

MCALESTER: A TRADITIONAL HUNT

Steven Maichak - 2008

Known to represent ambitious hunters from sixteen states in a single year, the archery hunts at McAlester Army Ammunition Plant are ones to be remembered. Often argued as being the most sought after, respected, and enjoyed deer hunts in Oklahoma, many a hunter apply for tags in the trophy-ridden management area. Pope & Young bucks are teeming all over the place. The catch: only traditional archery equipment is allowed - no modern compound bows with sights or other attachments are permissible. With a very limited range the once P&Y buck soon becomes a fantasy, and a fat, healthy doe starts to become just as much a trophy as an elusive wall-hanger. Eager to try my hand at the challenge, I finally got my wish this year.

Finally made a reality, youth archers are now allowed to participate in hunts on the renowned and revered munitions plant. This recent enactment, made possible by hard work and dedication from the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation and McAlester Army Ammunition Plant, opens up a whole new field of outdoorsmen to a world not found anywhere else. One can drive a mere mile down the road to his or her deer stand and see things not possible anywhere else in the state. Trophy bucks only fit for dreams are bedded down on the side of the road, just out of reach. Harems of turkeys strut across the road without a worry like pet peacocks. A couple hogs wallow in the mud along the road's shoulder. A pack of coyotes sing the blues only a few yards into the timber. Only at McAlester can one see such a high diversity and density of quality game animals in one concentrated area.

Upon the realization of my dad and I being drawn for such a reputable hunt, practice sessions went into overdrive. From the time I started hunting we always practiced shooting our rifles and bows together. He would watch me and correct my mistakes, and would try to return the favor. This year, though, we were working towards something truly magnificent. The potential was there to be an once-in-a-lifetime hunt. Even my little sister, usually only slightly interested in archery, was drawn to the excitement. Hours upon hours were spent between the three of us, flinging arrow after arrow into the target. Thousands of practice shots were going to come down to a single, well-placed arrow at the moment of truth during the hunt.

The arrival into camp before the pre-hunt orientation was a true heart-thumper. Guys and gals were walking around with stick and string in hand. Finally, a group of people had been realized to match my passion for the tradition of bowhunting. Every man, woman, boy and girl was just as pumped up as me. The eagerness became a tangible, uncontrollable energy. The thoughts of what the next day might bring was all the mind could think about. A 4:30 a.m. wakeup call every morning was a tough exercise of will until I remembered why I was there. Getting up so early tends to separate those who are determined from the less motivated folks. One both loves the sport and is willing to make do with the early morning routines or shouldn't be there in the first place. Besides, there's nothing like waking up to be greeted by three hundred other people who are just like you. Everyone there shared the same heritage – the heritage of a hunter, of an archer.

Disappointingly, the hunt didn't go as imagined. The success rate was low across the board. Nobody in our hunting party had the opportunity to launch an arrow at a deer, but that doesn't mean there wasn't any success at all. A select few hunters were able to harvest mature animals, be it deer, hog or turkey. Most importantly, the camaraderie was as abundant as the leaves on the ground. Everyone had a good, and that makes the trip completely worthwhile.

The draw hunts within McAlester Army Ammunition Plant are the best place to share the heritage of archery and bowhunting. Limiting oneself to traditional tackle only enhances the emotions and quality of the hunts. Now that youth are allowed to take part in the activities, father and son, mother and daughter, husband and wife, and all combinations thereof can share the memories and experiences with one another. Although my younger sister wasn't participating in the hunt she was just as excited as my dad and me. Getting to spend time with the family outdoors makes even the worst hunt a success in itself. The stories brought back allow others to join in and imagine they were there themselves, as if everything was happening right in front of them. With that in mind I hope the spirit and tradition of bowhunting will forever live on and be passed through the generations.