



BACK-40 NOTEBOOK

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STAND AT THE CROSSROADS

It isn't a pretty structure, and it's certainly not modern. But the old wooden gun stand serves as a landmark between hunts of the past and hope for the future.



The stand and I met as strangers; sort of a changing of the guard from a bygone era to a new day.

Actually, it might have been the first notable landmark I saw while chugging up the now-familiar logging road for the first time one gray November afternoon. My wife and I were starting the process of buying a cabin on a small piece of land, and I figured I'd better check out the ground before signing away a good chunk of our checkbook. After hoofing through the bottom field to the northern boundary, I found a trail that wound southwest up the ridge toward the top. And when I finally reached the summit, huffing and puffing, the stand stuck out like a big oak on a barren prairie. Obviously constructed by the property's previous owner, it's all that remains of his deer hunting adventures there.

Immediately, I knew it had stories to tell.

The structure doesn't differ much from other DIY deer stands of its day. Posted near the peak of the ridge near a small opening, it allows a good view into two timbered ridges and a big draw. Its construction is solid, with big posts driven into the ground and what appears to be a pretty decent carpentry job throughout. The roof, though leaky, still stops most rain and snow, and the old carpeting on the floor, albeit soiled and matted, still keeps things quiet. The builder even affixed mirrors to the fore and aft of the stand so he could glimpse deer sneaking in from behind.

That first day, I hesitated to investigate the stand. We were in a hurry, after all, and I've heard far too many stories about hunters taking unplanned gravity rides after foolishly trusting rotted steps or platforms. But weeks later, after the snow had cleared, I examined the stand and determined it was still pretty solid. I tentatively climbed

the short ladder — grasping the rails tightly — and then ducked under the doorway into the box. Nothing creaked or groaned. And the view seemed pretty good. If things worked out, I planned to spend some time there that fall.

Months later, after getting to know the land better through turkey hunting and some habitat work, I climbed into the stand long before daylight for the firearms deer opener. I'd hung other ladders and lock-ons along the ridge and in the valley, and many of those were probably better choices that day. Still, it only seemed appropriate to mark the passing of ownership by starting the day in the gun stand.

Sunlight slowly filtered through the cold morning, and I wondered how many similar openers the stand's builder had enjoyed there. I tried to guess about how the landscape looked all those years ago, and figured he'd likely seen quite a few good bucks come and go through the opening and associated woods. Shoot, I knew he'd seen at least a couple, as their racks still adorned the walls of the pole shed in the valley. That alone sparked hope for the day.

Much of the morning passed slowly, with a few sightings of antlerless deer. And as usually happens during lackluster hunts, I began to rethink my decision to sit in the stand, figuring the action was probably better elsewhere.

A soft crunch snapped me out of self-doubt, and I turned my head north to see a doe at the clearing's edge. She stood at full alert, no doubt having seen me move at the sound. But as she turned her head and sized up the orange blob in the tree fort, white antlers topped the rise behind her, almost in slow motion. Buck. Big buck.

Immediately, I lifted my rifle to the stand's old crossbeam, trying to find the

buck in the scope. He'd sensed the doe's caution, however, and wasn't about to step into the open. Instead, he took a hard left and followed the thick timber line southeast along the opening, offering enough glimpses to keep me hopeful but never pausing long enough for a shot. Within seconds, he topped the ridge and continued on, and the encounter was finished.

I leaned my head back, groaning at the missed chance. Taking a nice buck during my initial hunt at the new place would have been poetic, but it wasn't to be. Instead, I was left with a stinging disappointment and the hushed whistle of wind through the stand. Maybe, I thought, that wasn't the first time such a scene had played out there.

Later that day, I checked out some other spots to see what they offered. But the next morning, I returned to the stand and found a consolation prize in the form of a fat doe at 70 steps. She folded neatly at the shot, and the stand and I officially kicked off our partnership. The next year, we cemented it again.

I don't use the old stand as much nowadays. Having learned a bit more about the land, I typically favor new setups at — hopefully — more productive areas. But at least once a year during gun season, I'll sit there for a few hours, soaking in the landscape and trying again to hear some tales from bygone hunts. One day, I'll have to tear the thing down and start anew, but it won't be anytime soon. For now, the stand remains as a landmark to the hunting tradition on that piece of dirt — one that started long before I arrived and will hopefully carry on after the stand and I are gone.

