

Looking back at December . . . I blew it

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By JOHN L. SLOAN

It was cold this morning, 20 at the house at 6. I dressed accordingly. The gray light had just started to show on the fringes at the top of the trees as I eased the Arctic Cat into the briar patch and shut it off. It looked as though there might not be much of a sunrise, just a spreading of the gray. I made a last check of my pockets, cocked the crossbow and began to ease into the cedars and push my way, using elbows only, into the middle.

It took about four minutes to reach the ladder stand strapped to the nice maple tree. The maple backed into a small hook of cedars and was as pretty a stand site as I have ever had. I have killed 11 deer from this tree. It has only been hunted once in four years. I passed up two small bucks that one time. I don't care anymore. I'll kill whatever walks by with one exception; a lone doe gets a pass. I'll grant that to the nice buck that often used the thicket.

I stand at the base of the tree with a firm handhold on one of the ladder rails. My crossbow is snapped to the haul line. I do a few deep knee bends and check to make sure my legs will lock and not fold up. I start up. Twelve feet above the ground, I safety off and pull up the crossbow. I hang the quiver on the hook that has been there four years and remove an arrow. It goes on the crossbow. I try to catch my breath. A clear drop of snot drips off my nose and into my mustache. I use my left sleeve as it is intended.

I move the new hand warmers from my coat pocket to my back warmer and snug the neck warmer. I have two more hand warmers in my jacket pockets and one in each boot. I take a few deep breaths and a fresh dip of Grizzly then pull the facemask down. I'm ready to hunt.

The far side of the clearing is exactly 32 yards. It is 21 to the left and 26 to the right. There is a narrow window running 16 yards behind me. Most of the bucks come that way. It is the same way I walk in. The clearing is small and grass-filled with a scattering of maple and oaks and some weed I can't identify.

This morning the grass and weeds are frost covered. I look again at the range marks, the stump, the bent tree and others. How many times have I ranged those marks? I flex the fingers on my right hand. They are swollen but not too bad. The left is worse but still operable. At least I don't hurt too bad.

Color is slowly coming to the woods though not with much sun. Quickly I run the tape through my mind of all the deer I have killed in this small thicket. It believe it is right at 30. One year I killed at least two deer out of every one of the seven stands. Now all the hanging stands are gone. I pulled them and gave them away three years ago for safety reasons. I have the three ladders and the ground blind left.

The first squirrel is right on time as is the school bus out on the road. The duck hunters in the blind on Old Hickory open up. A young doe-this year's-sticks her head out of the cedar/honeysuckle tangle to my left. Briefly my heart hits passing gear. She steps out unconcernedly, browses a minute in the frost weeds and walks off. I don't like that. She should have been hinky, looking behind her. I lean over, pull the facemask down and spit.

The sun is still hiding from me now. I pretend it warms my toes. Something rattles the leaves behind me. I know it is the squirrel. I look anyway. A bigger doe skitters into the trail window and stops, looking everywhere. That's all I need to see.

I stand, cursing my knee when it pops and remove the crossbow from the hook. I click on the scope and slowly turn around. I slide the steady rest into my stomach, just above my belt and wait. Not bad, maybe 122 inches. The crosshairs almost settle but I have to level the dang bow limbs. With a compound, he would be dead. Something crashes back in the thicket. We are all startled, they run, the buck and the doe.

"What the hey?" Did something frozen fall out of an airliner? I stand motionless until my still weak legs begin to tremble. I put a hand on the tree and sit, still clueless. I draw a deep breath and glance once more behind me.

Our eyes meet, his and mine. Then he is gone in a whirl and a snort. He looked heavier than he did last summer. Maybe wider, too. Perhaps 18 or 19 inches. Long G-2's and brows.

I grin ruefully at myself. I blew it. I stand slowly and test my legs. They are okay now. They are 10-inches smaller than five years ago and weak. I send the crossbow and quiver toward the frozen ground and follow them. I slowly walk out and fire up the Arctic Cat.

I sit in the truck and listen to some wannabe country singer bellow about beer and working hard all week and I grin at myself. A voice in my brain says, "You blew it old man. Five years ago you wouldn't have done that. Five years ago you would still be standing there...ready." Another voice says, "Yeah, and five years ago I wasn't a beat up, wore out old man." I grin again. No doubt about it. I blew it.

I start the truck and look at my watch. It is exactly 3:23. I then remember the watch battery ran down two years ago. I guess mine is winding down, too. The truck clock says it is 8:45. I pour a half-cup of coffee and I guess out of habit, I blew it.

Sloan's columns are online at wilsonpost.com.

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