**Showcasing the DNR: Hunting for the experience**

**By MICHELLE ZELLAR**

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When I think about hunting, it is amazing to me how something I am so passionate about today was never introduced to me when I was young.

I grew up in the Upper Peninsula, a part of the generation that always had the opening day of deer season off from school – it was literally considered a school holiday – and yet, at that point in my life, I never really knew why.

Into my late 20s, I was still wondering what all the deer hunting fuss was all about.

Still, going out to deer camp, eating good food and having lots of laughs with good friends and family sure seemed like something I could see myself enjoying.

You see, that was my perception of deer hunting.

Little did I know the experiences I had ahead of me.

Things changed in 2002 when my husband, Jamie, took me out hunting a few times. It wasn’t long before I hunted on my own for the first time, the following year.

My transformation has been dramatic.

When I think about deer hunting now, I think of peace, leaves falling, twigs snapping, seeing my breath in front of me, a crunchy skiff of snow and that smell. You know that smell, pungent yet so refreshing, the smell of nature at its peak – hunting season.

I hunt now in all three deer seasons – archery, firearm and muzzleloader – and I revel in the uniqueness of each experience.

**An archer in the woods**

Picture walking in to your tree stand in late October to archery hunt, dragging the wet leaves stuck to your boots, pointing your nose upward to smell and feel for the wind direction that you had already checked multiple times throughout the day and the days prior.

You know, sitting there that night, you will be completely exposed to any buck in the woods – wary as they are and with such keen senses.

Climbing as quietly as you possibly can, you try to get settled quickly, yet comfortably, because the amount of movement from here on will be limited for the next couple hours.

At this point you are one with nature, listening to the birds chirp and the squirrels and chipmunks chatter, all the while hoping to get a look at the elusive majestic buck. Pure peace, yet every rustle, every snap, increases your awareness and anticipation.

Then there’s that instant heart flutter that suddenly makes you aware. You can literally hear your heart pounding, just as you get that glimpse of the tail flutter, and in walks a doe with deliberate stride.

Nothing compares to being that close to a whitetail deer in its natural environment.

Every sit in a tree stand is a new experience, each one. Hunting this way is, in my opinion, the ultimate hunting experience. Though this is the most exhilarating way to hunt, even as an avid deer hunter, I must admit I have yet to harvest a buck out of my tree stand.

Having said that, I did harvest my first black bear from my tree stand, which was amazing!

**November rituals**

As each firearm deer season approaches, the thoughts and anticipation are at an all-time high, but so very different for very different reasons. The weather is changing, the deer habits are unpredictable, traditions and rituals with friends and family are being planned and set in place.

It’s that time – it’s deer season. Just the thought of sitting in my blind from dawn to dusk is exciting and a thought that never gets old.

The walk in is the same for me every year, every step placed as lightly as possible, thinking with every step about getting into my blind without any creature knowing I was there.

This walk seems like it takes forever, because of the rush of emotions and adrenaline. My steps are long and lean. I’m paying close attention to any sound not made by my footsteps.

As I approach the blind, it seems I can’t be too quiet and careful. The preservation of my opening-day hunting spot depends on it.

Now I am in. I’m finally here.

A check of my watch, counting down the minutes until that blurry view becomes light enough to see. So very still, I’m just listening and watching for a sign that a deer might walk out into view at any moment.

Suddenly, a brush of movement catches my eye in the wide distance.

No, I am mistaken.

It’s just the wind and my anticipation.

After hours of sitting in the blind content and peaceful, combing the tree line visually back and forth through my binoculars, searching for a flicker or flash of brown off in the distance, I’m peering with great intent.

Only then do I realize a nice buck has approached from behind and is strolling, nose to the ground, steadfast through this clearing.

I am overcome by an instant mirage of thoughts and emotions, some too quick to process.

“Breathe, breathe,” I tell myself.

I need to get a shot off quickly because he’s not stopping.

“Squeeze the trigger,” I hear myself think.

“Breathe.”

“Squeeze.”

This buck – still not so much as a lift of the head, just a stealth stride focused on a mission.

Bang!

Did I shoot?

I didn’t feel a thing.

I can hear and feel my heart beating outside of my chest.

The deer, a full 360 jump and run.

“Load another one, Michelle, load another one.”

I’m shaking uncontrollably.

Suddenly, a dead stop, a turn of his head both ways and another jump out of sight.

“Oh, he looked nice.

“What just happened?

“Breathe.

“Stop talking to yourself.”

I’m wrapped up in a whirlwind of emotion, excitement, anxiety. Oh, the anxiety, I can’t see him lying there.

“OK, take a breather. Wait until you get the steady back into your shaking legs before you exit the blind looking for signs of a fatal shot.

“Now make the call.”

**The retrieve**

This will be the call to my husband and family that I got one, still not certain whether it was seven antler points or eight, just that it was plenty big enough to shoot and they couldn’t get here fast enough for us to retrieve it.

You see, this is the most special part of the hunt, retrieving the animal with the people you care about most. Sharing the story, every detail, every emotion.

It all happened so fast, yet the story goes on and on.

Retrieving the animal as a family has given my children the opportunity to experience the success and emotion of the hunt. Together we are all making those connections, making those memories.

They have seen firsthand my passion and excitement, which makes them want to experience the rest of the story.

For me, it’s all about the experiences, very little about the harvest – experiences I very much want to continue share with others: my husband, my boys, my sisters, but most importantly, my daughter, Bailey.

**Mother and daughter**

Bailey, who is now 14, hasn’t committed to hunting to harvest an animal, but by participating in the process and being exposed to our experiences, she has a complete understanding and appreciation for deer hunting here in Michigan.

Sitting with my boys over the years has been fun, but the first time I took my only daughter out to hunt with me is a memory I will never forget.

She had been out to the blind before with the family, putting it out for the season, playing around as we put it up. She was there when we brushed out the shooting lanes and set up the trail camera.

Come the middle of the season, when there was a foot of snow to walk through with those little legs, complete with a backpack containing her baby doll, baby bottles and a few snacks, was an eye-opener for her.

Cute as a fawn’s button nose, with her fuzzy hunter orange hat, baby doll in her lap she sat peering out the windows, wondering when and if we were going to see something. Having heard us say so many times that just seeing deer when you’re out hunting is fun, she now understood after sitting in the same place for several hours.

She was rocking her baby side to side, when out came a doe and fawn walking leisurely down an old logging trail.

“That’s so cool,” she said.

And I, with a smile and a nod of the head, quietly said, “Yes, it is.”

**The experience**

Bailey has yet to be sitting with me when I have harvested a deer. She is much more apt to suit up to retrieve the harvest, but she’s experienced the hard work, the connection with nature, the peace.

She sees and feels the passion I have for hunting and doesn’t miss the opportunity to jump in a photo capturing the success of a hunt.

And I can’t forget to mention my favorite part: the hug, which is followed by a “Good job, mom.”

She wouldn’t have this hunting appreciation had she not had these family experiences.

She understands the ethics involved, she understands how nature recharge the soul, she understands the anticipation and excitement we hunters feel when we get a glimpse of the animal while afield.

She understands the process, the value to conservation, and she will treasure our family traditions and memories.

It’s all about the connections; it’s all about the experience.

I did my job as a sportsman, a parent and a conservationist and fulfilled my commitment as a woman to share that hunting is so much more than killing an animal, it’s respecting the animal, and it lends the ability to embrace and appreciate conservation.

I take great pride that my 18-year-old son Justin is an avid archery hunter.

One of my fondest moments hunting was the day my son Ryan, Bailey’s twin brother, shot his first buck with me from my blind. I’m not sure who was prouder, or who was more excited.

Even though this will forever be a hunting highlight, it doesn’t compare to knowing my daughter can share my passion, appreciation and understanding even though she’s never pulled the trigger.

It’s priceless.

***Editor’s Note: Michelle Zellar works for the Michigan Department of Natural Resources as an administrative assistant and coordinator for the Becoming an Outdoorswoman program, which introduces women to recreational and educational experiences in the wonderful outdoors of Michigan.***

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**/Note to editors**: Contact: John Pepin, Showcasing the DNR series editor, at 906-226-1352. Accompanying photos are available below for download and media use. Suggested captions follow. Credit: Michigan Department of Natural Resources, unless otherwise noted.

[**Bear:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/11/27/file_attachments/1113434/Bear.jpg) Bailey, Ryan and Michelle Zellar with a black bear Michelle shot.

[**Buck:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/11/27/file_attachments/1113437/Buck.jpg) Michelle Zellar and the buck she bagged this year.

[**Deer:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/11/27/file_attachments/1113439/Deer.jpg) Ryan, Bailey, Michelle and Justin Zellar with a deer that Michelle bagged on one of her hunting trips.

[**Mother-Daughter:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/11/27/file_attachments/1113440/Mother-Daughter.jpg) Michelle and Bailey Zellar enjoy the mother-daughter hunting experience together.

[**Seven:**](https://content.govdelivery.com/attachments/MIDNR/2018/11/27/file_attachments/1113441/Seven.jpg) Michelle Zellar with the 7-point buck she shot and described in her hunting story./