

## AN EARLY MORNING HUNT FOR BLACK-TAIL DEER

By Clarence A. Lyman

WE slept that night as we ever do in the hills, with the front of the tent wide open, so that from my pillow, the side of a saddle, I could watch the Great Dipper do its slow somersault around the North Star. When the camp-fire died the night before, and we went to bed, the Dipper was lying along the tops of the mountains, brimming full. It is easier to watch this great hand in the astronomical clock than to light unwilling matches from time to time in the night and examine a match; and I knew that when the constellation had nearly reversed itself, it would be time to start moving.

A man in camp sleeps sweetly, yet lightly. A dozen times through the dark hours the distant sharp bark of a fox, the rustle of a leaf, the deep sigh of a satiated and sleepy horse on a picket rope, the cracking of a coal in the embers of the camp-fire, the call of a night bird, or the snap of a twig under the tread of some one of the animals of our cavalcade, called me with a gentle thoroughness from slumber. Each time it seemed as though the position of the encircling attendants of the North Star had changed by only a slight angle; and each time I sank instantly again into the perfumed rest that comes from a bed of balsam boughs after a hard day's work.

The hush that comes over all nature just before the dawn was near being my undoing after all. The Dipper seemed to have made a great sudden sweep and was dangerously far over when my eyes opened again. The canvas was throbbing with the pulse of the morning breeze, but the eastern was darker than the western sky, where hovered a faint glow. It took an effort of will to get out into the cold air, but necessity compelled haste and I scrambled as gently as I could over the dewy coverlet, hurriedly put on the few clothes I had taken off the night before—dressing and undressing are mutually short operations. In a hastily made camp—found my damp and clammy shoes, raked together the coals in the ashes, fanned a flame, boiled coffee and munched a hasty

breakfast of bread and some cold trout. My partner, chum, helpmate never stirred. It is wonderful how a trustful woman will sleep in the wilderness, safe in the superstition that he who sleeps beside her is competent to meet danger which may arise,

I dropped half a dozen cartridges into my pocket, together with a couple of biscuit in case the chase should be unduly long, shouldered the heavy rifle and strode out through the high grass, which was so beaded with dew that walking was like wading an ice-cold stream. The horses were standing on wide-spread legs, heads near the ground, asleep, while the burros, weary with the long pull with the heavy packs of the day before, were huddled together, lying on the ground.

The morning star was at its brightest as I started across the valley, but by the time I had picked a splashing path across the current of the little river and got fairly started up the trail, it was paling. Little flecks of purple cloud began to appear above the sun's approaching glow, as, though they had been newly created. The range to the west began to lift its rugged ascents into view in a purple radiance. The eastern hills grew from shapeless masses of gloom into rounded eminences with dainty fringes of aspens and slender minarets of spruces against the faintly glowing sky. I wished I had started half an hour earlier, and quickened my pace a little.

In the growing twilight I could see a furry skunk in his sleek coat of jet black and snowy white, treading the clumps of bunch-grass, picking up the benumbed insects before the sun's heat might give them the vitality to escape. In the trail ahead of me a fox trotted. I was conscious of the faint presence of his scent but did not place it until I saw the flash of his fur above the grass. He knew I was following, but knew too that he was safest down in that sinuous passage between high walls of grass and flowers, on whose smooth surface he could make a far safer, swifter flight than over the rough ground to either side.

A mile or so above camp I left the trail and crossed the stream again, getting my feet no wetter in wading, but feeling the icy chill pervade the water in my shoes which my feet had warmed in the comparative dryness of the beaten track. Close to the rippling surface a colder breath moved and the scrubby willows had a coating of white frost. I brushed a furry moth from a twig in passing but it was too cold for more than one very feeble flutter. It fell wide-stretched on the water and as the current swept it into a quiet eddy it disappeared so quietly that one might suppose it had sunk of its own weight. I marked the spot where lay a trout, so big that its mouth could take in an insect of that size without a splash, as a good place to drop a feathered imitation when I carried my rod that may.

There was no mistake that it was very light. My eyes had been growing accustomed to the dimness, meeting the dawn half way, but the first glow of the rising sun was just striking the tops of the higher hill. The sky was a turquoise blue all across the dome. The clouds which had been purple, had faded to lavender, flamed with a tint of orange and were now melting away in yellow fleeces. It would soon be time when all sensible deer would be deep in the thickest of the green timber, where it would be all but impossible to come upon one of them unawares. Already the burros, far down the valley where camp lay, were up and moving stiffly down to get a drink at the river.

The southern hill before me was one I had marked the year before as a likely place for deer. It rose in smooth slopes and narrow benches a thousand feet or so, fringed on the top with the edge of the deep thick forest of spruces which ran back on the plateau beyond. The ascending surface had spruce and aspen groves lying on it in long streamers, divided by half a dozen open grassy glades, each with a tiny rill gurgling down the center, coming from the banks of snow which still lay protected by the dense shade of the crown of spruces. The streams were fringed with the succulent marsh herbs which deer and elk most fancy as dessert after filling up on vines and tender boughs.

It does not pay to hasten or to get out of breath when hunting deer, so I climbed very, very slowly upward, keeping in the shelter of the bushy young aspen that

fringed the bigger trees at the edge of one of the ascending glades. At each step, as I placed my foot to avoid any crackling twig, I looked all around and listened for any sound of game. The simulation of the color of the early coat of the deer to the dry bunches of grass is so close that in the imperfect light it was well to study closely each outline, else some proud stag might bear his coveted burden of venison out of range at a bound, before my eyes had seen the slender legs and gracefully borne head.

There were plenty of tracks in the mellow earth, some almost obliterated by two or three successive dews, and some apparently as fresh as though the cushioned hoof had just been lifted from them. In spite of all my caution, a crack of twigs and stamp of hoofs off to the right indicated that an alarm had reached eyes or ears or nostrils of some deer, but I sat still and listened to the beating of my heart until apparently it decided that its suspicions did not justify precipitate flight, for though it went on, it was in a noiseless walk. From tree to tree I edged in that direction. I found the fresh tracks, evidently a buck of good size, and I followed carefully on a slant up the hill. I saw something moving ahead of me, and was ready to shoot but it came fearlessly down toward me, evidently not seeing its danger. A doe with her two fawns was working down to a safe shelter in the willow tangle along the river. I did not want to turn them back in the direction in which the buck had gone, so I crouched behind a bush to let them pass. Only a pot-hunter fails to respect femininity and infancy in hunting deer. The mother was pushing along with all the ungracefulness of her kind, neck out, ears back. One fawn wanted to stop for refreshments and was pushing in front of her like a calf at milking time. The other spotted pet was intent on play, bounding about in extravagant semicircles. His erratic course brought him directly upon me, and he stopped suddenly with legs braced at aide angles, so close that I felt the breath of his startled snort. His ears mere opened wide, and his dewy nostrils quivered as he drew in a scent of whose danger he had yet to learn. His great soft eyes looked full into mine for a moment, and I could almost have reached out and touched him. Then he remembered his mother, who had passed on out of sight, gave a mew-like expostulating



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"ONE OF THOSE PRETTY, PRETTY THINGS—HOW COULD YOU DO IT?"

bleat, bounded a couple of yards to one side, and gamboled on in pursuit.

The shadow of my hill had by this time crawled down to the opposite slope in the valley and the sun was shining full through the tops of the trees. A raven cawed and flapped lazily across the valley, high overhead on a tour of investigation. His keen eye had marked the murderous weapon I carried, and he circled above the mountain and lighted in a tall dead spruce to await the outcome of the hunt. The buck on whose track I was following was evidently intent on reaching shelter. He had been in no haste, cropping the herbage as he went along, but the determination with which the tracks forced themselves up the hill meant that he had a mind for the safe protection of the growing green timber forest. I must make haste to head him off and as it would be fatal to hurry directly

behind him, I crossed over into the next glade and then pushed steadily up the mountain toward the summit. Just at the very brow was a continuous grassy bluff over which any animal seeking the upper shelter must pass; and on this I threw myself down. I had no breath, and could not have aimed my rifle to save my life, so I devoted my whole strength and attention for a few moments to regaining some steadiness of respiration. In the valley way below three tiny spots of buff, the deer family I had intercepted, were crossing through the grass to a wide bed of willows that marked the filled-in site of an old beaver dam. Down at camp everything was still, and the absence of smoke told that the sleeper was still dormant. The raven cawed impatiently.

I became suddenly conscious that there was a deer in the trees off to the right and a

little below me. How long he had been there I do not know, but I am certain that my eye had rested on the spot and its surroundings a moment before and saw nothing. I slipped down off the grass and into the trees and worked very cautiously in that direction. A shot downhill is so deceptive that hitting is pure luck, and I sought a place on the same level.

A stately buck he was, stopping for a final lunch on the tender shoots of a clump of vetch vines on the edge of the stream. His black nostrils were wet and shone with the high polish of new patent leather. His form was well rounded, his coat was smooth and glossy, and his spreading antlers full grown. In the motions of his eating, every muscle moved and quivered. The sight was so superb that it almost precluded murder, and I sat with rifle half raised and watched for fully a minute. His nostrils caught a breath of hostile odor, and he flung his head high, poised for flight, but not quite sure which way the danger lay. He remembered the alarm downhill and turned to look that way. The white bead of the front sight rested against his curving neck, just back of the head, and the white bead rested in turn on the lower rim of the circle of the hind peep-sight. The sight was perfect and the finger crooked against the trigger almost without conscious volition.

A 45-70 bullet in the cervical vertebrae snuffs out all power of motion as though it were the flame of a candle. There was never a struggle, just a sudden collapse, and the beautiful animal lay in limp confusion sprinkling blood upon the verdure where he had just been feeding. The hunter's work was done and what remained was mere butchery. The rough surgery of the hunting knife must let out the blood in a foaming torrent before the heart ceases beating, and with the same flow release the remnant of life which still showed dimly in staring eyes. Then must follow the smeary

task of dressing the carcass, which had been a deer and was now venison. The raven flew from his perch and brushed through the trees above. It seemed as though the sound of the shot had summoned all the smaller predatory birds, the magpies and gray-jays, and I could hear their harsh cries approaching through the trees, as they fluttered closer and closer in short flights. Before my gory task was done they were busy, without fear of me, picking the dainty flecks of suet from the entrails, while two or three other ravens had joined the pioneer and were scolding from the tops of the trees because I was so slow in completing my work and leaving them a clear field. I hung the venison in a tree, protecting the exposed meat with boughs, and washed hands and arms in the waters of the rill. Then I struck out for camp. Under the tall grass red-leaved plants hugged the ground. Drops of dew had fallen on some of them, making the homeward path seem through a trail of fresh blood. The sun shone down on the valley hot and ungentle. It seemed as though the whirring grasshoppers unduly extended their flights to escape my presence. A startled grouse, breakfasting in a bear-berry bush, instead of rising to the nearest tree, whirred away clear across to the foot of the mountain, where it flapped deep into a tree as though murder was behind it. As I came up into camp the horses scented the blood and snorted as if I were some strange wild animal and moved uneasily on their picket-ropes.

She had just awakened and was looking with sleepy eyes out into the sunny world.

"Fresh meat," I cried.

"Oh, did you get a deer? I didn't know you were gone until just before I heard you shoot." Her eager interest flamed up in question about the events of the chase, and then, in reverie—

"One of those pretty, pretty things! How could you do it."