

Hunting the Whitetail

Michael Mayday

Standing was an exercise. I had to shift my weight from the small seat built into the stand to my heels and then to the balls of my feet before putting a good deal of pressure on my quads, which shook from slowly extending. I turned the left side of my body toward the two bucks off in the distance as I brought myself up. The bucks, grazing in the alfalfa field before me, didn't notice my movement. My bow, which I had placed on a small branch to my left, was already in my hand. Slowly, I pulled an arrow from my quiver and notched it. I watched one buck graze by a rub my father and I had traced out to be roughly twenty to twenty-five yards from my stand—the very distance I've been practicing at. As the buck grazed, he exposed its broadside to me, offering the best shot I'd likely get for the season.

I latched the mechanical release to my string and pulled back, tucking a little plastic marker right beside the corner of my lips. I peered down the doughnut eyesight woven into the string and matched it with the plastic neon-pink marker my father had adjusted for twenty yards. I paused for a moment, thought of where to place the neon-pink marker, then raised it to match the buck's upper shoulder. I thought better of it, though, and raised the marker a little higher so it would rest just atop the buck's spine, hovering over an area where the arrow would hopefully drop to hit the buck in the lungs, making for a clean kill. I remembered to bend

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at the hips to compensate for standing twenty feet up in the air, on the side of a tree. My breathing was hard and I thought I was shaking and I wasn't sure what to do next; I ran a quick mental checklist of everything I had to do before I squeezed the release, but nothing came up. I stood, silently shaking. The adrenaline caused me to think my legs would give way at any moment. They didn't. I thought the bucks would smell me and bolt at any second, or I'd flinch, or that another doe or buck would materialize underneath me and spook at my scent or that a truck, for some reason, would come tearing across the alfalfa field bearing down on the deer or me. None of it happened. All I did was watch the buck raise his head and set one hoof forward and then another, grazing alongside his pal. He was leaving, I thought. I almost panicked, thinking I missed my opportunity, until I remembered one thing my father had said if I found myself in this very situation: make a noise. I made a curt "hurft!" and the buck jerked his head, scanning my tree line. It was now or never. My finger, already on the trigger, had tightened and tightened and tightened.

Before I knew it the arrow had flown from my string with a quiet "thump" and was hurtling toward the standing deer in the distance. I did not move; the last time I moved after loosing an arrow I injured a doe, likely mortally, and never found it because my movement adjusted the arrow's flight path into the animal's stomach—likely resulting in a very painful death with no benefit for either party. I wouldn't risk that again.

The buck didn't move until the arrow hit him. He bolted a few strides, reared his hind legs like he was supposed to after being shot in the kill-zone, and ran under my stand toward the soybean field behind me. I moved my entire body to follow his movement as a precaution (another lesson learned from a previous hunting experience). The buck ran roughly 100 to 120 yards from where the arrow struck him before pausing at the crest of a hill to look back and scan the tree line a second time. I noted the spot where he stood; it would help when it came time to track him. But then the buck did something I didn't expect: his hind legs slunk and he keeled over, almost comically, where he stood in the tan soybean field. I was in disbelief. I had shot him in the heart. I had never done that before.