Hunting *with* Andrew

Introducing a nonhunter to a day (and night) in the deer woods.



BY NOAH DAVIS.
ILLUSTRATIONS BY
MICHAEL KENSINGER

ANDREW WAS A BUDDY, BUT NOT A HUNTING BUDDY. He lived in the apartment above me and my wife in Missoula and worked as a geologist, 10 days on, 10 days off, at the cobalt mine in Salmon, where he stayed in company housing for his hitch. When he was at home, he tinkered in the garage on his motorcycles. His arms were stenciled with tattoos and as wide as the off-road motorbike tires he stored next to his welding gear.

Andrew was friendly, and when our paths crossed in the driveway or laundry room, we'd talk about work, the price of gas, or any trips we had planned.

One October afternoon as I cleaned a pair of ruffed grouse on the shared patio, Andrew asked if I would take him hunting. He didn't want to carry a shotgun or rifle and wasn't sure he'd ever want to actually hunt. He just wanted to see what it was like.

"I'm in shape, and I can carry meat," he said, as if delivering his opening remarks for a job interview.

Happy to show a nonhunter a day in the woods, I jumped at the chance to bring him out.

We left town at 4:30 a.m. on a November morning. Under a sky full of bright stars, we reached the trailhead 90 minutes later with dawn still more than an hour away. I knew we wouldn't quite reach the peak in time to watch the first movements of the day, but we could cover a good bit of distance in the dark. As we climbed through thick trunks of ponderosas, Andrew's headlamp bobbing behind mine, few words passed between us.

Once daylight arrived, I paused periodically to glass the brightening finger ridges for deer. Andrew asked what we were doing, reminding me I needed to narrate. Though I wasn't mentoring him exactly, this also wasn't a passive walking tour from one point of interest to the next. This was something in between, and I needed to find that balance.

Three miles in we hit calf-deep snow, and I wondered if Andrew's ankle-high hiking boots would be up to the task ahead.

"We're going to go off trail and over this ridge," I said to Andrew. "Then we'll glass the far face of the mountain for the rest of the morning."

"Sounds good," he replied, cinching his backpack tighter on his shoulders.

After five minutes of wading up the ridge, I looked ahead and saw a 3x3 mule deer buck peering down at our slow ascent. Guessing his range at 150 yards and not knowing if I'd have time to move to a tree to steady myself, I slowed my breathing and waited for the crosshairs to settle behind his shoulder. The snow muffled the rifle's clap and the buck bounded off.

Slipping immediately on my next step, I floundered up to the buck's tracks. They were obvious in the fresh snow, but I found no sign of hair or blood. Only the strong bounds of a mountain muley.

"He's over to the left," Andrew whispered. "That shot was way louder than I thought it would be."

The deer I missed stood with another smaller buck on the lip of the ridge 400 yards away looking at us with curiosity.

I figured our best bet was to keep advancing, so we followed the bounding tracks and marked where they slowed to a walk. The pair pushed higher as we approached, and soon they were moving across the head of the bowl more than 600 yards away.

"I'm happy it was a clean miss, but dang, the shot felt good," I grumbled as we took a break where the bucks had stopped to look at us. "Should've got to a tree to steady myself."

"But what if the buck would've moved before you reached a tree?" Andrew asked. "You'd be mad that you didn't take a shot sooner, right?"

Andrew had already realized the contradictory nature of debating one's choices after a botched opportunity, and he hadn't even pulled the trigger.

"Asking those sorts of questions, you're already thinking like

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Noah Davis is a frequent contributor. His second book of poetry, The Last Beast We Revel In, *was published in April 2025.*

a hunter," I laughed, watching the now-miniature deer make it to the far tree line. "I don't know if it's a good idea, but we could follow those deer up and over then explore the back side. It'll be tough going though. Footing will be bad with the snow and rocks."

"Let's go for it," said Andrew.

The traverse that took the deer 15 minutes had us sliding on hidden scree and stumbling over downed logs for an hour. Our boots were caked in a gray frost as we tromped through country blackened by a fire that had roared across the peak three years before.

Between heavy breaths, I questioned if I should have refrained from taking that shot with Andrew next to me. I pulled the trigger because I thought my aim was true, but an off-hand shot is never as steady as a braced one. So rarely is everything perfect in a hunting situation. My mind volleyed all the "yes, buts" back and forth, what I could or should have done. I concluded that I would've taken the shot even if my mother had been watching. How real is a day of hunting without some disappointment? And that's what I wanted to show Andrew, a real day on the mountain. "So far, so real," I muttered to myself.

REACHING THE FAR SIDE, we found no deer, but gathered enough wind-blown wood to start a fire to dry Andrew's soaked boots.

"I should've worn gaiters," he said as he roasted his Merrells like a hot dog over the low flames.

We ate lunch in the sun and looked over the cold mountain. I talked about possible ways to spend the afternoon, the variables of shooting offhand, following animals to be sure they weren't hit, and how he should let me know if he saw a buck regardless of its size because meat was my priority more than big antlers.

Andrew asked how I started hunting, my favorite meals to make with venison, how I picked good places to hunt, and how late we'd be getting back.

"We'll stay up here until dark, so once we dive off this knob and make it to the south-facing trail, we can take a nap." Andrew laughed before he realized I was serious.

Halfway down the face, we found a well-used deer trail, and I noted a patch of young firs where we could sit and keep watch on the path once evening approached.

On the south side of the mountain, we did take a nap, and in the grogginess of waking, I told him he was well on his way to experiencing as full of a day as I could've hoped. We'd hiked far, seen animals, had a shot, made a fire, ate lunch on a mountaintop, and napped.

"The only thing we have left is to kill a deer," he said, before taking a sip of water.

"I hope that happens, too," I said. "For both of us."

THE SUN BEGAN TO SET BEHIND US, its rays slowly prodding the contours of the mountain face. We hid behind a charred log beside the small stand of firs in the bowl as the last hour of shooting light arrived.

"I'll watch this ridge, and you watch the face," I instructed. "We're in it now. The deer will be moving." I believed what I said, but I also remembered many evenings I'd seen pass without a deer appearing.

I looked across the ridge, willing a buck to saunter in. As the shadows deepened, the temperature dropped and I pulled on another layer, wondering if it would be worth it to build a fire.

"Deer," Andrew said. "Coming in on the bench."

"You're joking," I whispered. "How far?"

"Less than 200 yards."

I saw the deer and knew it was a buck. Finding a solid rest on the log, I adjusted my scope magnification and saw the forked antlers on the deer's head.

"I'm going to shoot."

Andrew plugged his ears.

The buck fell with the shot and rolled down out of sight to the next flat.

As we climbed to the deer, I wondered if this would be the first large dead animal Andrew had been close to. I almost began to ask but decided to stay quiet.

When we reached the still deer, I placed my hand on the buck's shoulder and said my thanks to the animal, the mountain, and the day.

"Can I touch the hide?" Andrew asked.

"Of course," I said, then tried to explain the best I could how it is never easy taking the life of a beautiful creature and that all we can offer after is thanks and care for the meat that will feed us through the year.

Andrew and I dressed the carcass and dragged it to the trail. I tried to imagine what he thought of all this: the long hours, the miles of climbing, the silence, the violence, the carrying a deer off the mountain in the dark. For a nonhunter, he had taken it all in stride with thoughtful questions. Maybe he'd want to do it again. Maybe he'd consider taking FWP's hunter safety course. Maybe not.

"Are you already thinking about the meals you'll get from this deer?" he asked.

"Absolutely! Chili, steaks, and sandwiches," I replied.

"I'll think about that, too."

"You'll need to make some room in your freezer," I said, adjusting my pack. "You're going to earn a lot of meat on this drag."

The last I heard from Andrew, he still hadn't taken up hunting. I've got a hunch the unique memory of our day together on the mountain is an experience that lingers with him—and maybe also his conclusion that it might be better to kill deer a little closer to the vehicle and not quite so late in the day.



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