

Smokepole Christmas Gift

By Tank Hoover

Driving down the gravel lane to one of my favorite hunting places, I wave to Charlie, the live-in grounds keeper of the farm I'm about to hunt. Charlie is 80 years old, give or take, I'm not sure if even he knows. Lean, and ramrod straight from a lifetime of hard work, I stop my '98 Tahoe and chat with him for a few minutes. Charlie jokes that he could use a young deer for meat this winter. I tell him if I'm lucky enough to score, it is his. I have given Charlie several deer in the past, over the years. He is always grateful, and always chides me for shooting the shoulders out. "Why don'tcha neck shoot them, so's ya don't waste so much meat...." The bantering continues until we say goodbye.

The late muzzleloader season has always been my favorite. The orange army has retreated to their warm homes, and the woods has quieted down, and almost returned to normal. The trees are bare of foliage, and the woods take on that grey ghost appearance of the impending winter.

During this time of year, the deer usually feed at night, and are back in their beds before sunrise. Morning hunts are usually for naught, with the afternoons and evenings more productive. It's a time to be able to sleep in on a day off, or catch a hunt after work, if you hurry.

Today found me on top of a favorite ridge, overlooking 2 benches to my rear, and a thick, nasty tangle of mountain laurel, grape vine, wild roses, and thorn bush, to my front. Perfect buck habitat. Past experience has shown that deer like to come from my front, head down the 2 benches, and then graze in the large field of winter wheat. During winter, fighting daylight, you have to head the deer off, before dark. You know where they are going, it's just a matter of time, and luck, to guess where they will be coming from.

When I get to my favorite tree, and sit down, and get comfortable. I always enjoy looking for rubs on the sapplings and bigger trees, once situated. Each sighting brings on a twinge of confidence, as I play connect the rubs, to determine past travel routes. Today, was a cool, dry day, so I would have lots of help with the crunchy leaves under foot.

It was 2:40 pm when I was all settled. After doing a cursory examination of all potential "rub" trees was done, I started looking thru the brush, for any potential movement.

Today, it didn't take long. A little before 4:00pm, the unmistakable crunching, and scurrying of leaves to my left was heard. I could see 4 or 5 does playing tag with a chunky buck, and he was "it", chasing them merrily around in a tight circle. They were about 75 yards off, give or take, and in the thickest part of the woods.

I instinctively brought up my TC Encore muzzleloader up to my eye, as I cocked the hammer. Peering thru the Leupold 3X9 scope, I found my buck. The only problem was that his head and neck were the only thing exposed. I usually frown on neck shots, but put the cross hairs on his neck, not knowing if I would shoot, unless it felt "right". The cross hairs stayed on his neck, perfectly still, as if they were tattooed there. BOOOM! The explosion of 150 grs. of triple 7 behind a 250 gr. shock wave bullet in a ribbed sabot, startled me. That is good. When the smoke cleared, all was quiet. This can be a good thing, or a bad thing. Either the deer was dead in his tracks, or it was a clear miss, and he snaked his way thru the thick stuff without sight or sound made.

It's amazing, no matter how calm, cool, and collected we are prior to, and after the shot, I kinda go to pieces afterward. I made this shot off-hand, sitting on my rump. My hunting jacket has shrunk, due to heavy use over the years, and is a tad snug.

Whenever bringing my arms up to the shooting position, this snugness adds immensely to the stability of my arms, wether shooting rifle, or sixgun. Guess it is kinda like a shooting jacket, without the straps .

With shaking hands, I reload the front stuffer, and get up on shakey knees. Amazing, after all these years, I still wobble after every shot at a game animal, be it groundhog, deer, elk, or other varmint. I start the walk towards the fallen tree I thought the buck was standing behind. I get there, and no deer. Damn ! The empty sinking feeling kicks in. I look around further, replaying the shot. It felt perfect ! 20 yards further, there he lays ! WOOHOOOO ! Amazing how those roller coaster feelings can change also. It has been a good day. After admiring my buck, and giving thanks for him, he is gutted and dragged down to the field. I walk back to my Tahoe, stow my gear, and pick up the buck .

As I ride back, there is Charlie, leaning against his fence. "How'd ya make out ?" "I heard some shootin" he asks. With the smell of woodsmoke in the air, I tell Charlie about the hunt. Charlie tells me about his family coming tomorrow, Christmas Eve, and how excited he is to be seeing them. With a straight face, I ask him if his grand kids, and great grand kids like smoked venison. "That they do, know where I can get any ?"

We drag the 6 pointer out. Charlie examines the gutted gift and says "Shame ya shot him in the neck, ruined a few roasts " I laugh, some things never change. Merry Christmas I say, as I pull away.....feeling pretty darn good. Charlie tells how he plans on smoking the hams, and frying up some back straps.....