

Hunting is often referred to as a male-predominated activity, but that is not necessarily the case, and I have a family of women to prove it.

When I met my wife of 26 years on the campus of Texas A&I University, she wasn't a deer hunter. As for myself, I was engaged in a lifelong dream of managing whitetails. It was not only my goal, it was my passion. I spent all, I mean all, of my time either in the field observing whitetails or researching in the library to answer the many questions I had concerning deer. There was little time afforded to the many other activities a youth in his twenties could pursue. And, like most individuals, I wanted to share the wonderful experiences I enjoyed with Jan.

Although I immensely enjoyed shooting big deer, there was much more to management than simply killing an animal. It was what I referred to as the "holistic experience" that really lured me to the outdoor arena. Whether it was glassing white sheep above the clouds in the pastel-colored McKenzie Mountains of the Northwest Territories, or rattling up whitetails in the thorn scrub of the flat Rio Grande Plains, the kill was secondary to all the sights, sounds, and smells of wilderness. It was these collateral benefits to the hunt that I wanted to share with others outside of a photograph.

Over the years, my passion for hunting became contagious, and Jan began to enjoy some of the experiences I had the privilege of enjoying.

Jan's initiation into hunting occurred in East Texas on the Lochridge Ranch, the first of many large ranches I've had the privilege of managing. Being ranch residents, one of our daily activities was to make a round and look for deer. It was a particularly still afternoon with a crystal clear sky as we negotiated the deep, white sandy roads on the ranch. The fall foliage was breathtakingly beautiful. Enhanced by the bright

sunshine, the red and yellow leaves of the oak hickory forest were picturesque. As we covered miles of scenic lakes and forest, it wasn't long before I spotted an old buck. The animal was standing in a motte of post oaks glaring at us with no intent of running off. It was a large-bodied buck with much gray in his coat color reflecting his age. This guy was ancient. The beam on its right side supported four tines all standing erect, but its left beam was deformed. Knowing I had my 22-.250 in the back of the cab, I asked Jan if she would like to shoot the animal, she replied with an abrupt "Sure!"

Excitedly, I prepared the rifle as Jan handed Beth to a friend who was riding along with us. Moments later, the quiescent afternoon was momentarily interrupted by some jubilant celebration. Jan was initiated into the sport of hunting.

A short year later, 1983 to be exact, my good friend Bruce F. Harrison invited me to manage his family's vast landholdings, one of which was the Piloncillo Ranch located in the heart of the golden triangle.

Although my responsibilities entailed a large number of ranches scattered across the state, I chose to live initially on the Piloncillo Ranch. Over the next 21 years, we were privileged to enjoy free-ranging hunting at its finest.

The goal to yield premium quality bucks on a natural basis necessitated the removal of a substantial number of doe. Without all the permits presently available to land managers, our biggest challenge was obtaining hunters. The first few years required much time with the various groups we invited to shoot doe, relinquishing little time to hunt for ourselves. But like most unmanaged or nonhunted ranches, it takes time to reduce deer numbers to the point that the habitat cannot only sustain the animals, but allow them to exercise their genetic potential. But once the population was reduced over

the first three years, it was obvious buck numbers had to be reduced as well. Our buck harvest criteria stated that mature bucks eight points or less could be removed in order to accomplish the population goal.

Amazingly, some sportsmen treat an eight-point like a stepchild and will often pass on an eight in hopes of seeing a rack with ten or more tines. Not Jan—she was totally happy with an eight-point, and over the years she has taken some world-class eights that any man would be proud to take.

Now I am not saying that Jan is an exceptional hunter, but I will say she relishes the experience and appreciates the unique outdoor experience.

Her ace in the hole was me. Every single day of the deer season I was either with a hunter or in a blind observing deer over the many food plots I developed on the ranch. I was her scout and guide, and when I spotted a nice eight, she was ready to hunt him.

Sometimes it appeared easy. For instance, in 1990 I had spotted a 22" wide eight point following a group of doe into a particular food plot. I was guiding a hunter to a mid 160-class buck that I knew frequented the area. Stationed in a blind overlooking the field, we failed to find the one we were after, but the wide eight showed up every evening right at dark. Once my hunter and I successfully shot a trophy, my thoughts turned to the big eight. With her .270, Jan and I entered the blind on the patch early one evening before any activity. By 4:30 we were watching several doe and yearling bucks feeding on the sparsely vegetated grain field. By 5 p.m., even I was getting a little nervous, but just before dark the three does I knew he accompanied showed up, and our buck followed shortly. Feeding together at a distance a little too far for Jan to shoot, she simply had to watch her buck, hoping that it would approach to within her comfort zone. As the sun

began to disappear below the tall mesquite, I noticed the buck becoming interested in one of the does. Head down and ears laid back, it started to run the doe, and I knew it was only a matter of time before it hazed her across the field and close to our blind. With shooting light fading, I don't know who was more nervous. The buck would not leave the doe alone, and before long, she stood not 70 yards from our blind. The buck suddenly showed a disinterest in the doe and began feeding, but fed in her direction until it approached a position in which Jan could shoot. I don't know what it is about my girls, but when it comes to shooting, they are totally relaxed—can't say the same for me. But once I had her rifle out the window and she became comfortable, I got nervous. As she prepared to shoot, I glassed the majestic animal, and uniquely upon impact, the deer reared up on its hind legs and simply fell over backwards. It was another unique memory afforded by a majestic animal.

With eight tall tines and a 22" inside spread, the 145-inch whitetail remains one of her best.

Things don't always work out quite like you hope. For example, in 1989 Jan was high racking with my best friend David Shashy from Ocala, Florida and me. We were out simply looking at deer. Activity was strong, and deer were showing up just about everywhere we drove. We were having a great time when a wide eight-point appeared on a roller-chopped strip not 100 yards from our rig. Unquestionably a shooter, I prepared Jan for a shot. Expecting to see the animal drop in its tracks, I was shocked when the regal animal simply remained staring at us until it lunged back into the sea of brush. Quite emphatically, I asked Jan, "How did you miss that deer?" Well, silence was all I heard as we drove back to the range to check the gun. At the range I prepared her gun on

the sandbags, and as I reached for shells in my jacket, out emerged both .270 and 25.06 cartridges. One of the 25.06 shells was the spent one, and unfortunately for me Jan saw it. Obviously, I had placed a 25.06 shell into her .270 and the rest is history. Her three-shot group with the appropriate shells was dead on, and she let her professional deer hunting husband know it. It was enjoyable, yet quiet the rest of that particular day until she connected with another big eight which actually made the cover of Texas Fish and Game. We were once again a happy husband and wife team.

Her largest deer showed up in 1993. I spotted the tall, dark-tined buck in early December. Knowing that this massive tall-tined buck would come close to breaching the 160 mark, we spent a considerable amount of time looking for him. Seemed like every time I saw the deer, Jan was not on the ranch. When she was on the ranch, I was either too busy or could not find the animal. Finally, in late December, one of my guides spotted the now popular animal, and knowing I was tied up with a hunter, took Jan out on her own and she capitalized on a 158-inch eight-pointer.

Undoubtedly, my wife and I are a deer hunting team, but some of our most enjoyable adventures occurred in pursuit of other animals. Over the last four years we have gone on safaris in Zimbabwe, hunting everything from Cape buffalo to klipspringer. She was with me on each and every stalk. She and I got so close to a herd of buffalo in Chirisa we could smell the bovines. We walked within 75 yards of a lone giraffe one evening before Jan nonchalantly notified our professional hunter and me that two maned lions were bedded not 35 yards of us. Then there was the time I was exiting the shower in our thatched roof chalet and Jan asked, "Did you hear that lion roar?" I said, "You're

crazy, it's just an elephant", but before I could finish my sentence, the lion roared again. There's simply nothing like a silent wife when she's right.

All fun, that's all it is when you can share your experiences with the most important person in your life. Unfortunately, it's hard to describe many of the experiences we have enjoyed in the outdoors to those who cannot conceive just what the experience is all about. I can't tell you how many times the little things often overlooked are brought up and enjoyed together. For us hunting together is a relished experience and a wonderful way to ensure that the experience endures forever!