



What's *YOUR* Why?

“SHE WAS POWERFUL, NOT BECAUSE SHE WASN'T SCARED BUT BECAUSE SHE WENT ON SO STRONGLY DESPITE HER FEAR.” ATTICUS

BY
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It was a beautiful October day to drive from northern Michigan to eastern Wisconsin. I was heading there to photograph and write about an all-women's whitetailed-deer hunt at The Wilderness Reserve, a 5500-acre ranch in Phelps, Wisconsin. I had been hired by Prois, the women's hunting gear and apparel company based in Gunnison, CO to document real women in real hunting situations experiencing real emotions.

As I drove the six plus hours to the lodge, I kept circling back to the first Prois trip I had taken and met Kirstie Pike, the owner of Prois (See Kirstie on the cover of this issue!). It was fall 2017 and I was losing more battles than I was winning. I was struggling personally, burnt out in my career and felt like I had lost myself somewhere along the journey of marriage and kids.

One cold October morning, I got an email blast from Prois that a spot in their all-women's pheasant hunt in South Dakota the following month had unexpectedly become available. After a brief mom-guilt battle, I told my husband I wanted to go and would get my mother to come watch the kids.

At that time, it had been over 13 years since I had taken a solo trip of any kind. Yet, here I was, a very inexperienced hunter taking off to go hunt with a group of people I had never met to chase a species I had never hunted in a state to which I had never traveled. **Why?** *Because I needed to take my life back.* That trip, that hunt gave me the courage and community to do just that.

Now, three years later, a much different woman was driving West. She was strong, confident, peaceful, powerful and excited about all that life had to offer. She raised her hand; she said yes to this adventure called hunting. And, here we are.

I pulled into the Wilderness Reserve at about four o'clock in the afternoon. I was greeted at the gate by Lisa Pike (no relation to Kirstie). She and her husband, Forrest, run the Wilderness Reserve. We had never met, but I was instantly drawn to her. Her smile, laugh, warmth and hug were contagious. She also had great taste in trucks – we both were driving black F-150s.

I followed her about 20 minutes into the heart of the Reserve. It was over 5500 acres of towering hardwoods, fluffy conifers and rolling hills. The yellow leaves were molten in the glow of the setting sun. I rolled the window down and coasted slowly down the gravel road towards the lodge.

We emerged from the woods and I was greeted with a magnificent lodge overlooking a lake through the windshield. I felt oddly at home as I parked Victoria (my truck) on the gravel pad in front of the lodge. I had a feeling some amazing journeys would be travelled this week

and incredible stories would be both written and told.

The ladies were already out on stand so the lodge was quiet. I unpacked, settled in, readied my camera gear and waited for the call that I knew would come soon that there was a “big buck down.” I didn't have long to wait.

That night, two ladies tagged out on incredible deer. The first woman was a very new hunter and an Army vet. This was her second deer, but her first with a rifle. I watched the excitement turn to peaceful power in the glow of the lights as she processed her buck with the help of her guide.

She had driven across the country alone to hunt with five women she'd never met and put the pieces together for the next phase of life. She not only got the first deer of the trip, but the biggest bodied buck ever harvested on the property. He was 286 lbs.!

The second deer was back at camp by the





hand, a different group of women came to the table that night from the evening before. Faces flushed from the snow outside, the fire on the hearth, but, more importantly, the fire inside.

There was the woman who had never been on a girl's trip in her adult life and just harvested her first deer, at the same time! She made a phenomenal shot after a tough stalk through the snow, mud and woods. I'm not sure who was more excited, her or her guide!

There was the JAG lawyer who was a warrior not only for herself but for the little boy she was raising singlehandedly. Her walk up to her deer was one of the most emotional I've ever captured. There is nothing quite as sacred as the moment you sink to your knees in gratitude beside a harvest.

Then there was the Southern Arkansas rancher who was as strong and fierce as she was

time we returned. He was a beautiful, mature, massive typical buck. The hunter was a former Marine and adult-onset hunter with extensive personal and professional involvement in the outdoor industry. She started with antelope and never looked back. The emotion, the solitude, the self-reliance and the challenge fed the fierce and nourished the soul. Her reverence and quiet satisfaction with both the process and outcome were written on her face.

The next couple of days brought four inches of unexpected snow, a first deer down for one amazing woman, a few personal bests and some of the most authentic dialogues ever experienced by the guides and lodge managers.

Prois merino wool on and post-hunt wine in



beautiful. She drove to Wisconsin to harvest her personal best buck and she did! As she got to her deer in the freshly fallen snow, the sun broke the clouds and time stopped. The following day, we celebrated her birthday at the lodge. She came away with some amazing stories to tell her grandbabies back home.

The last one in the picture was the owner of Prois, Kirstie. She created more than a brand. She built a community for women in the hunting world (See Kirstie's profile in the upcoming Leading Ladies issue!). Kirstie harvested a beautiful buck with her long-time friend, Lisa, as her guide. The giggling coming from their Ranger on the pack out was a perfect reminder about the beautiful sense of community found in hunting.

Each woman was outfitted in Prois clothing and gear for the trip. Prois is not just a base layer or a down coat, it's an attitude, a mind-set and a



purpose. It's a community of women taking part in a mutual passion at all levels. From the new hunter to the seasoned vet, it's a sisterhood of support, encouragement and empowerment. Kirstie saw the need for performance hunting gear for women, but created a bond amongst

women hunters that is incredible to behold.

That night, after an amazing meal, the conversation started to flow. For most, hunting was something that came in later in life. The women around the table ranged from 34 to 54. Single, married, divorced, mamas and grandmas.



The laughs and stories rolled around the table like a warm wave. Finally, one woman looked at Forrest and Lisa at the end of the long table. "So, is it different having an all-women's hunt in camp?"

Even the fire seemed to stop crackling as Forrest looked away from his wife sitting beside him. His eyes travelled around the table as he started to speak.

"In 25 years, I have never encountered a group of hunters who have fought harder or overcome more to get where they are. I have never sat around a table of hunters and had the pride be checked at the door without question. I've never sat and listened to the level of raw emotion and fierce determination that I've heard this week. And I've never encountered the level of authenticity, fight and focus that I've seen these last few days. Thank you."



The table was quiet for a long heartbeat. Then, a toast was raised to the moment, the hosts and the experience. The conversation turned to "why." Why are you here? What brought you to this moment, to this place and to this choice? Why do you hunt?

What's your why? I've asked a lot of people that question, including myself. Why do you hunt? Why do you harvest? One by one, I listened to the answers as the ladies around me unwrapped their why.

"I want to provide." This is one of my favorites. I love the concept of providing for my



family in this way. When I pull a backstrap or a breasted-out pheasant from my freezer to prepare for a meal, I know I am providing for my family in a way that no one else can.

“I want to be self-sufficient.” In 2020, being self-sufficient is a treasure. Knowing you have a freezer full of food is a true gift in a time of intense uncertainty and food rationing.

“I want to feel more connected to nature.” I love this one. As a hunter, you absorb more sunsets and sunrises than most people who don’t hunt. As you sit in the woods in the dark and listen to the world awaken for the day, you live the sunrise, not just see it. You are watching, hearing, smelling and feeling the world wake up. There is nothing quite like it. That connection is primal and beautiful.

“I want to be a good steward.” Being a good steward encompasses a broad range of responsibilities. Whether picking up trash on the

side of the highway or managing animal populations, stewardship and conservationism are a crucial element in being a human.

“I want to know I can do it.” This one was special. The woman who offered it was wearing an aura of quiet confidence over her Prois camo base layer. She had never harvested a deer before and had made a perfect shot on a gorgeous, trophy-class buck just four hours earlier. She wanted to know if she could do it, and now she had her answer.

Late that night, I sat cross-legged in the middle of my bed at the lodge and looked at the cursor blinking at me in silent question. So, Andrea, what’s your why?

When I felt like I was the prey in life, hunting gave me a way to reverse that relationship. It gave me the confidence to create my own outcome, the tools to do so and the community I needed.



Hunting gave me the peace in my heart and the stillness in my mind to carve opportunities from ruin and victory from challenges. The life of hunting provides a bond with my sons that nothing else could. It’s a passion, a lifestyle and a link that I pray will always be there and will fiercely protect.

That’s my why. Now, you raised your hand. You said “yes” to this way of life. Whether you started as a child or decided to try later in life, there was a reason; there was a why. So, what’s your “why?” ■



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