



Hard work, passion and habitat improvement were the catalysts for this young lady taking to the deer woods.

■ Text and Photos by Mark Olis

BECOMING A HUNTER



**"I LOOK FORWARD TO BUILDING MORE MEMORIES
WITH MY HUNTING BUDDY IN THE FUTURE."**

When my son was born, my mind flooded with emotions. I instantly thought of playing catch with him and taking him hunting. As he grew and became old enough to start shooting a .22LR, we would set up at the farm and practice shooting. He proved to be quite a shot even with larger hunting calibers. We agreed that he could hunt after he placed three consecutive bullets into the 8-inch bull's-eye of the target. Whatever distance that was would be his maximum range in the field. After a few sessions, he was printing tight groups at 100 yards. He was ready, and when a large doe stepped into a food plot at 90 yards during our first hunt, he did everything perfectly and dropped her. I was so proud, and we were excited. I finally had the hunting buddy I dreamed of.

Although my son was a great shot and performed well in the field, hunting wasn't his passion. He expressed that to me while hunting the next fall. We talked about it, and I asked him why not. He said it just didn't excite him like it did me. He loved playing sports and soon found his passion for playing an instrument in the school band. That could have been devastating to me, as a father who loves hunting, but he's a great kid who's healthy and has found his passion down a different avenue than me. I wasn't going to let hunting

blind me to the blessing he is. My son still enjoys going to hunting camp and helping during workdays with the other off-season chores that don't require sitting quietly and waiting for a deer to come out.

My wife and I are also blessed with a beautiful, healthy daughter. She's five years younger than her brother and altogether different. My son is laid back, but she is a fierce competitor who loves playing softball and being outdoors. She also took to hunting like I never imagined. I learned that one December afternoon a few years back when she accompanied me hunting for the first time. We sat in a shooting house atop a tall ridge looking over a food plot and cutover below. It was a perfect blue-sky afternoon, and we took turns using the binoculars to scan the cutover for deer. She had lots of questions, and I was happy to answer them. She wanted to know as much as she could about hunting and wildlife. Our conversation was abruptly interrupted when I spotted a deer's rump in the cutover about 120 yards below us. I told Ella I saw a deer, and she excitedly wanted to see it, too. I handed her the binoculars and talked her into where it was. She was thrilled to see her first deer while hunting, and then she said, "I think it's a buck!" Grabbing the binos, I scanned, and sure enough, it was a buck — a nice one.



We took our time looking at the buck through the glass, examining if it was a mature deer. I pointed out the sagging belly, large neck and hump over the shoulder. When I mentioned that I thought it was a shooter, all Ella would say was, "You need to shoot that buck." I agreed and grabbed my rifle. When the buck turned quartering away, I squeezed the trigger. The buck jumped and disappeared into the thicket. My hunting buddy wanted to know if I got it. I told her I was confident, but we would have to go find it.

We spent about 25 minutes searching through the chest-high vegetation before finding the downed buck. Ella was so excited. It was her first time to hold up antlers, and she realized what an accomplishment that was. We snapped photos and made a big deal of it. She was bitten by the hunting bug that day, and she knew she wanted to become a hunter.

PREPARATION

Fortunately, Ella's competitive spirit played well into her hunting preparation. We had all off-season to get her ready and learn how to shoot. We started in the backyard with a scoped pellet rifle. She listened well as I taught her to squeeze the trigger instead of pulling it. She practiced her breathing while steadying the reticle on the target. Before long, she was consistently drilling the bull's-eye at 20 yards. Next, I moved her into a scoped Ruger .22LR. We moved the target out to 50 yards, and she worked at steadying her aim and trigger squeeze. She again mastered that level and was ready for something bigger.

Although an AR-15-style rifle isn't conventional for deer hunting, it was the perfect gun for a youth to shoot. The Daniel Defense AR was chambered in 6.8 SPCII, with a collapsible buttstock. Federal's Fusion 115-grain bullet is an ideal deer round out to 200 yards and shoots extremely accurately from that rifle. The collapsible buttstock let me adjust it to fit Ella's smaller frame, too. This rifle was also outfitted with a suppressor, which removes the obnoxious bang and also smooths out recoil. All those components made it

■ Ella started shaking, and the author fought back tears as they walked up to the buck.

ideal for my 8-year-old daughter to hunt deer with.

Ella had been practicing all summer with the .22LR, and by late summer, it was time to take her to the shooting range with the AR. We first placed a target at 50 yards and got her set up on the bench with a thick jacket to place the gun on and get steady. I didn't want to use a sled or anything that locked the rifle in, as I wanted her to learn how to steady the gun by herself, as she would have to do in the field. Ella got on the rifle, carefully aimed at the target and squeezed the trigger. She quickly turned to me wide-eyed after the recoil pushed back into her shoulder. Then she smiled widely, instantly feeling the difference in power from the .22LR that she was used to. She fired two more rounds, placing three shots in the 8-inch bull's eye. Remembering the agreement, she was so proud that she had passed her proficiency test out to 50 yards, which would let her hunt out to that distance. Then it was time to test her skill at 100 yards.

I calmly coached her back at the bench and told her that any mistakes she made at 50 would now be doubled at 100 yards. I expressed how she would need to concentrate on settling the cross-hairs and squeezing the trigger even more. I saw her absorbing everything and processing it. Just like before, she settled into the rifle, went through her breathing routine and squeezed the trigger. She did the same, firing two more rounds downrange. She was anxious as we took that long walk to the target. As we neared the target, we could see three bullet holes printing a 2-inch group, all inside the bull's-eye.

THE FIRST HUNT

Our hunting property is in Alabama, and youth weekend is always the weekend before the general rifle season opener. Ella and I had that weekend circled on the calendar for some time. However, she had her last softball tournament that Saturday, too. So, we would have only Sunday afternoon after church to hunt. Fortunately, the weather was clear and cool, and the wind was perfect for the food plot

I wanted to hunt. The well-managed plot was lush, and my Moultrie Mobile camera revealed that deer were pouring into it every afternoon.

Ella and I climbed into the blind about 3:30 p.m. and got the rifle positioned out of the front window. I adjusted the office chair we had in the blind and folded my coveralls for her to sit on to get high enough to aim through the scope. To pass the time, we looked at pictures of deer with the vitals superimposed, and I showed her where to aim. About an hour into the sit, a large doe stepped into the field and began feeding on the sweet-tasting Whitetail Oats Plus. I instantly went into coach mode to keep Ella calm enough for the shot. Her breathing had audibly gotten louder and deeper. She was feeling the adrenaline coursing through her little system. I told her to focus on her breathing and not to rush anything, because the deer had no idea we were there. She got into the rifle, and I told her to first practice putting the cross-hairs on the shoulder of the deer, as we had talked about. She got comfortable with her aim, and she let me know she was ready. I clicked the safety off, and she patiently waited for the doe to turn broadside and stop. Then the rifle erupted. The doe dropped in its tracks at 95 yards. I was amazed at what she had just done.

After putting the safety back on and setting the rifle down, we began hugging and talking excitedly. Ella was so excited and shaking. I was shaking, too. She became a hunter the minute we entered the field that afternoon, but it was official to her now — she was a hunter. Unlike my son, who gagged as we gutted his first deer, she jumped right in and wanted to know where the heart was and what each organ was. She even held the body cavity open to help.

The next weekend, she got another doe, and I quickly realized I would now be the guide for the foreseeable future. I loved my new role. The remainder of the fall season, we settled into a routine where I braved the early morning cold while she slept in, and then I would resort back to being her guide for the afternoon hunts.

The next season, our goal was to get

her first buck. Again, we circled youth weekend, and as luck would have it, a nice 8-pointer started showing up regularly on our Moultrie Mobile camera in the same plot where she'd taken her first doe. The wind was perfect for that plot, and we slipped into the blind that afternoon. After a brief sit, does began to filter into the plot. With her goal set on a buck, she sat patiently watching the deer feed. Within 15 minutes, I looked out of our window to the right, and the 8-pointer from the trail cam pictures entered a shooting lane. He and a 6-point began walking right toward us. However, the rifle was already situated out the front window, where we anticipated the action would unfold. We sat patiently as the bucks walked within 20 yards of the blind and headed into the plot to feed. We were trembling and breathing hard. She had to calm herself as the bucks walked toward the does in the back of the field. She worked hard to keep her nerves under control as she settled the cross-hairs on the buck's shoulder. When he stopped quartering away, she took her time and squeezed the trigger. The buck jumped in the air and kicked like a bucking bronc. He struggled and ran toward us, and did an end-over-end flip into the woods as he exited the field to our left.

She didn't see the deer go down and was asking if she had gotten it. I assured her she got it, and she immediately wanted to go see it. I told her I needed a few minutes to calm down. I was a mess. When we gathered ourselves and got down, I let her do the tracking. I saw the deer's white belly just out of the plot, but she walked us through where the deer came from and went, and then she saw it. She started shaking. I fought back tears as we walked up to the deceased buck. It was the best hunt I've ever experienced. There are no limits to what this kid can do in life, and I'm so thankful that I get to come along for the ride. These are memories that only she and I share. I look forward to building more memories with my hunting buddy in the future.

