

The Saturday before Thanksgiving -- always

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By JOHN L. SLOAN

I sat in the graying, waiting for the first boom of a rifle or shotgun to float through the moss-shrouded arms of the giant cypress. The big trees lined the edge of Belle's Beak in the vast Saline Swamp. I hoped the boom would come from my L.C. Smith 12 gauge. It was the opening day of the Louisiana deer season, 1957.

It was not the Saturday before Thanksgiving.

There have been many opening days in many places since then. Much has changed. One thing that has not changed here in Tennessee is our opening day of rifle deer season. It opens the Saturday before Thanksgiving, this Saturday, November 19. There have been some changes to our deer seasons this year however, the opening day is not one of them.

It will open Saturday November 19 and continue through January 1, 2012. You may use a centerfire rifle, a muzzleloader or archery equipment. Here in Unit L, you may kill three does a day and one buck a day, not to exceed three bucks for the entire year. Contrary to some rumors, baiting is not legal. Among the changes in the seasons is the continuous rifle season. There are no breaks. That keeps it more simple.

Weather and health permitting, I'll be among the army of orange. I will don my vest and hat of blaze orange and just before good daylight, I'll make my way to a ground blind I built in a huge blow down I know about. One of the big winds we had back in the spring must have had me in mind when it blew the huge red oak down. The fork in the main trunk, now lying on the ground, makes a perfect ground blind. My folding camp chair, complete with back and arms, fits perfectly in that crotch. Even better is the fact that it is on a ridge splitting two large bowls. The deer travel the edges of the bowl and down the spine of the ridge to get from point A to point B. None of those trails is more than 50 yards from my natural ground blind.

I found the spot a couple weeks before our archery season opened and have been saving it. The tracks in the trails tell me it is getting plenty of use. I am banking a buck, immersed in the throes of passion, we call it the rut, will either chase or trail a doe by my blow-down. If/when he does, I shall plant a .308, 165-grain, silver tip behind his shoulder and anchor him in place. He will then be converted into dinner packages.

On that morning so many years ago, I sat squirming on a cypress log, straining to hear the first cry of a deer dog or the boom of a gun. My toes were cold in the black, solid rubber hip boots and I feel sure my nose was running. Some woodies buffeted through the trees of the break and splashed down in the shallow water. A Pileated woodpecker tried to beat his brains out on a hollow tree and something made me look behind me.

A fat spike with new antlers about five inches long was 20 yards behind me, looking right at me. As he turned to run, the bronze bead on my shotgun shook and shimmered and finally settled somewhere behind his shoulder and I pulled the first trigger. He made a high jump and I pulled the second trigger. He jumped again and fell over backwards. I had my buck. My deer season was over.

Since then, there have been many changes. For one thing, I have learned there is no such thing as my buck. Unless I am hunting behind a high-fenced deer farm enclosure, I do not own any deer. They are our deer. We all own them equally.

In the early days of deer hunting, does were not legal. A true hunter would not shoot a doe. A real man only killed bucks. We preached that and now we have to convince some of the older hunters that is no longer true. A real hunter, one who cares about the game, will indeed, even should kill a doe.

As our deer were restocked and restored they survived so well it became a problem to maintain a healthy herd population and balance. To do so, we need to kill some does.

In this area, designated as Unit L, the L standing for liberal, we have so many deer we are allowed three does per day. However, if a hunter will just kill as many does as he does bucks, we will be okay.

In addition, although there have been some whiners who want a reduction in the three buck limit, that too is sound management. Since such a small percentage of TN hunters kill two or three bucks a reduction in the buck limit would prove useless. Our age strata are among the best in the country if you go by solid facts and not rumor.

In short, our deer herd is healthy and doing well in most parts of Tennessee. So venture forth with your equipment of choice and enjoy a safe and productive deer season.

I have had many opening days. There was one when I used a boat and braved hot weather to kill a nice little buck on an island in AL. One in the Midwest when I killed two good bucks in two states in one morning and one that I recall as being just a little cold. However, barring an unforeseen something, I'll be there this Saturday, rifle in hand. Join me won't you?

Hunt safe and good luck.

Contact the author at: bowriter1944john@aol.com

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