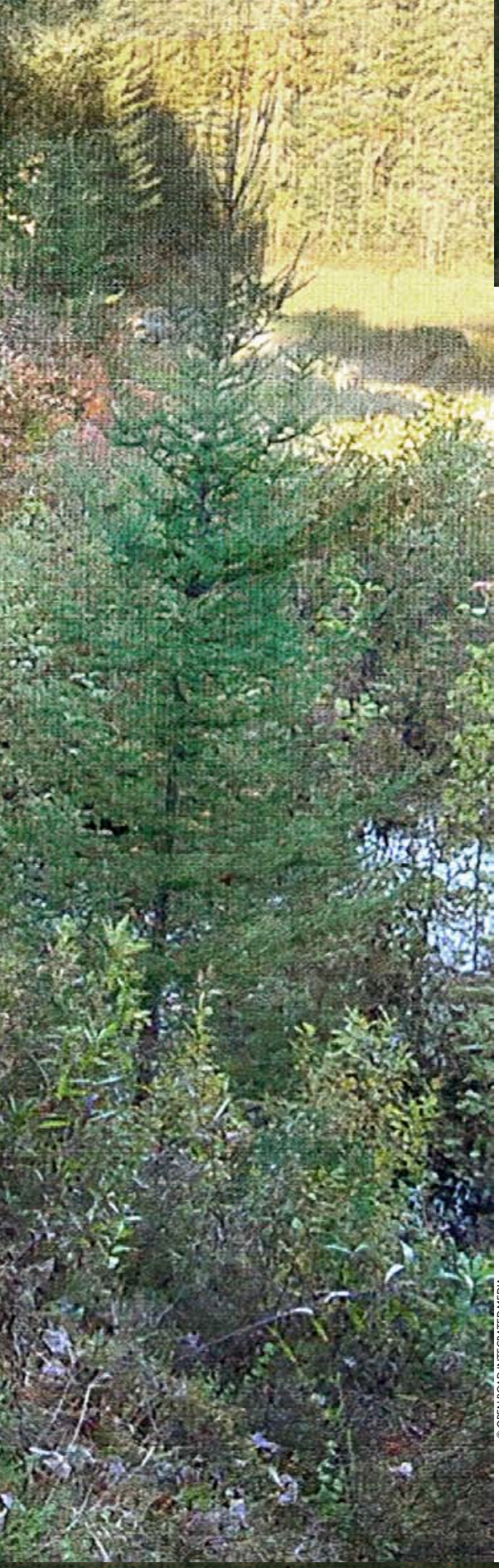


ONE MAN'S JOURNEY INTO

HUNTING

In search of meat and meaning

by Tovar Cerulli

What was that faint sound? The distant crunch of hooves on snow and frozen leaves? Awkwardly, I shifted my sitting position and half raised my rifle. Moments later, I glimpsed deer forty yards off, walking toward me among the maples and pines. Tightening my grip on the rifle, I brought the stock to my shoulder and felt my heart begin to hammer. I had no idea how it would feel to kill a whitetail.

For nearly a decade, I had been a vegan and an anti-hunter, motivated in part by a deep concern for animal welfare. In more recent years, my diet had changed for health reasons. I was once again eating eggs and dairy, plus some local chicken and wild fish. And my perspective on the ethics and ecology of diet had shifted as I recognized the impacts of agriculture on habitats and individual animals alike, and began to grapple with what it meant to be a member of a complex, interdependent food web, full of moral ambiguities.

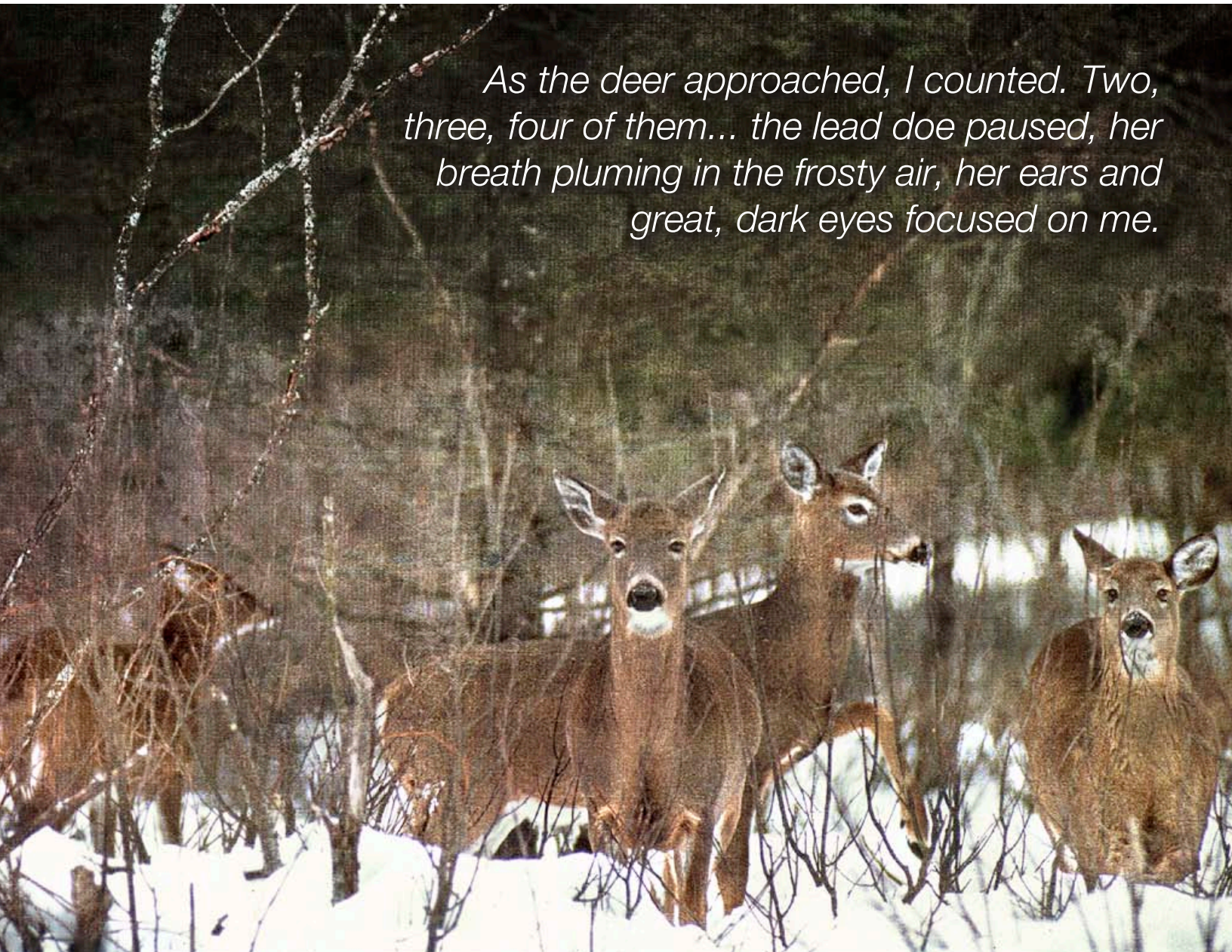
I had returned to fishing, a throwback to boyhood summers spent catching brook trout in one of southern New Hampshire's old abandoned granite quarries. Then, cautiously, I had started learning to hunt.

Hunting struck me as a potentially meaningful way of confronting the mortality caused by my existence as a living, eating creature, a way of taking responsibility for at least a portion of the killing. But the idea of ending the life of a fellow mammal, especially a creature as big as a deer, still wasn't one I could take lightly.

As the deer approached, I counted. Two, three, four of them. At thirty yards, I got a clear look at the first deer in line: a doe. My tag was for a buck. As they kept coming through the trees, I stared along the iron sights, watching for antlers. Beyond the lead animal, I saw that the second whitetail was also a doe. The third, also antlerless, looked like a six-month-old. And the fourth?

For three autumns now, I had taken to the Vermont woods in pursuit of meat. The experience had taught me a great deal. I had learned the importance of knowing which way the breeze was carrying my scent. I had learned to recognize deer sign: tracks and scat, scrapes and rubs, the browsing of twigs and bark. I had learned where deer trails intersected out beyond the old beaver meadow near home, where old stone walls ran through the forest, where brooks gurgled, and where I might catch sight of a bear or bobcat. My relationship with this place – with these hills and valleys – had deepened. But I had not yet dragged home any venison.

The fourth deer stepped into view: another doe. There would be no shot today. A dozen paces away, the lead doe paused, her breath pluming in the frosty air, her ears and great, dark eyes focused on me, uncertain what manner of creature crouched here against this spine of rock. Undecided, the four whitetails hesitated. They looked and listened. Then, slowly, they turned back the way they had come. Trembling, I sat



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and watched them go. I couldn't have known it then, but it would be another year before the confrontation with death would come, another year before I would find out whether hunting was for me.

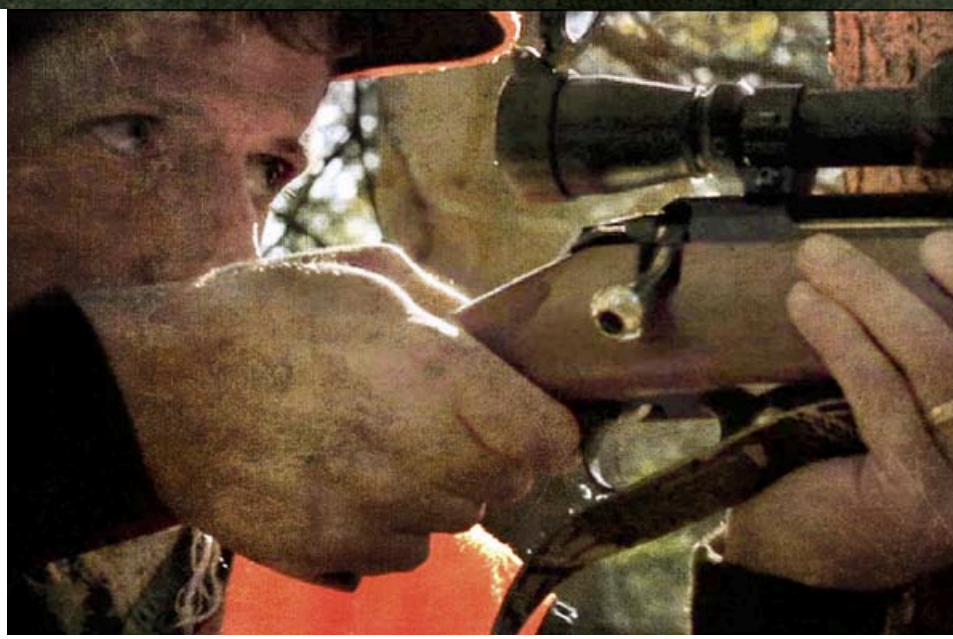
COMMON MOTIVATIONS

I have spoken with dozens of people here in New England who, like me, have taken up hunting as adults. Many of these "adult-onset hunters," as I call them, came to it for similar reasons.

Maine resident Deborah Perkins was once opposed to hunting. In high school, she wrote a passionate essay arguing that the pursuit was morally wrong. In college, however, studying wildlife and natural resource management at Sterling College in northern Vermont, she recalls "starting to feel drawn to the notion of growing your own food and cutting your own wood."

Among her classmates and teachers, Perkins was getting to know hunters, and she began to see that they were students of animals and habitats. "They knew so much about the woods and wildlife," she recalls. Though her father and uncle had hunted when she was a girl, Perkins had always perceived it as a purely recreational pursuit. She had never seen hunting as part of a broader set of cultural values, encompassing stewardship of the land, a sense of place, and an awareness of how interconnected everything is. At Sterling, she began to grasp these aspects. "It wasn't just 'Go out and shoot a deer in cold blood.' That killing moment is a very small part of a much larger experience."

Several years later, with encouragement from a boyfriend, Perkins took up a gun herself. "As a skill, it was so challenging and exciting to learn," she recalls. Now in her late thirties, Perkins hunts grouse, turkey, and deer. "Thinking about the animal's habitat and behavior – and the pursuit – it feels very innate to me. It's not just a sport. It's about going out your back



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Food is a primary motive for many of these hunters, who include a surprising number of ex-vegetarians. They want to eat healthy food, to be directly involved in procuring it, and to bypass the industrial food system. Many grow their own vegetables, raise chickens, or keep bees, and want to steer clear of antibiotic-laden meat.

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"It grounds me not just in physical place, but in community... As a Mainer...I want to carry the torch of the history of this place. I want to keep that alive, at least in my own family."

Deborah Perkins

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door and experiencing a deep, meaningful connection to the wildness around you."

Hunters like Perkins tell me that hunting makes them feel more fully engaged with the land, walking it and returning to the same places year after year. And they feel more fully engaged with their own senses: listening as the pre-dawn forest comes alive with birdsong, watching as clouds of ducks rise up off a coastal bay, paying attention to the habits of animals, learning to track deer or to strike up a call-and-response conversation with a wild turkey.

Some talk about connection in spiritual terms, describing the forest as their church, or the wind in the trees as the breath of the divine. Many speak of feeling connected to humanity's ancestral roots. "I always think about what we were like as a species before all this civilization and technology," Perkins told me.

Most fundamentally, they say they feel like participants in the food chain. As one hunter put it, it feels like they "belong to the cycle."

Food is a primary motive for many of these hunters, who include a surprising number of ex-vegetarians. They want to eat healthy food, to be directly involved in procuring it, and to bypass the industrial food system. Many grow their own vegetables, raise chickens or keep bees, and want to steer clear of antibiotic-laden meat, produce and eggs contaminated by salmonella, and other health hazards. Many refuse to eat factory-farmed meat and feel strongly about the importance of treating land and animals with respect. In short, they want to take nutritional, ethical and ecological responsibility for their own sustenance.

"As part of the food movement, I think we're going to see a resurgence of interest in hunting," one hunter told me. "People are thinking about where their food comes from."

These hunters also speak of hunting as a response – even an antidote – to the frenzied distractions and disconnections of modern life. In part, it's the deeply focused state of mind they slip into when hunting. "The worries that you have just kind of melt away," one said. "It's like meditation."

In part, it's the sharp contrast between hunting and shopping for food. As one hunter said, "Part of it is definitely a connection to a world that we have lost connection to. Buying your food in a supermarket is really sterile, and duck hunting is not sterile."

Whether they're retrieving ducks from a salt marsh or field-dressing a whitetail and dragging it out of the woods, many are finding that hunting provides a direct, visceral encounter with food, life,

death and – inevitably – killing. For deer hunters in particular, the powerful, conflicted emotions that accompany even the quickest, most humane kill can be hard to express. “I feel very excited, but I always feel sad, usually cry,” one Vermont hunter told me. “It’s a mixture of awe and sadness.”

COMMON CHALLENGES

These new adult hunters also face common challenges. Some, like me, come to hunting with deep uncertainties about killing. Some have no experience handling firearms or grew up in an urban environment where guns were associated with violent crime. Many come with ambivalent feelings about hunting and hunters. All come lacking the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in the hunt – from understanding the terrain, to making a clean kill, to getting the meat from woods to freezer.

Those who stick with hunting usually have help overcoming these obstacles. When Perkins wanted to learn to hunt turkeys, she turned to a friend, a lifelong hunter and Maine Guide. He assured her that the shotgun she already had would be fine, and helped her get her first tom.

Having a mentor is vital for most aspiring hunters. It gives them someone to turn to for guidance. And, it usually connects them to someone who comes from a hunting background. These relationships can help new hunters feel connected to local hunting traditions. “It gives me a culture I can identify with,” one hunter told me. “It grounds me not just in physical place, but in community, too.”

That, in turn, can inspire these new hunters to pass the pursuit on to the next generation. “As a Mainer,” Perkins told me, “I find it sad to see the culture of Old Maine fading. I want to carry the torch of the history of this place. I want to keep that alive, at least in my own family.” Though neither her husband nor her brother hunt, a few years ago Perkins’s uncle gave her an old Winchester 94 that belonged to her great-great-grandfather. And her four-year-old daughter, who has never been shielded from knowing where meat comes from, is already curious about hunting.

Of course, not everyone shares this curiosity about pursuing food on the hoof, paw or wing. For those who do, though, it’s a path worth exploring. If you’re interested, find a willing mentor – someone who will neither discourage you nor push you too fast – and see where it leads. Even if you take only one step toward the woods, you stand to learn a lot – about yourself, about other people, and about the natural world we all inhabit.

Tovar Cerulli is author of The Mindful Carnivore: A Vegetarian’s Hunt for Sustenance *(Pegasus Books, 2012;* tovarcerulli.com*). This article is based on his personal experience and his graduate research at UMass-Amherst. He grew up in N.H. and Vermont, where he now lives.*