

has the potential to have a really nice rack," points out Quentin.

But we're not going to see one today. There are some tricks we could try like luring the deer to us by rattling antlers together. "You can do a combination of a buck grunting, a doe bleating, beat your antlers together and simulate a buck fight going on," observes Quentin. And we could use scents and calls that, like fishing lures, catch more hunters than deer. But we're cold. We're going in.

We clamber down from the frigid hut and walk stiffly to Quentin's battered and cluttered SUV. Putting the heat on high we bump and bounce along logging trails to check on an abandoned four-wheeler. Quentin leaves a message on the ATV owner's answering machine. No big deal. They'll be back to pick it up. Quentin just wanted to be sure some hunter wasn't lying half frozen to death after falling out of a tree stand.

The Doolittle family comes roaring into the check station equally empty-handed. But that's okay because herein starts hunting's great sideshow: the story telling. Good-natured ribbing, jokes, tall tales and general merriment and camaraderie abound. Ron tells a story on his Dad about how a buck charged him once because of the scent lure Jim was dragging on the ground. "That thing came after me," confirms Jim feigning shock.

Ask the Doolittles why they hunt, and you'll get a variety of answers. "If I get stressed out, I come out here, I'll go back home a different person," says Ron. "You got to keep the animals thinned out or they'll overrun," chimes in his dad. Brother Bruce interrupts. "You can see all that stuff you want on TV... you can watch those shows until you're blue in the face, but until you get out here and see it yourself, you're just wasting your time... To hear a turkey gobble?" He lets the sentence finish itself.

"That's why they call it huntin'," says another who has been eavesdropping and came up equally empty-handed this morning. But that's okay; we all witnessed the dazzling frosty dawning of this stellar November day. Now, wh-wh-wh-where is that hot cup of coffee?



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

Three generations (sometime four) of Doolittles enjoy hunting together and passing the tradition down. From left to right, father Jim, son Ron, grandson Jonathan, and son Bruce (Jonathan's dad).

Rules and regs and a word of advice

Although bow hunters and muzzle loaders have already been at it for awhile, the firearms season for deer in Orange County lasts from Nov. 15 through Jan. 3. You are allowed to take does on Nov. 22, 29 and Dec. 6 through Jan. 3. You may shoot as many as six per license year, but no more than three can be antlered.

A resident license to hunt costs \$18, plus another \$18 to hunt bear, deer and turkey. These can be obtained at most sporting goods stores or on line at www.HuntFishVA.com. If you are not fortunate enough to belong to a hunt club that leases land, you might think about joining one or taking advantage of the 37 Wildlife Management Areas (WMA's) in Virginia. Totaling 200,000 acres, these public hunting lands are owned by the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. The closest ones to us are: Hardware River in Fluvanna County (1,034 acres),

Rapidan in Madison County (10,327 acres) and C.F. Phelps in Fauquier County (4,540 acres).

Or you can approach private landowners. According to Captain Joe Pajic of DGIF, permission is needed whether land is posted or not. "It's always best to have written permission," he recommends. Permission in writing is required on posted land.

A word of advice to hunters: Poaching, illegal hunting and trespassing will only give hunters a bad name, ruining the sport for the vast majority of those who are law-abiding, courteous, and respectful of private property. Examples abound of vehicles tearing up newly-sown crop fields, fences being damaged, gates being left open, livestock and pets escaping, being wounded and killed... even houses being shot into.

Have some common sense and decency! Hunting boozed to the gills by 9 a.m. is just not where it's at anymore. If you want to hunt on someone's land, ask permission and do it courteously. If you play your cards right, the landowner just might say 'yes.' And if he does, make sure he gets that tenderloin back strap as a Christmas thank-you.

A word of advice to landowners: Before you have a knee-jerk reaction forbidding hunting on your land, consider that hunters can actually help you. They can thin out this overpopulation of herbivores that are devouring everything from your

garden to your corn crop.

Also, you need to understand that the game running through your property does not belong to you any more than the wind that blows across it or the water that flows through it. Wildlife belongs to the Commonwealth; that means to all of us. In fact, Captain Pajic says, "the people have a Constitutional right to fish and hunt in the state of Virginia." So, as a landowner, pay it forward a little bit. Go ahead and let this guy who doesn't own land enjoy your conservation easement on which you pay less taxes.

As a landowner, by all means, be pro-active in how hunting will be conducted on your land. Set limitations. If you don't want dogs, tell them. Tell them where the livestock is, where the newly-sown fields are. Tell them what's off limits and what's on. In fact, write it out on a piece of paper and make them sign it. If one hunter approaches you about bringing in a group, insist on meeting every single one of them face-to-face in-person. Get their names, their addresses, even their license plate numbers. That way if there's a problem, you can deal with it. They know that, so they won't cause the problem in the first place.

Here are three phone numbers in case you encounter a problem or have a question: Emergency, violation in progress: 1-800-237-5712. Non-emergency violation: 1-804-367-1258. General information: 1-804-367-1000, weekdays.



Opening day was productive for the Raines family, pictured here at around 10 a.m. on Courthouse hill in Orange. Brandon Raines (center) bagged the monster in the middle, while his brother Timmy shot the eight-pointer on the left and his Dad, Tim shot the nine-pointer on the right. Shot on an undisclosed farm in the area, Tim Raines said "we're having trouble with poachers over there now."

PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

The Whitetail deer population has swollen from 25,000 in 1931 to as many as 1 million animals today, causing an average of 34,000 deer/vehicle collisions in one year statewide.



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

This handsome buck would make most hunters proud, and he probably meets the maturity requirements of the J.E. Taylor Hunt Club. Note the sag in his back and belly and how his brisket has filled out. But he might not have enough inches in his rack to be a trophy.



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

Although we saw nothing, Quentin Flowers obliges the photographer in me by aiming his muzzle loader. If a young deer had walked out with less than "a monster rack, I won't even pick up the rifle," says Flowers referring to the club's trophy management program.

Gone Huntin'

The almost full, egg-shaped moon, looking like a lopsided orange, set on the western horizon more than an hour ago. But we're still an hour away from sunrise, so it's pitch black out here, and it's going to get cold. The mercury drops to 23 degrees. We are sitting motionless in a wooden hut about five feet off the ground, but we are relatively comfortable in multiple layers of polar fleece and quilted camo. The uncontrollable shivering won't start for a couple of hours yet.

My hunting companion is Quentin Flowers. He is the president of the J.E. Taylor Hunt Club in Orange. He is also a sworn-in-by-the-state Conservation Police Officer (CPO). That's the new word for "Game Warden." His jurisdiction is a 6,000-plus acre tract of land, bordered roughly by the Monrovia and Lahore Roads. It also includes a 400-acre piece across Route 20 on Jerdone Mountain, all of it owned by Quentin's boss, Howell Taylor.

Quentin is a busy man these days, because we are smack-dab in the middle of deer hunting season. Yet, he has been kind enough to take this clueless scribe out on a deer hunt on a frosty morning simply because, at the time, we were still a few days away from rifle sea-

son. But from now until Jan. 3, Quentin will have no time to fool with such idle pursuits as sitting on a stand, on the off chance a deer will wander by. No, he will be patrolling, managing and enforcing hunt club and Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF) law, regulation and policy almost 24-7 on this vast tract of property.

Quentin has to deal with three sometimes unpredictable entities: hunting, hunters and the hunted. Let's talk about the age-old ritual that is hunting first.

Hunting is about as visceral and instinctual as well, fire, shelter and the desire to procreate. We owe our survival as a species to hunting. It is deeply rooted in our id. Those who say it's not necessary anymore, that it is the senseless

slaughter of innocent animals by people who have more than enough to eat, just don't get it. They don't realize that for some, hunting, whether it be in the woods or the corporate boardroom, is absolutely essential to their psyche.

Like it or not, deep down, we are still hunter/gatherers. It's in our blood. Generally speaking, men hunt and women gather. Although there are many fine female hunters, the sport is clearly dominated by men. Of the 50 active members of the J.E. Taylor Hunt Club, only one is a woman. A psychological study, published some time ago, about the differences between men and women, points out that, generally, women prefer to sit across from each other, such as at a restaurant or around a campfire. Men, in general, prefer to sit side by side, whether it's in front of a TV, or at a live football game, or...like Quentin and I are right now, on a deer stand, scanning the horizon for movement.

Let's talk about hunters. Misunderstood and stereotyped by many as being Easy Rider-style shotgun assassins, they are in fact, conservation and wildlife protectors and promoters. But like everything else, a few bad apples ruin the barrel.

Bruce Doolittle is a good apple. He's out here this morning with his son, Jonathan, his brother Ron, and their father Jim, who jokes that he's either 78 or 79 years old, "one of the two... it doesn't matter." Here are three generations, sometimes four, all hunting together, passing along this time-honored tradition that goes back to their great grandfather and beyond.

"You get a couple of guys, they go out there and act like idiots, and right away, hunting's bad," says Bruce shaking his head in disgust. "Hunters are bad. They're a bunch of dumb rednecks," you know," he quotes the critics. "All it takes is a handful, and they blame everybody." He pauses and adds, "You've got 5,000 hunters doing good things; you don't hear nothing about that."

This is confirmed by 20-year-veteran, Captain Joe Pajic of the Fredericksburg office of DGIF. Of hunters, he says, "They're more law-abiding than the average citizen." But, regrettably, a small percentage are violators, and those violations are "high-profile." Pajic also points out that being a CPO, is "the most dangerous job in law enforcement." After all, what other policing job do you know of where *everybody* is armed to the teeth? They are also outnumbered. Twenty years ago, Pajic says there were 209 game wardens in Virginia; today there are just 159, and they are dealing with double the pressure.

That's where gamekeepers like Quentin Flowers and strictly self-regulated clubs like the J.E. Taylor Hunt Club can step in and help. "My jurisdiction is only on this property," clarifies, Quentin. "If I have a major problem, then I call a regular one (CPO) or call a county deputy to

assist me, and then I go to the magistrate and get a warrant."

On this particular morning, club members like the Doolittles let themselves in through the padlocked gate just across from Henry's Store. They lock it behind them and drive down to the check station. By battery powered light, they sign in and place their numbered sticker on a clear laminated aerial photograph of the property. This tells Quentin where they will be today.

"Everybody has three spots that are 250 square yards apiece," explains Quentin. For 50 hunters, which is the club limit, that works out to "about 13 acres apiece in three spots." On Saturdays and holidays all hunters must be at their stands before daybreak, and they must stay there until 10 a.m., "so they don't mess anybody else up going in and out." Then they may go back at 2 p.m. but must remain until dark. At 8:30 p.m., Quentin checks the map for remaining stickers. "If somebody's signed in and everybody else is gone and nobody knows where they're at, then I'm going to go look for them."

As a result, "We have not had any hunting accidents; none whatsoever." This perfect safety record has stood unblemished since Quentin put this system into place in 2001. Since then, his job has been to seek out what he calls "evil doers," the poachers, the bad apples.

Quentin is well-suited for this job. Having befriended Howell Taylor when they attended Orange County High School together, Quentin went on to join the Army. He earned a Purple Heart in Somalia and served in the Old Guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, before taking a job as a heavy equipment operator. When Howell called offering him the game warden's job, he jumped at the opportunity.

There has been some resentment to this new order, particularly among some adjoining land owners who over the years have felt that hunting on the Taylor tract was by-right. "I've had people threaten to beat my tail, burn the place down, all that kind of stuff," he says nonchalantly. "You just kind of let it roll off your shoulders." He casually mentions that he's been charged by someone on an ATV and shot at, although

not intentionally.

"A typical day starts for me about 4 o'clock in the morning," he says, as he fires up a smoke and sips on his ever present Mountain Dew. "And then I go out and I patrol, whether I'm walking in the woods or in my vehicle or my ATV...And if somebody has harvested a deer, then I check it in and then patrol through dark, and then sometime in the evening, I go home and get a bite to eat, and then I'm going to go back out and patrol some more." He

is careful not to follow a pattern. "People who are poaching are watching you," he cautions.

Here at the J.E. Taylor Hunt Club, being a good apple is a condition of membership. Limited to 50 members, and yes, there is a waiting list, Quentin Flowers and his club Veeps, Ken Stanley and Jeff Morris, will screen applicants to see if they have the right mindset to be part of this trophy management program. "They've got to leave a good impression as an ethical hunter. And then they read the rules and if they don't agree with the rules, there's no point in joining," shrugs Quentin.

Here's a rule that some hunters might question. "The buck has to be a certain size," explains Quentin. "He has to be at least 3-1/2 years old." This prompts a wisecrack about going out in the field and asking a wild deer its age. Quentin patiently explains, "Older bucks, you're looking for a sway in the back and a sag in the belly... Younger bucks are streamlined, look kind of like rectangles with long legs." He also says mature bucks have bigger briskets. He even teaches seminars and shows videos on how to recognize older mature bucks. Good thing too, because if you shoot an underage buck here, you'll pay a \$350 wildlife management fine! And that's in addition to your \$1,250 annual dues.

The other determining factor is antler size. This is what is known as 'trophy management.' "He has to have a growth score of at least 140 inches on his rack," continues Quentin, quoting a widely accepted formula for judging rack size. Suffice it to say, a 140-inch rack is a monster. A 170-inch rack is destined for the record books. Pushing this bar higher and higher hasn't happened overnight; it has been developed over seven years. In the old days, when they allowed dog hunting, deer were shot on the run, with little mind paid to how mature they were. But now, J.E. Taylor Hunt Club only allows still hunting, with the occasional manned drive at the end of the season. "Managing hunters is a big key," sums Quentin. "If you don't care what size buck you kill, we have no problem with that...But we're looking for a little more. We look for like-minded people to come in the hunt club."

The whole point of this is to manage the herd. When he first came to the Taylor tract, Quentin Flowers says the ratio of does to bucks was an unhealthy 13:1. Now, they've got that number down to 4:1. According to last year's survey, there are close to 600 deer on this piece of property. That works out to about 60 deer per square mile, and although they do not feed them, Quentin plants nutrition plots every summer.

The J.E. Taylor Hunt Club is one of 2,000 clubs statewide participating in the Deer Management Assistance Program (DMAP). Participating clubs are issued tags that allow their hunters to take button bucks and does any day of the season, and in any quantity until



PHOTOS BY PHIL AUDIBERT
Swift and high flying, these does are coming in season right now, causing bucks to fight for the right to mate. Females fight as well, but mostly for territory. They spar by standing on their hind legs and pawing at each other.



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT
Camaraderie is just as much a part of hunting as sitting out an unproductive cold morning in a stand. Here, Ron Doolittle (left) amuses Quentin Flowers (center) and Bruce Doolittle (right) with hunting stories.



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT
It's about 5:30 a.m., a full hour before sunrise. Quentin Flowers checks in hunters by battery-powered light at the sign-in shack. Note the stickers and the aerial map of the 6000+ acre tract. Before a hunter goes in to his stand, he puts his numbered sticker on that spot on the map. He removes it when he leaves. At the end of the day, if any stickers are still on the map, Quentin goes looking for their owners.

“It’s really about the smiles”

Something extraordinary will happen at the J.E. Taylor Hunt Club this coming weekend. Many of the members will unselfishly lay down their arms on one of the busiest weekends of the year to help with a handicap hunt Friday and Saturday. Dozens of disabled applicants from across the nation, have been narrowed down to a few hunters "who've been homebound the last 10 years. I'm going to choose them first," says Quentin.

The club provides meals, overnight accommodations, and "each disabled person gets assigned three of the hunt club members.

They take them out and they put them in the stand, whether they have to carry them or whatever," explains Quentin. "Yeah it's nice if the people kill a deer but it's really about the smiles on the faces. They come out; they have a good time and they get to spend time with people they've never met before, spend some time in nature...Killing a deer is like icing on the cake. It's really about the smiles."

The club also hosts Wounded Warrior hunts through the Armed Forces Foundation. Some are amputees from the Iraq War. "That's to let them guys know that there's life after

getting wounded in combat," says Quentin. "They sit in that hospital, depressed, trying to figure out what the heck they're going to do the rest of their life, now that they've lost a limb. Just to get them away from all that, and get them out here and get them out in the woods around some good people and have a good time." He waves vaguely at the surrounding woods and fields. "We've got so much here, it's nice to give something back."

Maybe hunt club vice president Ken Stanley's wife Sarah said it best. "You sleep that night with a good conscience."

they run out of tags. At the check station, hunters must weigh and measure the animal, remove the lower half of its jaw, and send it in to DGIF. The next fall, a packet bearing all this data comes back to the hunt club, "and it gives you direction and suggestions on what you need to do to get your herd to where you want it." And so the key, says Quentin "is weeding out does and saving bucks... You have to manage the herd. You have to manage the nutrition. You have to manage the hunters."

It is now about 8 o'clock, broad daylight, and the shivering has started. A blue jay almost flies right in the window. A chipmunk skitters across the roof of the hut. But no matter how hard we peer at the cut over crop field in front of us, nary a deer shows its face. The almost full moon of the night before has worked against us; the deer are partied out, exhausted from fighting, rutting, and breeding all night. They're sleeping it off.

"You see all kinds of crazy stuff if you just sit and watch them," says Quentin "You see them rutting, you see deer actually in the act; you see does that are territorial; they stand on their hind legs and beat the tar out of other does standing on their hind legs. You see deer out playing like a bunch of puppies, young deer running around playing grab ass... just like a bunch of teenagers at a bar."

The Whitetail deer is not Bambi; it is a wild animal. An *Insider* article three years ago about deer/vehicle collisions revealed that this wild animal runs into or is hit by cars 34,000 times on average in one year in Virginia. Over the past 10 to 15 years, its population in Virginia has stabilized at 800,000 to a million animals! Compare that to the 25,000 total state deer population of 1931, and you get a sense of this population explosion.

Hunters "harvest" 200,000 of these animals a year, 2,400 in Orange County alone. That doesn't even put a dent in the population. By next year, they will have recovered to their original numbers. The average life expectancy of a deer is seven years, although Quentin knows of some that have lived to 12 plus. They reach their maximum antler potential at 6-1/2.

Deer start breeding at age 1-1/2. Gestation takes 200 days. Ideally, that puts the fawns on the ground in early June. If a doe is not bred during her first estrus, she will come back into season until she is. A sign of too many does is when you see a spotted fawn in early fall; it means the mother wasn't bred until late last winter, instead of the November prior.

When they talk about "saving bucks," the idea is to let them breed an average of four to seven does per season for several years before being hunted. Antlers develop with maturity, not because of big rack genes. If that were true, there would be no more trophies. "Every buck