



PHOTO BY MARK OLIS

The author's daughter, Ella Cate, helps Dad drag out his monster buck.

■ by *Mark Olis*

THE SIX- YEAR BUCK

The author and two of his friends started a hunting club in east-central Alabama in 2013. Their hard work has paid dividends.

“The capacity to accept or tolerate delay, trouble or suffering without getting angry or upset.” That’s the definition of patience. But who has time for patience these days? Looking around, it’s not that easy to find anymore, either. It’s not on social media. It can’t be found during rush-hour traffic. It’s not listed as an ingredient on a bag of microwave popcorn. So, where is it?

It lives closer to the soil. It’s in the dirty hands of land managers and food plotters — those willing to suffer under the hot sun planting for wildlife only to have to wait weeks or months later to return for a chance at a trophy, not to mention the endless hours of sitting in a cold tree stand and enjoying it. Though land managers might be patient, few can avoid anger or becoming upset. Just let the tractor or implement break down while planting or a forecasted rain dry up before watering freshly planted seeds into the soil — plug your ears, youngins’. If you’re inclined to toil in the soil to improve the hunting and wildlife on your piece of earth, I suggest you start practicing patience now.

In 2013, my brother, two friends and I decided to start a hunting club in east-central Alabama. This isn’t a section of the state known for producing

the biggest bucks or even a county where you hear of guys leasing land to hunt. However, one of the club member’s family owned 200 acres we had the freedom to manage how we wanted. It consisted of mature pines with oak bottoms and ridges, three ponds, two creeks and a 4-acre pasture in the middle. There were no food plots, and the terrain was rugged and hilly. However, it was the perfect place to begin a transformation. And long before the first hunt, we agreed to only shoot 4.5-year-old bucks or better. We wanted to create something special. So began the suffering.

FREEDOM

With freedom to roam, the first thing we did was work to create food plots. We didn’t have heavy machinery to clear ground, but we had a tractor and a willingness to labor in the jungle-like humidity and heat of Alabama that summer. We worked the edges of old logging roads, strategically cutting down trees with chainsaws to reveal sunlight to our meager fall food plots. With cinder blocks and a set of old discs, we turned that red clay under for the first time in years. There’s something about cutting soil that begins an obsession with micronutrients, soil health and crop growth.

With the first plots planted, we blan-

keted the property with Moultrie trail cameras and shelled corn to take inventory. We soon found there were numerous does and three bucks still in velvet that were at least 3.5 years old or better. Our confidence soared, so we created a hit list from pictures of nocturnal bucks we’d probably never see in daylight. Only one buck actually made it onto the hit list that inaugural season.

HUMILITY

That first year taught us a lot. Actually, it kicked our butt. It wasn’t uncommon to hunt two consecutive weekends with only one doe sighting, if we were lucky. I took a doe with my bow and one with a rifle that season, and another member shot a doe. No one saw a shooter buck during legal shooting light that year. In fact, it would take four years before someone got a shooter in their scope.

Four years is a long time to go with nothing to show on the wall, but the education gained by having to work hard and try new things was well worth it. We learned early that if we wanted lush and lasting food plots that would attract and hold deer, we needed to follow our soil tests — every year. We also learned that renting a lime buggy to spread ag lime was far better than spreading it with a hand spreader 40 pounds at a time. Or that you can’t plant soybeans

alone in a ¼-acre plot and expect them to feed the herd. Although we screwed up plenty, we were learning.

GROWING AND LEARNING

After several growing seasons and steady food-plot maintenance, we began to see our labor paying off in better-looking and more attractive food plots each season. We even began to see a few more deer while hunting. Through some Internet digging, I located a phone number and contacted a lawyer who had recently helped sell the property that bordered us to the east. He gave me a number to a timber company that bought it, and we ended up getting the lease to the adjacent 350 acres. We added two more close friends as members to help offset the cost, immediately took soil samples of our new plots and added the lime and fertilizer as recommended.

We also started planting high-protein summer food plots and experimenting with blends to find one that deer wouldn't ravage as soon as it sprouted. One of the best blends we found for our larger plots was Whitetail Institute's PowerPlant. It consists of a variety of vining forage soybeans and peas along with sunflower and sunn hemp for the beans to climb. Our first year of spring planting, we tried PowerPlant and Round-Up Ready soybeans in separate plots. The RR soybeans were hammered as soon as they sprouted and never grew enough to shade out weed competition, even after spraying them a few times. However, the PowerPlant plots sprouted and grew with the deer pressure. Within six weeks, these plots were head-high, and the deer were hammering them.

TRANSFORMATION

From the beginning, our biggest limiting factor was quality habitat. The mature trees made for a beautiful property, but there wasn't any sunlight reaching the ground to sprout early successional growth for food and cover. After talking with the landowner for several years about having the timber cut on the place, he finally decided to pull the trigger. I had state foresters look at the prop-

The author and his crew have taken at least one mature buck off of the property each season for five consecutive years. In our world of instant gratification, there are still things that take time and patience to accomplish.



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erty, and they agreed it would be an ideal long-leaf pine habitat, which would allow us to use regular prescribed fire to manage habitat and would also offset the landowner's cost of replanting it because of cost-share programs. We eventually hired a timber consulting firm to conduct the timber harvest. The best part was that I got to drive the property with the consulting forester, who was also a hunter and land manager, and share my thoughts for improving the hunting and have him design it in a way that would benefit wildlife.

The forester left large sections of hardwoods in all the bottoms, and we also designed two new large food plots to add more food on the property. One was on the far northern end of the property and one on the southern end, leaving the 4-acre pasture we had converted to food in the middle. The rest of the trees were clear-cut and replanted in long-leaf pine.

We immediately took soil samples of the new plots, added tons of lime to them and fertilized accordingly. By the second growing season, the plots looked amazing and really started to attract wildlife. We also had many acres of thick cutover for deer to bed in, and within the first growing season, we saw more deer than

we'd ever seen at the place. We were regularly seeing four to six deer per hunt instead of one doe every two weeks. We also had bucks of all age classes roaming the property.

SUCCESS

As mentioned, we hunted four seasons before the first member had a legitimate shooter in his cross-hairs. It was the peak of the Alabama rut in mid-January when a member shot the first buck at the property. It was a heavy-bodied 8-pointer that excited the entire group.

The next season during that magical time, the same member killed another mature 8-pointer. Although some of the other members wanted a chance at one, everyone was still pumped, because we had harvested shooter bucks two consecutive seasons. It seemed as if the hard work and patience were starting to pay off.

We were into our sixth season as a hunt club. Only two mature bucks had been taken to that point, but our members had seen plenty of younger bucks through the years and were patient and disciplined not to be selfish and shoot them. That included a few nice 3½-year-old bucks that were allowed to walk.

In six years, I'd only lifted my bins to

look at bucks. I had yet to pick up my bow or rifle to shoot because none had met our standards. I shot plenty of does during that time and enjoyed success during spring turkey seasons, but no buck for me.

I had an opportunity to hunt one stormy Saturday afternoon during that magical mid-January period. It poured rain until almost 4 p.m. As soon as it stopped, I grabbed my rifle and climbed the steep ridge behind the camp house to a shooting house that looked over the 4-acre pasture plot with the surrounding cutover below. Within minutes, a spike and 6-pointer entered the plot 100 yards below me. As they fed around, I noticed another deer walking from the far side of the plot heading uphill toward the two young bucks. I grabbed my binos to see what it was. Instantly, I recognized it as our top hit-list buck that season. In disbelief, I told myself to put down the glass and pick up my rifle.

The mature buck walked into the plot below and scent-checked both smaller bucks before turning and walking away

from me. He stopped at 145 yards at the edge of the plot, just before a dirt path that split the plot in half and a section of mature chestnut trees and thicket to the left. I put the cross-hairs on his neck, waiting for him to turn. If he turned to the right, I would have plenty of time for a shot. If he turned left, I would have to shoot quickly, or he would be in the tree line and thicket and perhaps out of sight for good. Of course, he turned left. As he turned, I dropped the cross-hairs to his shoulder and squeezed the round just as he disappeared down the bank toward the dirt path.

I didn't see him go down, but I didn't see him run through the thicket. I didn't know where he was. As it got dark, I finally eased out of the house and down the back side of the ridge to the house.

I got in the truck and drove toward the pasture plot. As I drove around the corner next to the chestnut trees and thicket, the headlights shined toward the plot and illuminated a beautiful buck lying against the dirt bank below the plot. I couldn't believe what had transpired af-

ter all of the years and hard work. Looking back, I was able to tolerate delay without getting upset — I was patient. I knew something better was coming. I just didn't know when.

The coolest part about getting the buck was that our group put in the time, effort and discipline to have mature bucks at the property. We have taken at least one mature buck off of the property each season for five straight seasons now. In fact, I was hunting with my daughter this past season from the shooting house overlooking the pasture plot and killed a mature 9-pointer in early December before our rut kicked off.

In our world of instant gratification, there are still things that take time and patience to accomplish, especially when we're on Mother Nature's timetable. So enjoy that long, slow ride on the tractor. While each turn of the disc might not seem like much, it will pay dividends in the long run. Good luck.



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can't resist a lesson.*

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everything we still don't.
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