**Showcasing the DNR: That ‘one’ good Michigan hunting story**

**By RYAN SOULARD**

**Michigan Department of Natural Resources**

It’s hard for me to pick just one story to write about that centers on hunting in Michigan, because there have been so many outstanding experiences to choose from.

I know I can speak for a lot of Michiganders when I say we are lucky to live in this state, and to have a plethora of natural resources available to us, essentially at our fingertips.

When it comes to hunting, the Michigan opportunities available to experience and write about are endless: first hunts with a friend, watching your children harvest their first animal, discovering new and exciting places, maybe spending that last deer camp with a loved one who’s since passed on, or maybe just a quiet note of self-thought and reflection.

Whatever it may be, we are lucky to have approximately 4.6 million acres of state land at our disposal, ready and waiting for us to discover our next adventure afield.

I couldn’t choose just one hunting story to write about, so here’s two.

**A timberdoodle tale**

It was late in October 2014, when I set out on my annual hunt with good friend Dave Wildrom of Grand Haven. I met Dave a few years prior via a local waterfowl organization where we both volunteered.

I was fortunate enough to get an invite from Dave on one of his coveted American woodcock hunts, after he discovered that I had never been out upland hunting for the magnificent “timberdoodle.”

That fall we were running very short on time to get out hunting together, with the season closing within a week or so, the weather turning very cold and woodcock migrating south by the minute.

Dave had been out a few times on his normal southern Michigan hunts and they just weren’t producing, so he declared that we would be heading “up north.”

Anyone from lower Michigan knows that could mean as short as a 30-minute drive north of wherever you live. I have come to realize now, after hearing the term thrown around since I was a little kid, that really “up north” could mean anywhere you travel in our great state to unwind, recreate, reset your gears and become one with the outdoors for a few days.

In our case, we left on a very cold, rainy and windy morning and embarked about two hours northward for some “new to me” lands. It was Dave, me and Holly, the drahthaar. If there was a Navy Seal version of a bird dog, Holly would be the equivalent – determined, sharp and full of energy.

Dave is built for the upland woods – slender, long-legged, fast – darting in and out of alders, willows and “popples” (poplars), chasing Holly as she is in hot pursuit of grouse and woodcock.

Me, I am more like an old bear, either having to plow through those narrow saplings or lumber over the logs and hoping my feet don’t get too tied up in the shin-tangle as I am dragging my tired feet along keeping up with those two.

It is a rare occasion when I am not extremely excited to be outdoors.

However, on this day, as the raindrops got larger, the temperature got closer to freezing and the wind picked up, I was already daydreaming of how that old recliner back home was going to feel and what we were going to have for lunch.

As we pulled into the parking spot, Dave was mentioning to me that this was one of his favorite spots to trap beavers, and that he was excited to show me the flooded timber, knowing our mutual affection for duck hunting.

We crept up to the top of a very tall hill to peer over the edge, at what I can only describe as one of the most beautiful flooding areas my eyes have ever seen.

There was only one problem.

No ducks.

I thought to myself, “Great, it’s even too wet of a day for the ducks to be out here!”

About that time, the wind picked up and the rain followed suit, and we sought shelter in the car. As we sat there, I was picking Dave’s brain about everything outdoor-related I could think of.

I asked Dave how he sets his traps, where he found diving ducks to hunt over the years, how he learned to carve decoys and what got him into upland hunting. I was learning all this great stuff from someone much wiser and more experienced in the outdoors than myself, soaking up every ounce of it.

You can’t buy this kind of knowledge or read it in a book, you must seek it out from those who have trounced through those woods before you and see it through their eyes.

Time flew by and before we knew it, the rain had subsided, and it was time to upland hunt. Dave, Holly and I headed off into the dense stand of popple, hoping all the bird scent hadn’t washed away.

For those who haven’t upland game bird hunted, often people will use a beeper collar to locate their dog and know when it’s on point. Slow, spaced-out beeps indicate the dog is moving; faster-paced beats indicate that the dog has stopped long enough to most likely indicate a point.

Holly had shot through the woods like she was riding a rocket and Dave and I were in chase. We weren’t there very long when we could hear the rapid-paced beep.

Dave yelled, “Get on up there Ryan, she is on point!”

I hurried along at my pace with Dave on my heels, bobbing and weaving, heartbeat racing, not knowing if it was a grouse or woodcock, and trying to keep my composure for hopefully what was going to be a shot opportunity.

I finally caught up to the dog and saw her on a beautiful point. I was so fixated on the dog and looking ahead of her, that I didn’t see what she was pointing at, but I sure was about to.

The realization soon came over Dave and me.

We yelled at the top of our lungs in unison, “BEAR!”

Holly was on a rock-solid point on a bear that was laying on a hillside. She was about 5 yards from the bear, and 30 yards from Dave and me.

The mighty old bruin stood up. The bear was so close, Dave and I both commented on the old cuts and scars it had on its face and muzzle, indicating old fights with other bears.

The bear soon sauntered off, taking its time, and Dave called Holly off. We both looked at each other in astonishment at what we just witnessed. Our best guess was that the bear was laying down, starting to hibernate and we interrupted its nap.

We worked our way out of that area and back to the vehicle, figuring it was probably best that we cede that knoll to the bear and find somewhere else to go.

**The drake**

I am sure many people can relate when I say that life hasn’t always been easy.

There have been some trying times financially, some instability, family issues, the list could go on and on. Often the woods and water here in Michigan are old friends I can rely on to hear me out on my issues or to help me get my thoughts sorted out and back in a row.

Black Friday (Nov. 28, 2010) was one of those days when I just needed to get outdoors to clear my mind. I recall that the wind was over 30 mph and it was spitting snow.

A few people had told me about the Fennville Farm Unit at the Allegan State Game Area (Allegan County) being open to duck hunting when the normal managed goose hunt is closed.

I decided to head down there for an afternoon hunt.

While driving around, much to my surprise, I ran into a couple of regular hunters from the Muskegon area that I had known through work for a couple of years. One of them had his kid along.

As it turned out, we all had the same thing in mind.

It was decided rather quickly that we would all hunt together. I’ll never forget that, just after we got done setting up our decoys and hiding in the corn strips, another guy came in by himself and set up just a short distance away from us.

We thought to ourselves, “With all of this huge area, why did he have to come so close to us?”

We decided that we would go and chat with him and invite him to join us, no sense in competing against each other.

The guy kindly declined our offer and told us that he had just been fired from his job that day in Grand Rapids, due to downsizing. Close to retirement age and not planning to call it quits anytime soon, this was a huge blow to him.

He said he hadn’t even told his wife yet and decided that he would grab a few of his decoys and just go sit for an evening to try and figure out how to handle this situation on many levels.

We all understood and wished him good luck. He didn’t stay long, but did manage to fool a few weary mallards in. Hopefully, those birds and that state land helped to at least give his mind a break for a few moments.

For us, we sat and froze all afternoon and were rewarded with not only a few mallards, but the most gorgeous northern pintail drake I have seen shot on a hunt.

It’s hard to believe that was nine years ago, when I remember it like it was yesterday.

**Visiting an old friend**

I could go on and on talking about my experiences hunting on state land, but to tell the truth, aside from a few deer hunts as a kid “up north” with my Dad and various friends and family, there really weren’t many other experiences until my adult years.

I think back on turkeys thundering and gobbling on an April morning, wood ducks squealing in the morning fall air, squirrels making racket like deer and just moments of silence thinking about my years on this earth, in the woods, and an endless number of memories that I have made alone and with great mentors, friends and family.

Every time I return to Michigan’s outdoors, it is like visiting an old friend. No matter how long you are apart, after just a few minutes, it feels like you picked up right where you left off.

Set aside some time to get yourself back out and acquainted with nature, invite a neighbor or coworker, or maybe that niece or nephew.

I may never be rich, in a monetary sense, but I can assure you that I will be rich with experiences, many of which are focused on Michigan’s woods, water, fields and streams.

These are moments that I cherish in the outdoors, something I will never forget because thankfully, these are indelibly etched into my mind – the sights, sounds, smells and feelings of what it means to be a hunter in Michigan.

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