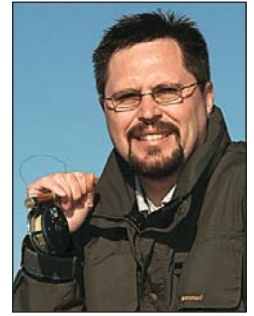


back cast

By Ron Wilson



Let's be honest. North Dakota's youth deer season, in many cases, means more to the adult than it does the kid.

As adult hunters, we understand the worth of the hunt because we're the ones who count the days leading to the state's regular gun season. We're the ones who don blaze orange caps in October just to rake leaves because we simply can't help ourselves. While it's a tired portrayal, it's an honest one: North Dakota's deer season has a holiday-like feel to it, and those with the spirit revel in it like a child at Christmas.

I've been looking forward to this hunt since 1994, the year my oldest son was born and the first year the special hunt was held. That's a long time ago – maybe 1,000 *pops* of a BB gun ago, aimed by little boy arms at a cardboard box in the basement.

The purpose of the youth season – in 1994 and now – is to give young people the opportunity to discover deer hunting in an environment free of stress and 75,000 other hunters. This is their opportunity to figure out for themselves if they want to be deer hunters in the future.

Our job, other than providing a ride and carrying stuff – camera, water, ammunition, knives, binoculars, candy bars, drag rope, and so on – is to lead them by the hand and guide them on an ethical, fair chase of the state's most popular big game animal.

“Because a good percentage of the people in North Dakota hunt in relatively large groups during the regular deer gun season, when would you find the opportunity to work with a young hunter one-one-one?” said Randy Kreil, North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife division chief. “The youth season is special because it offers that one-on-one time.”

The success rate in the youth season is about 50 percent. With two days left in the season, my youth hunter is firmly planted in the wrong half. He's shooting a rifle passed down from a deceased deer hunting grandpa he's never met, and figures this puts karma on his side. Karma, it turns out so far, doesn't hunt deer.

I look at my youth hunter differently nowadays because he's nearly as big as me. Our days of wrestling around the house are long gone, and it's a given that I now surrender the pickup keys when we drive anywhere.

Even so, he's still a kid. While waiting for deer to make their morning and even migrations, I reminded myself of this over and over as he harvested the tall grass between his legs one agonizing pull and snap at a time, unscrewed the sling from his rifle and ran a fingernail unconsciously back and forth, back and forth over his rifle's checkering.

When he was motionless, I knew without looking he was sleeping the hard, instant sleep of a teenager – prone in the prairie grass with his mouth partway open. He was as comfortable as the bedded deer we'd been watching for almost an hour, waiting for it to finally stand and stretch its legs and wander our way.

While the kid is firmly a hunter, I still wondered from the outset how he would take not getting a deer his first season. We've come home from grouse and pheasants hunts empty handed before, but this was different, more celebrated, certainly, because he was finally hunting big game.

We'd talked about this opportunity to hunt deer many times and that's exactly what he was given – an opportunity.

“Man, I can't believe I missed ... Do you ever miss?” he asked.

Every season.

