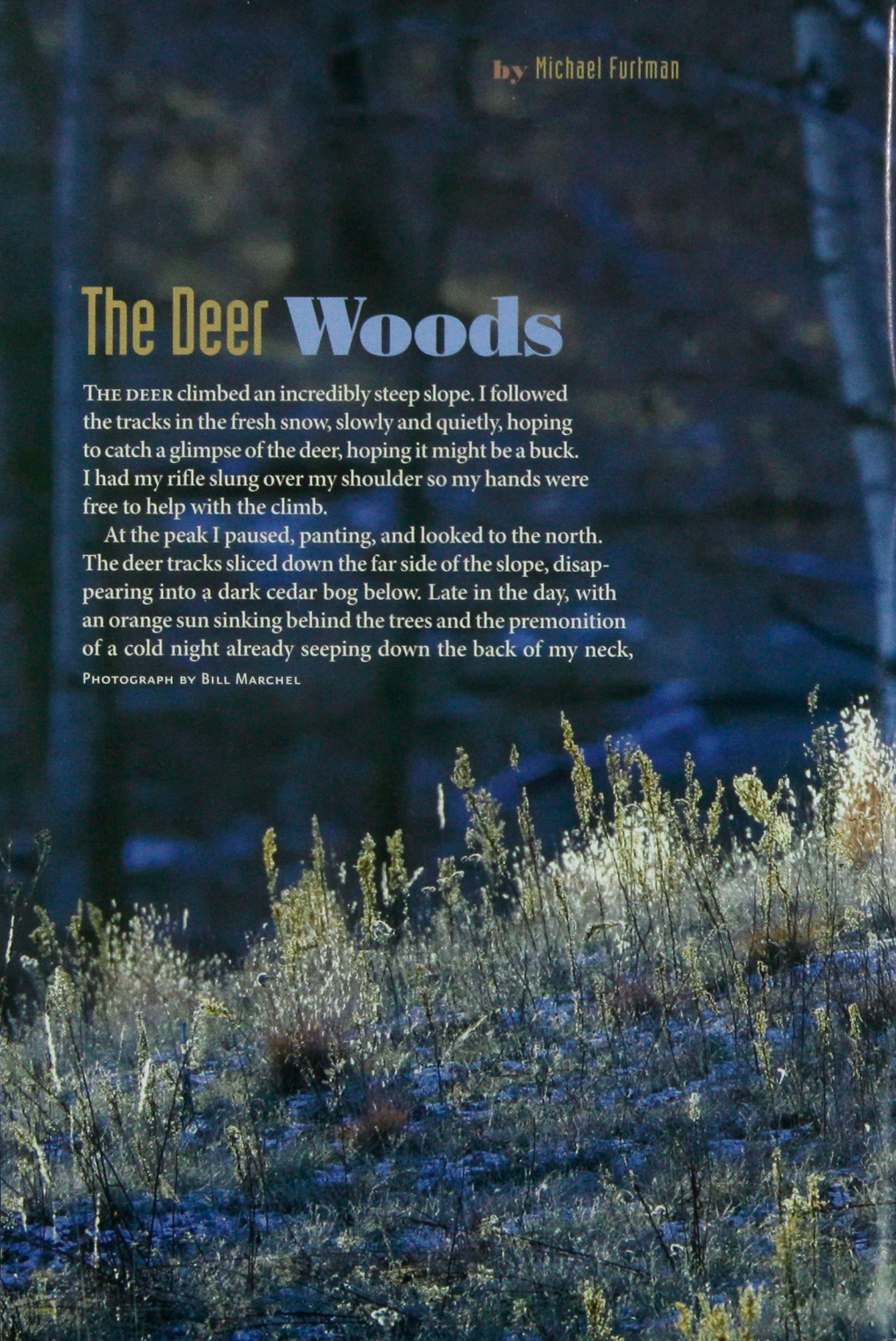
by Michael Furtman

The Deer Woods

THE DEER climbed an incredibly steep slope. I followed the tracks in the fresh snow, slowly and quietly, hoping to catch a glimpse of the deer, hoping it might be a buck. I had my rifle slung over my shoulder so my hands were free to help with the climb.

At the peak I paused, panting, and looked to the north. The deer tracks sliced down the far side of the slope, disappearing into a dark cedar bog below. Late in the day, with an orange sun sinking behind the trees and the premonition of a cold night already seeping down the back of my neck,

PHOTOGRAPH BY BILL MARCHEL



"I could gaze down and over the marching tops of aspen, maple,

RICHARD HAMILTON SMITH

it was getting too late to follow further. Finding a fallen tree, I sat on its trunk to rest before heading back toward the truck. From the ridge, I could gaze down and over the marching tops of aspen, maple, spruce, and cedar. Despite the fact I knew a highway was little more than a mile distant, the impression was of a vast, impenetrable forest, one containing secrets.

I admit I'm a bit of a romantic. I find the quality of the land is inverse to the ease of access. Of course, one must be allowed access, so my romance also includes a love of public lands. As a young man in my mid-20s, I would pore over topographic maps and envision the mysteries that lay between the contour lines, of places uncrossed by roads. I was seeking a large, unroaded woods, one in which I could cut a fresh deer track in new snow and follow it without disturbing other hunters, without being disturbed. So when I found this trail that took a full day to walk across a patchwork of state and county forest west of Duluth, found the hills it traversed, the bright creek that crossed it, the remnant giant white pines, I felt like an explorer. I was young. My black lab was young. The forest and upland hunting season were young. And I walked and learned.

I found beautiful ridges that rise above the aspens, led there by a flushing grouse and a swiftly following dog.

I discovered the cool, shaded ash forest and the clear stream that cut through it, led through the alders by twittering woodcock.

I shared sandwiches with a tired dog on a hill above a beaver pond so big it could be called a lake.

I scoured the hills for sign of deer and signs of deer hunters, and found plenty of the former and little of the latter.

spruce, and cedar."

And that is when I began my plans to hunt this secluded deer woods. The fact that the spot was a 30-minute walk from the nearest road bothered me not in the least. I was assured few other hunters, and the confidence and strength of youth dismissed the difficulty of hauling a dead deer to the truck. Much time has since passed. Four dogs ago. Many, many miles ago. Still this place thrills me, comforts me, teaches me.

Walk It. Here I learned that there is no other way to know a deer woods than to walk it. Forget the advice in glossy, big-buck magazines that you should not spread your scent by walking deer trails. To know how the woods looks to a deer, you must see it from the deer's perspective, from the deer's trail. Do it before season, perhaps, or during the season after you've gotten your deer, but do it. Follow every trail, through the low areas, up the hillside. See where they feed, where they pause to look cautiously before stepping into an opening. See the secret places where the does bed, for that is where the bucks will seek them during the rut. Find the draws and gullies, creeks and marshes, that funnel deer movements. Get to know them so well that you can picture them in your mind.

I also learned that generations of deer, in an undisturbed setting, will behave identically. Along the curve of one ridge is a deer trail that for three decades has had buck scrapes—where bucks scrape leaf litter from the forest floor and urinate as a message to other deer—in the *exact* same spots. And if the bucks are creatures of habit, so are the does, for generations have bedded on the same knoll, skirted the beaver pond outlet in the same place, and crossed the ridge at the same point for those three decades.

I learned of the great gray owl that swooped upon a vole, watched grouse feeding on aspen buds while I sat silently, admired a fisher feasting on the entrails of a deer I'd shot earlier in the week. Here I learned to sit unmoving for hours, to see and hear things large and small that live in this northern forest. Here I saw the wolves slip from the cedar bog after sunrise, their coats glowing in the light, their breath visible and panting audible as they trotted past my deer stand and climbed the ridge.

Whenever I hunt here, I feel like the first human to stumble upon this stunning place. Of course, I was not the first to discover it, and if all goes right in the world, not the last. Though no sign marks it, no gates shield it, no guidebooks list it, it is there to be found, for my deer woods is "just" some county-tax-forfeit land in northern Minnesota—public land, our shared wealth.

Public Legacy. Above all, this woods has taught me the value of public land. Where else but on public land could I wander so freely—literally free of cost. Few of us can afford to own much land. Even leasing it can be prohibitively expensive. In Europe, where most hunting land is privately owned, only the wealthy hunt. In Texas, the state that has most closely adopted the European model, only 4 percent of the land is in public ownership, and almost all hunting is pay-as-you-go. A good friend of mine in Houston has a "deer lease"—the Texas version of a Minnesota deer camp. He and his three brothers each pay $3,000 per year for the right to hunt what he describes as marginal deer habitat.

But in Minnesota, for the cost of a license, a gun, a box of shells, and good boots, anyone can venture into the deer woods. Here

BILL MARCHEL

"I learned to **sit unmoving** for hours, to see and hear things large and small."

"I learned of the **great gray owl** that swooped upon a vole."

MARK PALAS, WINDIGO IMAGES

we have two national forests and 58 state forests, totaling almost 9 million acres. Many counties have public forest—St. Louis County, in which I live and hunt, has almost 900,000 acres of public lands. All of these large, unbroken tracts of public lands hold the imagination of wanderers who relish the notion of things yet undiscovered, those who yearn for a place to hunt free of fenced boundaries, a place like this deer woods.

To know a woods as well as I know this one is much like developing a sturdy friendship. Such a long relationship does not diminish amazement or affection. In truth, it strengthens each. And it incurs debts, for I owe this land that has fed my wife and me for all these years. Two dozen deer have found their way home with me, carefully processed, packaged, and eaten.

I am bonded to the land. Its parts have, molecule by molecule, become deer; and the deer have become me. The ridges I love are in my bones.

"I am bonded to the land. Its parts have, molecule by molecule, become deer; and the deer have become me."

Shared Places. A cherished place is better yet when shared, and a few friends have joined me in the hunt. Most hunted with me only once or twice, but two stayed. My good friend Bob and his cousin Dave have also scoured the hills, the creek bottom, the cedar bog, and the routes around the beaver ponds. They too have learned to love this place, and it is as much their deer woods now as it is mine.

I realize that despite my sense of ownership, this land does not belong to me. Others in the future will find and cherish it too. But I worry. Large tracts of private forest are being carved into smaller and smaller private parcels. Once Minnesota had hundreds of thousands of acres of timber company lands open to the public, but much of it has recently been parceled, sold, and privatized. While we may hope that our public forests will forever remain intact, there are no guarantees unless we are vigilant. This public legacy was created by government. It can be disbanded by government too. Counties particularly are under financial stress to sell their public lands.

This land was known by many others before it became "public." Since the glaciers formed this ridge, it has been hunted by paleo-Indians, the Dakota, the Ojibwe, settlers. Still the forest marches north from that ridge. Still the deer funnel along its ravines. Still the wolves rendezvous atop the high knob. I am but one hunter in a string of many who have learned the way of this woods.

There will always be those who need to know the way of an unfettered woods. It is my fervent wish that generations of hunters will, as I have, shuffle silently through a fresh snow to pause red-faced on that ridge, will look north and still see trees marching endlessly, will feel the exaltation of being an explorer, a hunter, a part of the land. Whether they will be allowed to do so, though, depends upon our knowing, loving, and defending our public lands.

If we do, it will prove we were as wise in protecting this gift of public lands as were those who set them aside.

And that will be a great gift itself.

BILL MARCHEL