

Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

The Tree by Louis Avosso

At precisely 7:30, the old man carefully climbed the hill behind the cabin. Looking through the trees to the cornfield below, he knew it was only a matter of time before a nice buck would appear and another deer season would end in success.

For most of his adult life, opening day found the old man in the hardwoods of upstate New York, always taking one deer, two if the law allowed. It seemed the rest of the year existed to discover new areas, collect more equipment, read more books, and plan new strategies for opening day. He had been a dedicated and passionate deer hunter, but since retiring and moving to his south Florida home, he hadn't hunted. His passion grew dull from endless days of sunshine and "early bird" specials. The man did not realize he had grown soft, more in will than body. Although his desire to hunt had not flagged, his desire to take a deer had. In turn, he no longer had the ability to execute quick decisive moves necessary at the right moment. It was a prelude to failure and failure is exactly what happened.

Eight-thirty came and went and his mind began to drift back to his college days. He found himself remembering the silly things he did and the serious things he failed to do.

A twig snapped...a shiny black nose and white muzzle poked through the thicket...

Some thoughts were so familiar that they quickly bored him; others were too delicate to entertain for long. In the midst of his daydreams, he suddenly noticed the tree.

It was a red oak of enormous proportions; the circumference at the base was probably seventeen or eighteen feet. It was big enough, he thought, to be 150 years old, maybe more. He wondered if, when it was young, many bucks polished their antlers on it. Just how many insects, woodpeckers, loggers, beavers, lightning bolts and other assorted insults had it survived? To him the tree was sentient and its mysterious history consumed his consciousness.

By now it was 9:30 and the man began to amuse himself by asking the tree trivial questions like, "How many acorns have you made?" and "How many cords of firewood could you produce?" As he pondered the answers, he realized that in all the seasons in which he patiently waited for deer, he was never bored. The antics of red squirrels, a nervous weasel or a plodding porcupine sometimes made him briefly question the purpose of his presence, but a tree capturing his imagination gave him pause.

James Clayton



A twig snapped, and his focus returned with a rush.

First, a shiny black nose and white muzzle poked through the thicket, only fifteen yards away. The head followed, with six or eight tines. The old man's heart began to pound; he felt flush and uncertain. With two recent heart procedures, he knew this physio-

logical response wasn't good. He commanded self-control. Like an old friend, the rifle came firmly to his shoulder. He switched the safety off and all seemed to go well—it was almost mechanical. The buck froze and glared at the hunter. The hunter knew he had been "made." The old man thought, "Should I snap shoot, or wait?" He had mere seconds to decide. Too late; the buck was gone. The man hesitated and failed.

Somewhere above the eastern United States, a flight attendant asked the old man if he wanted something to drink. He did not hear. His mind was adrift, thinking about the tree. Only 24 hours ago he questioned his resolve, his passion for what he once loved. He sat deep in thought, planning next year's hunt. He knew exactly where his tree stand would be.

Louis Avosso is a professor emeritus from Nassau Community College. Although he enjoys living in Florida, each November he returns to the Catskills to renew his spirit and hunt white-tailed deer.