

# Back Trails

Perspectives on People and Nature

## Ex-hunting Buddy by John Hammer

Last autumn while hunting for deer, I was befriended by a wild ruffed grouse. Each time I went to my hunting property he'd get a little closer and a little friendlier. Soon he would meet me at my truck. He followed me like a puppy while I checked and prepared my tree stands, from the time I arrived until the time I left for home.

One time in particular, I hunted from a tree stand near our usual meeting place. Within minutes he was at the base of my tree. He stayed on the ground under my stand making a lot of "cover noise." I thought that was great because any approaching deer would see the bird and never think a human was nearby. Later, he flew up onto my platform and stayed with me on the stand until the end of the day. That was when I started calling him my "hunting buddy."

But friendship has its limits. The next week I hunted from the same stand "we" occupied the week before. Within minutes he was there on the ground, walking around my ladder, once again scratching the leaves and generally making great cover noise. What could be better?

At about 4:45 he flew up to my stand, which was fine with me. At about 5:00, when deer usually start moving, I stood up and picked up my bow. Almost immediately, he jumped onto my seat, so I pulled out my camera and snapped a couple of pictures. After returning my camera to my pocket, I looked up to find that two deer, a mature doe and a fawn, had just crossed my shooting lane at about 25 yards. I had missed my chance. Dang.

I thought to myself, "Okay; your fault, you were fooling around when you should have been watching for deer. But maybe the deer will come back." Sure enough, within 10 minutes they closed in, but just out of range. I held my bow vertically in front of me and attached my release. That was when my hunting buddy jumped from the seat onto the lower limb of my bow.

At this point I was frantic, and tried to quietly shake my bow to get the bird to fly off without spooking the deer. He wouldn't. So I tipped my bow almost 90 degrees and he jumped back onto the tree stand, landing on my arrow quiver and producing a sound that rivaled the rattles of a 20-year-old minivan. Needless to say, the big doe ran off, but fortunately only about 15 yards.

I knew I still had a chance. If *only* this bird would behave. Sure enough, five minutes later, the doe worked closer again and was in range, but partially blocked by a limb. Once again I held my

bow vertically in front of me, ready to shoot. But when the deer lifted its front leg to take that next step, THE GROUSE FLEW UP AND LANDED ON MY NOCKED ARROW!

From personal experience, I can now tell you—it's pretty difficult to aim with a grouse sitting on your arrow. The jig was up with the deer, as the grouse rattled the arrow around trying to maintain his balance.

So I've given up hunting from stand number 5. It belongs to my ex-hunting buddy now. I'll never get another deer there as long as *that* bird is around.

A lot of things can go wrong while bowhunting. Some of them are within your control, some aren't. I always say, "When it's your time, it's your time, and when it ain't, it ain't." That day was definitely not my time.

The last picture I took shows my ex-hunting buddy and me, walking out at the end of the day's hunt. He apparently had no hard feelings about me dumping him off my bow limb. But I couldn't help but wonder if he wasn't in cahoots with the deer.

A *Conservationist* subscriber for more than 30 years, **John Hammer** is a lifelong hunter. Now retired, he is a Master Forest Owner volunteer with Cornell Cooperative Extension. He resides in Middlesex, Yates County with his wife Linda.



(Editor's Note: Versions of this story have appeared in *Quality Whitetails*, *Ruffed Grouse Society*, *New York Outdoor News*, and *Deer & Deer Hunting*.)