

Reflections of a Peaceful Longbow Hunter

by Brad Isham

"The way of the sage is to act, but not to compete."
Loa Tzu

Six weeks into the hunting season, and I hadn't taken a deer. In fact, the only deer I had an opportunity to shoot were two little twin brother button bucks. They were all alone. I could tell they hadn't had much training in the way of woods-wisdom. They had either lost their mother or had been sent away. They walked clumsily, preferred open trails to heavy timber traverses and seemed to follow the path of least resistance.

They stood in front of my stand, broadside at 20 yards, small as they were an easy mark. I imagined carrying one over each shoulder on the short walk home, but then the softness of a peaceful hunter set in, and I saw them for what they were.

They were clumsy little boys without the wherewithal to weather the storm of their first hunting season. They needed a safe place, a respite from the rifles, a sheltered reprise. It's only 25 acres that we share in the middle of thousands more that are leased to out-of-towners for mud and blood sport. They come with trucks and ATVs, and bring the report of rifles that let all my neighborhood inhabitants know it's that time again. It's my back yard though, and for now the small brothers buck are welcome and safe. I let them walk.

They will need to navigate past other predators to make their first year and second summer and become what I call a "coming two," but they need not fear me yet. Good or bad, I am a predator evolved, a peaceful hunter. I can discern my needs from those of the woods. The woods need those little boys more than I, and I am not hungry yet. Together, with two sets of eyes and ears and a few more lucky breaks, they may make it.

They may make it past the grey dog coyotes, the orange-headed humans and the two-eyed monsters that travel the roads at night. They'll learn to eat early and late, to chew their cud on the south-side hills when the sun rises and to not move unless moved by the heavy footfalls of winter warriors.

They'll learn to take water at the tiny trickles and small springs and not venture into the open areas around ponds. Together, they'll learn to decipher the squirrel's warning barks, to listen to the Blue Jays and to apprehend the calls of the pileated woodpecker. They will lag behind the mothers and daughters that no longer want them around, and learn that there is safety in following mindfully.

A coyote or pack of them has no mercy on prey. A bear will take any opportunity to fill its gut. A fox

in the chicken coop will kill one for the gullet, more for lust. A quivering rabbit, a deer disadvantaged by age or injury, any weakness to a predator means an easy meal, and predators are happy to oblige their duty no matter how unequal the odds. This is the way it should be. This is the way it must be. Nature often seems

unfair, but it is true. It is natural law that predators have no emotion that would supercede survival; it is intrinsic to what they are. They are not critical thinkers of balance and quota, and it sometimes makes me jealous. I want the kill, but emotion, logic and mindful thought make me tarry for the kill that is right. So I wait.

Am I right in my decision? I don't know. I just know what I've decided today makes me feel good. Perspective roils in my quiet contemplation though. *Take what God gives; take what nature provides; be thankful for what you see; it's not for you to decide.* I am thankful for what I have seen today, and I did decide. I am thankful to be a peaceful hunter.

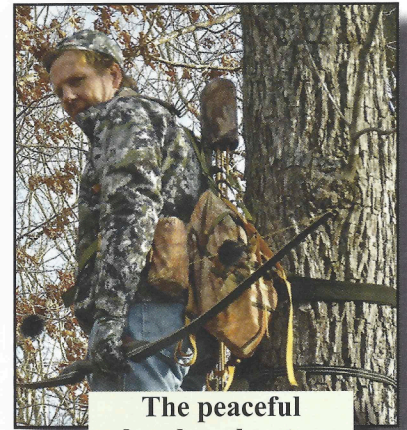
My longbow gently weeps at my decision, the three arrows it carries still quivered. It's not proud of me. It wants for the strain of limbs, the sound of the string and an arrow's flight. Having not fulfilled my obligation to it, I gently lower it to the ground, and then I climb down. Going home empty handed doesn't bother me. During the short walk home to where my dog waits by the wood stove, I think, he won't be proud of me.

He's a true predator, a Rappahannock Mountain Dog (a mutt), half Beagle and half Border collie. He chases, hunts and eats anything his nose can find on the foothills behind my home. With gut full of kill or carrion, he rolls in the freshest dung he can find, usually bear, and makes his way to the house. He arrives home, bringing with him a bone or two for the morning, dung caked under his collar, and a satisfaction in himself that I currently lack.

This morning it was my turn to hunt. The dog was left inside to sleep by the stove as I took to the woods. He'll be happy to see me, but won't understand why I couldn't do my job as effectively as he does.

As I climb the last hill before the house, the percussion of a muzzle blast makes my neck seize. A blast that tells the end of this story, a blast that most assuredly comes from the direction of the little brother button bucks.

And now, most assuredly, they are one.



The peaceful
longbow hunter