

Hit or Miss

Opening Day of the Gun Deer Season

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“I can’t believe I missed the deer.”

Those were my words to my son Devin at approximately 11 in the morning. It was November 22nd and opening day of the gun deer season. I had just fired 2 shots at a deer.

Our day started hours earlier at 4:30 am. A quick breakfast was followed by the packing of lunches and the filling of the thermos with hot chocolate.

Our drive to our chosen hunting grounds was a very short 15 minutes, possibly the shortest drive I have had to make to a hunting spot in 20 years. Whether this spot would turn out to be a good place to hunt had yet to be determined. No matter, Devin and I were excited and looking forward to what the hunt would bring.

By 6:15 am, Devin and I were settled into our hunting spots on public land just north of Tomah. We were sitting on a large ridge, typical of the kind found in the western part of the state. I had found our spots the day before and locked them into my handheld GPS so I could find them in the dark. At least that was the idea that the GPS would help us find our way.



The GPS was having problems staying locked on to its location on this morning which led to a longer walk than I anticipated. It is always amazing how spots found easily in the daylight are almost impossible to find in the dark.

Devin Watching For Deer From the Top Of a Ridge North of Tomah

A short 10 minute walk turned into a 20 minute affair that left us sweating from having to quickly climb a 40 foot hill to reach our spots. Sweat is the outdoorsman's enemy. If you sweat too much you will get cold.

However, we did find our spots in plenty of time to get acclimated to the quiet surroundings that were occasionally interrupted by a truck driving past on the road in the distance. It was apparent though that this was going to be a windy day considering the wind was already blowing and the sun had yet to rise. I knew I would get cold at some point.

Devin was facing north, looking down a steep incline and a large ravine that lead to the top. I was on the other side of the hill, 200 feet behind him facing south. I was covering a less steep portion of the hill looking down on a clearing at the bottom of the hill. From the top of the ridge, I could easily see lights 15 miles away in the cold clear air.

Though shooting hours began about 6:40 am, we would not hear a gun shot closer than a half mile until about 8 am. Considering this was a new hunting location for us, I began to second guess my choice. Maybe the herd was not nearly as big or maybe they just were not moving through this area. The lack of shots nearby would be indicative of a hunt where there seemed a lot less shooting than normal.

At 9 am a shot went off just behind me causing my heart to jump into my throat. It was the unmistakable "boosh" sound that a shotgun makes firing a slug and is quite distinctive from the "bang" of a rifle. I knew that Devin had fired his gun.

After a couple minutes, I called Devin on the two-way radio to find out what happened. He responded that he had shot at a doe. It had run off without appearing to have been wounded.

I left my spot to help him look for blood just in case the animal had been hit. It was clear though that he had missed while attempting a difficult shot through some thick brush. After discussing the shot and offering him suggestions over cups of hot chocolate, I returned to my chair to continue my vigil over the south side of the ridge.

Just before 11 am, I heard the sound of crashing brush at the bottom of the hill. I saw a large deer briefly run through an opening, behind it was a smaller deer. As they ran into another opening, I could see that the large deer was a huge doe and it was running away to my left.

Just as I thought they would continue moving away, the lead doe turned and started running up a swale about 100 yards to my left. I pulled up my gun and decided I would take a shot if I got the chance. The doe was big but the powerful animal easily ran up the hill in my direction.

As she cleared some thick brush, I aimed just behind her shoulder and fired. At the exact moment I pulled the trigger, she had turned and ran directly towards me. I figured I missed and cycled a new round into my rifle's chamber.

She ran into a clearing and came to a stop. I set the crosshairs of the scope on her and again pulled the trigger. I saw her make a slight jump at the loud bark of the gun. I cycled another round into the chamber and placed the scope on her side. I believed I could see where the bullet had struck her and decided to not fire another round. Though I expected her to fall down, she took off up the hill and ran over its crest with the yearling following behind.

I stood there in disbelief. What happened? How could I miss? Did I hit her in the gut? A gut shot deer can run a long time before succumbing to its wound. I began to wonder if my rifle scope had gotten knocked out of alignment.

As I started walking to where the animal had been standing, I called Devin on the radio. I was telling him that I thought I missed a huge doe. To my surprise, Devin told me thought he heard something big fall over in the brush. I went to the top of the hill to look over it, but did not see anything. Just a few minutes later while trying to recreate the path I thought she had run off on, I spied a small amount of blood on some leaves. I called Devin and asked him to help me to look for the animal.

It turned out the doe had indeed fallen dead on the other side of the hill. While looking for her the first time, I had been looking about 30 feet to the west of where she fell. I also discovered that that both of my shots had found their mark making for a quick kill. Seeing her close up, I realized that I had never shot a doe close to that size. She was even bigger than almost every other buck I had shot.

I estimate that from the time I first glimpsed the deer to when I fired that 2nd shot that only 15 seconds had elapsed. The intense activity of seeing and shooting at a deer often lasts for just a few seconds; however, the memories last much longer, especially when you don't miss the target.

Terry