

MASSACHUSETTS WILDLIFE

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A man with a beard and a green jacket is holding a black bear cub in a snowy forest. The man is smiling and looking at the bear. The bear is wearing a black collar with a camera. The background is a snowy forest with trees and a blue tarp on the ground.

**Black Bear
Trail Cameras
Heart of the Hunt**

MASSACHUSETTS WILDLIFE

Vol. 71

No. 1

FEATURES

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— Jim Behnke

In the mid-1970s, the Massachusetts black bear population was estimated at under 100 individuals. As the now-thriving population expands its range eastward, the risk of conflict with people increases as bears explore suburban communities for food. Minimizing this potential conflict will require people to adjust their behavior because bears aren't going to adjust theirs.

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The nexus of modern trail camera technology and a well-seasoned understanding of wildlife and their habitat needs enables the author to create striking images of our wild neighbors that inform conservation decisions and educate the public.

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Reining in our wandering thoughts may be the best way to hold tight to the trail and fully experience nature's gifts.

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The transition into a hunting family leads the author down an emotionally challenging path to her first deer and a deeper connection to nature.

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On the Cover: Game biologist Erik Amati prepares to carry a newly collared one-year-old female black bear back to her den in the winter of 2018–2019. This winter, the bear was handled in the den as a three-year-old and biologists documented her first litter of two cubs. Photo by Dave Wattles/MassWildlife

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Photo © Sally Naser



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Illustration © Charles Goodhue



Heart of the Hunt



by
Emma Ellsworth

Light poured from the barn, where my husband, Tom, and his 78-year-old pheasant hunting buddy, Jim, were chatting. I carried two cold beers for Tom and I and a Black Velvet and Coke for Jim—heavy on the Black Velvet, light on the Coke. And there, between them on the ground, was my deer. A 132-pound doe with big, beautiful eyes, long eye lashes, and a kill shot through the heart. I peered in, hearing the excited bubble of their voices as they recounted the hunt while waiting for the drinks, and for me to tell the whole story.

I wasn't always a hunter. I picked up a gun about 10 years ago, when I started to date Tom. I grew up in a family where we assumed hunters were dangerous, callous killers. We had no understanding of the art, expertise, or the skill intrinsic to hunting. I used to meet the woods as a walker, hiker, and trail runner. I loved being out there on cool fall days, and even those sweltering summer days when the wave of the day's humidity would crest and break in the late afternoon, misting me like lettuce in the produce section of the grocery store.

My father demanded that his children be outside on weekends. There was only one hour of Saturday morning cartoons allowed, then our behinds got the boot. There were tree forts; long arduous hikes on the Metacomet-Monadnock Trail; and paddling on the Connecticut River, which always ended with splashing and purposely tipping our canoes. Dad didn't know the names of all the birds in the forest, nor which tree was which, but he loved being in motion in the out-of-doors. There were also family triathlons. I did the swim leg.

Hunting came later. It was the day before the opening of shotgun deer season, and I took a walk in the woods with Tom. He was scouting; I was curious. He explained how to slow my pace, to control the snap of sticks and crunch of leaves underfoot. He told me to pause at every "window" the woods provided, to stop, look, and listen to what the next area of the woods might reveal. He told me to look for what is often the first visual cue of the presence

of deer, horizontal lines that look out of place against the pattern of vertical tree trunks. Then he paused, delighted, and looked at the ground. "Several does regularly come down that rocky escarpment on this path," he said. "Do you see it?" "And here, the buck's tracks, crossing theirs, and then following," he said in an instructive tone. No. All I saw were wet leaves, acorns, and a brightly colored salamander. The path didn't say deer to me. He looked at me, confused. How could I not see what was so apparent to one schooled by a grandfather, grandmother, father, and uncles in the art of hunting?

The next morning, I got into my car and headed to work in Boston. Tom headed to the woods, clad in camo and wool. To be honest, I thought he had made it all up, or at least exaggerated. I grew up in the woods. I knew them. I was wrong. By the time I was stuck in traffic at the Concord rotary, watching geese in the field by the prison, Tom had shot his buck. He had sat right where we had scouted and sure enough that unlucky buck did exactly what Tom predicted. The does crossed in their usual spot and the buck eagerly followed, his senses dulled by his singular purpose.

Seeing the picture of Tom's buck, shot that early November morning, changed what hunting meant to me. It was about being in the woods differently, listening more, slowing down. There was a whole story written in the leaves, but I could not read it.

So, I fell in love with, and married, the man who could teach me. Who could have imagined then that I would arrive at this night, looking into the barn at a deer I had shot that I now needed to help hang and, in a few days, butcher?

Oh, The Missing

I took my first opening morning stand three years ago. Tom had scouted a spot in the Otter River State Park and showed it to me the Sunday before. He explained the deer path (run), and where the big buck was going to emerge from the woods, walk across a dam or "pinch point," and then pass within range for a shot.

As we walked through fresh snow the next morning by the dim light of our headlamps, I doubted Tom's confidence that we would see a deer, let alone get a shot. However, I sat on my little stool, tucked into the brush, on a small mound that provided me with good sight lines across the dam. Darkness slowly turned to gray. Dawn ushered in soft pink light and the sounds of a few birds followed. Then the rustle of leaves behind me caught my attention. Was it a deer? I twisted and craned my neck to get a better look at ... a gray squirrel.

Dawn ticked on. My Remington shotgun, equipped with a rifled slug barrel with open sights, lay across my lap. My hands were burrowed deeply into a muff clenching hand-warmers. Coffee long since drained, my empty thermos lay at my feet. And then, like magic, I saw the buck Tom had described. Majestic, graceful, unconcerned. He exited the brush, just as Tom said he would, and turned in my direction. He started down the cart road and then across the dam; pausing now and again to sniff and take in his domain. I waited, heart in my throat, with hands shaking. Exhaling slowly, I gripped the firearm. My index fingered reached for and rested upon the safety. The deer approached. I was filled with doubts. When would he scent me? Would he flee? Would he turn? How far could I really shoot? I didn't have answers to any of these questions, but I waited until he got to my side of the dam. Was that 100 yards or 200? I am a lousy judge of distance.

I pictured his impressive rack in our den. Perhaps mounted on a piece of cherry harvested from my father's property. I would be so proud to see him hanging next to my husbands' mounts. I pictured myself showing him off to guests, "And that one is mine!" I would exclaim to their amazement.

I raised my gun.

Blam! Blam! Blam! He ran towards me. Towards me! I had missed. More shells, I needed more shells in the gun. He was still coming closer. My shaking fingers

frantically grabbed for shells in my pocket. I jammed a few of them into the gun and cocked the action. The noise alerted the deer to my presence. I lifted to shoot again, but he was gone.

I was trembling violently, my heart pounding in my chest like a drum. I could hardly think. I left my stand to investigate. I reached the spot where he had paused, where I should have hit him but didn't because I couldn't get the additional shells loaded in time. I retraced his steps, saw where he had stopped, then darted off. I saw his tracks, but no blood. There was only a scuff mark in the snow where one of my shots had gone under him.

Tom joined me, having heard the shooting. He was excited and oh-so-hopeful for me. Then he saw my crestfallen face, the after-effects of the encounter. I was still shaking. How had I missed?

That afternoon, we tested my shotgun in the yard. I hit the target. The gun was fine. I was fine. It was adrenaline that had gotten the best of me.

Since missing that first great buck, I have missed many more times. Another doe that same afternoon. Then a doe in the late season that I wounded with my muzzle loader. Tom and I, and his cousin and her husband, all experienced hunters—except for me—looked for hours in a race to beat the setting sun only to lose her trail as darkness fell. I kept picturing her in the snowy cold at dusk; hurt, perhaps mortally, and weakened. Guilt kept me up that night. It was a hard decision, to forgive myself, but we all start somewhere. No one is born an expert hunter. Most learn in their teens like my husband, mentored in a hunting family that was part of a hunting community. He shot his first deer the first year he could legally hunt. It was probably heavier than he was at the time. I am learning in my forties. Being a rookie requires humility.

Big Red Bows

This year, having had our usual pheasant and duck hunting trip out West canceled due to COVID-19, Tom and I decided to take the opening week of shotgun

season off together. Time in the woods, time in the woods. That's how you get a deer, according to all the hunters with know-how. This year, I was going to put in my time.

Day one: quiet. Pouring rain with a little spitting snow. Miserable cold, damp, and nothing to see. Day two: we joined Tom's old gang in his hometown. We pulled up to Tom's 73-year-old uncle's house as the morning is just starting to gray. Guys with orange hats stand around, gripping travel coffee mugs, stomping their feet to fight the chill, discussing the morning plan, and reminiscing about hunts of old. They talk about the wind direction and the merits of several possible hunting spots. Who has seen sign deer tracks, rubs, scrapes? Who else in town is likely to be hunting and on what tract of land? Which anti-hunting neighbors are we to stay clear of? Who doesn't mind if we cut across their field, or park at the edge of their woodlot? We get moving and Tom and I are assigned our spot.

We hike in thirty minutes to where we have been instructed to sit. The verbal directions all refer to generations-old landmarks. The red gate that hasn't been there as long as Tom has been alive. "Gram's run," where Tom's grandmother got her deer. The old beech tree where guys used to carve their names, a tree that has long since fallen and rotted, which is where we set up that morning, under Tom's old stand. As light crept into the forest, Tom pointed out where he had built a rudimentary platform in a yellow birch as a boy. A board still hangs there, a remnant of his youthful ambition. Behind us, a piece of his first metal stand is still suspended twenty feet up. He shot eight deer from this spot. I just want my first.

And sure enough, as we sit. I start to hear movement. Rustling that I can barely discern from the wind passing through the leaves. But, no, these are distinct. Steps. Coming. I freeze, put my hand on Tom's arm. Point in the direction I think they are coming from. My heart starts its now familiar pounding. Then he points, gently, not wanting to attract attention with a big gesture. I follow his hand into

the swamp and there they are. Two does meandering their way in our direction. Still at least 100 yards out. I raise my gun. Tom whispers, "slowly... wait till she's broadside." Blam! And off they run. "Why didn't you wait?" Tom asks urgently. "I thought ..." He shakes his head.

And then the radio comes alive. "Who shot?" "What was it?" "Do we have a deer down?" I drop my head. Tom sends me out to confirm. I go. I see where she walked, and spun at the sound of the shot, and ran off. There is no crumpled deer. No blood. No hit. I missed again.

"Well, you earned a bow," Tom sighs. "A bow?" I respond. He explains, "Yes, a big red Christmas bow. That's what you get when you hunt with the gang and miss." And sure enough, out comes a faded, well-worn red Christmas bow, which is dutifully pinned to my blaze orange vest. By Thursday afternoon, I had more bows than a high school cheerleading squad. The next doe I missed was walking straight towards me. I was sitting by myself that time. Then at Gram's run. And again, afterwards, Tom asked, "Why didn't you wait? She was coming to you." Confounded I stood. All my practice, my ability to take a deep breath, to exhale and focus, to look through and past the rear sights on my gun to line up the little white dot on the front of the barrel with the target—all vanished when I faced a real deer. Instead, there was that damned adrenaline, the frustrating palsy, the anxiety, and the doubts.

I try and laugh it off. Relax, forgive myself. Self-hatred won't help my aim, nor my focus. I wondered if the gang would give up. Tell me to stand somewhere well out of their way, so I will stop screwing the whole hunt up. Instead, they teased mercilessly and set me up once again.

Their best spot. This one always produces deer. I sat at the point of a triangle. A beaver swamp on one side, a road and fields on the other. Tom came with me to help find a good hiding spot that also has good site lines. We settle in for the wait, our backs against a big pine and a blow down in front of us for concealment. He



warns me it will be a while. Maybe two hours. We have a lunch of cheese, nuts, and dry salami. I snack on an apple. My butt starts to go numb. First one side, then the other. Tom tells me to stop fidgeting. We hear steps coming towards us. Then I sneeze loudly. Then we don't hear the steps anymore. Tom shakes his head. Again. I slump.

My Deer, My Tear

Our radio chirps. "I just jumped at least two deer. Tom, they're coming right to you." My hands spring out of the warm muff, and my index finger settles onto the safety.

The deer approach, revealing themselves from the other side of a stone wall. Tom coaches. "Wait, steady, aim." Tom makes a huffing noise and the two deer freeze. I shoot. The deer run past. I shoot again. Tom huffs once more. A doe spins, freezes. Right there for me. "Aim lower," he whispers.

Suddenly, the world slows. There is no panic. The tremble stops. I see the side of the deer. The gun is nestled tightly into the pocket of my shoulder. I see the sights. The white dot. My breathing is steady. I line up with her heart. Blam!

It was my last shell. She ran up the hill. I fish in my pocket to grab more shells, jamming a few into the gun. The tremble returns with full force. My brain can't control my steps as I trip up the hill to see if there is a blood trail. Did any of my shots connect?

Half-way up, I look to my right. Blood. There is blood, then more blood. "I hit?" I say to myself in near disbelief. "Yes, I hit!" And then I see her. Tucked in a small hollow. Her head back at an angle. I did it. I killed a deer. Tears poured down my face. But these were not tears of defeat, humiliation, or frustration. The tears flowed, instead, from a deep sense of accomplishment.

I bent down next to her. Caressing her soft head, tucking her tongue back in her mouth. I thanked her. My tears fell onto her face. I was so grateful. Emotion coursed through me with the all-encom-

passing impact that adrenaline had done minutes earlier. These were not simple, straightforward feelings, but rather a mix of relief, gratitude, grief, and pride.

I looked up at my husband, grateful for his patience and guidance. Grateful for his family, for the guys who helped with the hunt and believed in me. My eyes drifted down to the gorgeous animal lying in front of me, and my mind drifted to thoughts of the meals she would provide my family. I admired the length of her eye lashes, and the smooth hair that ran down her nose. I gently ran my hand across her powerful shoulder.

I had taken the lives of game animals before. I watched brilliant flashy colors shift to dull gray as a brook trout I caught heated on the grill. I even had to snap a wood duck's neck, in order to quickly finish what steel shot had left undone. But extinguishing the life of this larger animal felt distinctly different. This morning she had wandered through her woods, digging for acorns, peering out of hemlock cover, feeling the crunch of the thin layer of snow under her hoofs, and listening for predators. Now, she lay still. Her life, and the loss of it, had permanently become part of my life.

I finally killed a deer, and in doing so, had achieved a goal that had eluded me for years. I had spent so many hours in the woods in pursuit of this moment. That time was filled with memories of cold hands and feet, early morning anticipation, and end-of-day disappointment.

Then a wave of loss hit me like a club. I mourned the end of this hunt. Other deer hunts will follow, but there will never be another one like this.

The radio lights up again. And this time, Tom answers, asking, "Who has a pen that Emma can borrow?" Everyone understands. This means I have a deer tag to fill out. My first.



About the Author

Emma Ellsworth is the Executive Director of the Mount Grace Land Conservation Trust in Athol, Massachusetts.

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