged. *It's important to get the animal cooled down as quickly as possible.* So I skinned the deer right there in the forest. By the time I finished, my fingers felt colder than the snow all around me. Heat rose from the deer's cavity as additional snow fell.

I was tired.

After mentally retracing the path to the vehicle, I decided not to return the way I'd come.

"Uh-oh," you may be thinking, "this won't turn out well."

I thought, *I'll go down this hill and keep moving to the right until I come to the road. Then I'll walk to where Pete parked.* Since I didn't want to get my down jacket all bloody, I tied it around my waist, hoisted the deer around my neck, and headed downhill. Things went well (I thought) until I came to a small but steep ravine I couldn't cross. I stood there sweating as I tried to figure out my next move while balancing the deer on my shoulders. It seemed heavier and heavier—I'm sure it was because of all the snow collecting on it.

*I can keep walking downhill and hope this ravine ends or I can go back the way I came. Okay, I'll cut the deer in half and hang half of it in that pine tree within sight of that tall dead tree with the broken top. I'll carry the other half back up and walk to the Blazer the same way I came. Tomorrow I'll return to get the other half.*

(Stop laughing at me, okay?)

By the time I reached the road, I was quite a sight.

I was shivering.

My T-shirt was soaked with blood.

I wore a proud look on my face.

It felt mighty good to get the half a deer off my back and onto a tarp. Pete and Michael sat in the Blazer eating sandwiches.

“Why’d you skin the deer?” Pete asked, finishing his sandwich and drinking another sip of coffee. Criticism was obvious in his voice.

“I thought that’s what I was supposed to do.”

He grunted.

I was shocked by the anger and jealousy I heard in his voice when he commanded, “Get on the tailgate with the deer. I don’t want you to get any blood on the seat.”

As I settled in, he quickly took off, driving rather fast for about 15 minutes to where he planned to camp. The cold wind finished taking what little body heat I’d been able to retain. I kept wishing he’d stop so I could put on my jacket—blood or no blood. I was turning into a human Popsicle.

Twenty minutes later, I was starting a fire with damp wood, shivering almost too much to talk, while Pete and his son sat in the vehicle with the heater going full blast.

“So what are you doing?” he asked.

“Trying to get warm,” I answered.

I don’t remember much about that night, which is probably a good thing. But I did keep waking up and wondering how I’d find the other half of my deer someplace back in the woods.

To his credit, Pete drove me to the trailhead after breakfast the next morning, but he didn’t say much. I got out and headed down the same trails, thankful I no longer had to carry my rifle. New, wind-blown snow had covered nearly all of my tracks, but I had enough memories to get me to the general area where I’d shot the deer.

Perhaps you know what happens when a novice hunter who grew up in the suburbs tries to find half a deer hanging six feet up from the ground in a thick pine tree in the middle of a large, dark forest. Some apt phrases come to mind.

Wandering in circles.

Looking for a specific tree with a broken top.

Getting cold...and colder.

Feeling angrier and angrier at myself.

Dealing with nearly frozen feet.

I finally discovered the dead-tree marker, yet I still couldn't find the carcass. "God," I prayed, desperation prominent and worry stewing inside me, "will you help me find my deer, *please?*"

Within 30 seconds, my eyes noticed a spot of blood on the snow. "Thank you, God!" I said aloud. It just didn't seem right to just think about thanking him.

By the time I returned to the vehicle, Pete was ready to go home. He and Michael had hunted for several hours and hadn't seen a good-sized buck with the required points. As I climbed in, it seemed that Pete was even more angry that I'd shot a buck and he hadn't. During the ride home, my host said little. In fact, he never brought up that hunting trip again. Not long after that, he pretty much avoided me.

When I got home, my wife, Amanda, more than made up for Pete's actions. She wanted to hear all about what happened. She smiled or gave me strange looks at the appropriate times during my story. Then she got out a cookbook that had pictures of where different cuts of meat were located on a cow, and we used that as a guide as we cut up venison in our little kitchen. We marked the freezer paper with "stew," "steaks," and "not exactly sure." (We didn't really use this last category, though we should have. In light of how chewy some of the meat was, it should have been marked "cook for 18 hours minimum.")

After several days had passed, I couldn't help but think about what had happened during my hunting trip:

- I was thankful I'd been able to shoot the buck.
- It felt great to have meat in our freezer.
- I'd learned valuable hunting lessons—about not wearing nylon, about avoiding cotton, about why it's not good to skin a deer before carrying it out, and why it's

not great to try shortcuts on the way back to the vehicle or camp. I also learned why I'd never again hunt with someone like Pete, who cared more about his image as a great hunter than he did about helping a beginner. (I almost shiver in my office right now just thinking about how close I came to becoming hypothermic after that tailgate ride. Maybe I should put on a sweater.)

- Most important, God demonstrated his faithfulness to me when I was about 10 minutes away from giving up on finding the other half of that buck. The moment I prayed that simple prayer asking for help, the God who created the universe heard me and acted on my request.

Perhaps you're a bit like I was in those woods—searching for something you can't find yet knowing it's there somewhere.

I've been there.

It can be hard to find what our hearts yearn for—perhaps some kind of purpose and meaning that goes much deeper than possessions, fame, power, a rugged “I can do this on my own thank you very much” statement, and so many other things our culture highly values. That includes great hunting trips.

That day in the woods taught me a simple truth that has stuck with me ever since and is especially comforting during painfully difficult times of searching and loss. I think you'll find it very beneficial too.

Are you ready?

*Talk with God.*

See, I told you it was simple.

I picture God dancing with joy when we invite him to come alongside us and help us carry the weight of fear, insecurity, anger, lust, greed—and anything else that wounds us and holds us back from experiencing his abiding presence and the life he offers us.

A friend of mine who works in advertising once needed to set

up a photography shoot of a Christmas setting in the middle of a forest. He and a coworker packed in Christmas tree lights, a generator, gasoline, photography equipment, a ladder—everything they needed. Things went pretty well until they ran out of time at the end of the shoot. It got dark, and they had to leave all those lights on that tree. Quite likely they are still there today, waiting to confound a lone hunter.

I wish I could go back and find that tree where I'd hung that deer half. I'd put Christmas tree lights on it, fire up one of my generators to make it light up, and reflect on how God has answered some of my prayers since that deer hunt. It'd be like one of those Old Testament monuments—only a tree. You know, when the Israelites did what God told them to do: put up memorials of stones—standing stones—so they'd always remember the ways in which he demonstrated his character and helped them accomplish mighty things (Genesis 35:14; Exodus 24:4; Joshua 4:19-24). The Israelites were commanded to keep telling these stories to their children and grandchildren.

On second thought, it's much easier for me to pray right here, right now—to count my blessings from God (including the hard-fought ones that come as my heart finally softens) and remember God's promises—than to lug a generator into the woods.