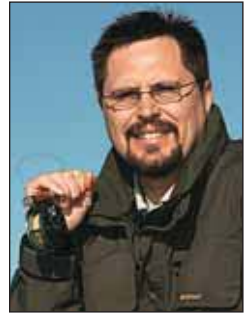


back cast

By Ron Wilson



Notes from the 2008 deer opener:

It's nearly daylight when I call home from deer camp. Turns out, I left just in time yesterday as Bismarck received several inches of snow, and more fell farther west according to sketchy reports. It rained hard here along the eastern boundary of Griggs County, which just doesn't feel right for this time of year. A skiff of tracking snow, as hunters like to say, would be more reminiscent, but not inches of rain. The wind continues to howl and everything is covered in a layer of ice. Power lines heavy with ice gallop with each gust, threatening to pull loose and dance in the wind like an unmanned fire hose. In the distance, flashing lights of emergency vehicles begin what will amount to days of muddy repair. The scene is surreal. This doesn't feel like opening day of deer season.

I scout for an hour or more and see nothing. I can't blame any animal for not wanting to venture out into this weather. The CRP, which was waist-high a day earlier, has surrendered to the wind, rain and ice and now lies nearly flush with the ground. It will be a sonofagun to hike through this stuff once the season opens at noon. Then again, I imagine every deer in the area abandoning the flattened grass for better and tightly-posted digs along the Sheyenne River, or in the gigantic draw with pockets of thick brush that runs north and south behind camp.

Back at camp, the power is out. There is some grumbling because that means the coffee pot isn't working. There's talk about heading to a friend's farm to retrieve a

generator. We could get by for a few days with gas lanterns for light and cook over the gas grill, but it's obvious there isn't any enthusiasm for that. One camp member is still in bed, nursing an injury suffered in a fall. He has trouble lifting his arm and his chest hurts. He's certain he's headed to the doctor if he can get out of his sleeping bag and into pants and a shirt. We offer to tie his boots, but tell him the help ends there. It's a joke, but no one laughs. We need



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coffee, better weather and a deer or two to hang in camp to lighten the mood. It's a tall order.

It's finally noon and we're hunting slowly – roughly from east to west – from brush patch to brush patch. Deer beds, flattened, grass depressions, are found in nearly every brush patch, but all are also filled with a couple or more inches of rain.

Flooded out, the deer have moved elsewhere; to higher ground, over the next hill, somewhere. When we reach the old railroad bed, we know we're halfway through the hunt. The only excitement thus far is a half-dozen startled sharp-tailed grouse that rise from branches above the water. The birds flush and struggle against the bloody strong wind, pausing in midair like kites tethered to short strings.

Back at the pickup, we cross paths with a mink doing its best to drag a dead muskrat across a dirt road. The predator labors with its catch, dropping it every few feet before standing tall on its hind legs, exposing the white patch on its chin. In a guide book that I carry in my pickup, it explains that the mink's tracks resemble those of a weasel, except that the fifth toe of the weasel seldom leaves an impression. Who knew.

The same guide book doesn't tell me anything about hunting white-tailed deer in this kind of weather. But that's OK because there are 16 days left in the season and I'm in no hurry. Next weekend my oldest son will join us, making it his first deer camp. I'm really looking forward to that.

Back at camp, the power is back on. The alarm clock in my camper flashes 12:00 over and over. The crock pot full of pheasant chili I left plugged in just in case is nice and hot. Unless this miracle of electricity we too often take for granted is a temporary thing, there's also the promise of coffee in the morning. Things are looking up.