By Michael Furtman

Two Hearts

A **deer hunter** *values the most fundamental reason to hunt: the harvest of food.*

One beats slowly, its owner picking his way along the base of a high ridge, nose testing the breeze for danger or the scent of a doe ready to mate. It is a November morning, and the sun has only just now cleared the ridge, its faint rays falling simultaneously on each heart's owner.

The other heart—mine—beats rapidly, pounding in my chest while I try to move quietly as the buck ambles toward me. The days of waiting have been long and often cold, as it is this morning. With stiffness born of that cold, I bring the rifle slowly to my shoulder. My eyes strain through the sights to find the other's heart. A finger squeezes. Only one heart remains beating.

Each autumn this scene is repeated thousands of times in Minnesota. Men and women, boys and girls, don their

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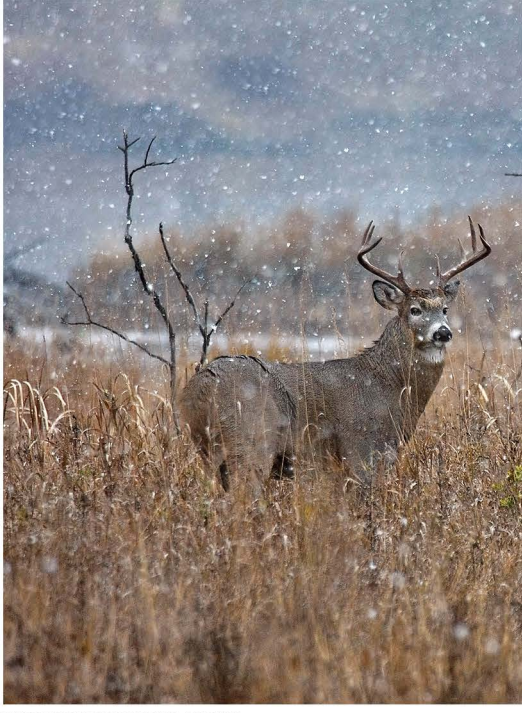
hunting clothing, uncase rifle or bow, and sit and wait, or creep quietly, for a chance to kill a deer. I have been a part of that tradition since I was a young man. At first, I hunted deer simply because my dad did. In time I hunted deer for myself, for reasons that I believe are inherently human.

I do not pretend to know why all hunters venture into the woods. But I suspect most hunters are responding to something genuinely primordial, something so fundamentally a part of the human DNA that many of us cannot deny it, nor do we want to. And while I've been thrilled to take many large bucks over the years, my motivation to hunt deer is little different than that of hunters through the ages—to put meat on the table.



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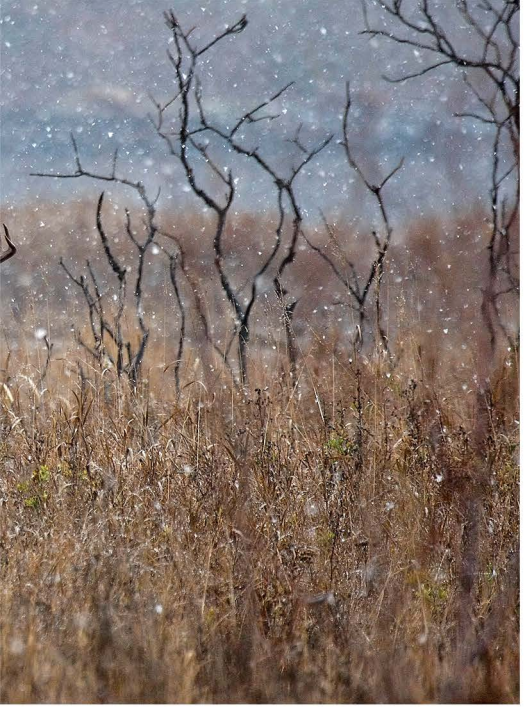
A recent study by Lund University in Sweden confirmed what I have long believed: Humans are a carnivorous species. The researchers defined a carnivore as a mammal that obtains at least 20 percent of its energy from meat. When they studied nearly six dozen species, they found that humans clearly fit into this category. They found the most telling trait we share with other carnivores was that of early weaning. While our species' breastfeeding period, about two years, is far longer than that of a wolf or a lion, it is roughly one-third the length of those of our nearest biological relatives, the great apes. Carnivores wean sooner than herbivores or omnivores because their nutrient-rich diet produces better milk.

Of the 200,000 years that our species has been on this planet, humans have practiced agriculture only for the last 10,000 years, and in many regions, far less time than that. When ancient humans began eating meat, the new, higher-quality diet meant women could give birth more often during their reproductive life, which in turn meant we could spread more rapidly across the world. In addition, learning to hunt necessitated improved communication, planning, and the development of tools, all of which demanded larger brains. And eating meat made that increase in brain size possible.

Hunting also shaped our bodies. Although it may be hard to fathom considering today's obesity epidemic, the human body evolved to be long and lean. Unlike other animals, we evolved sweat glands over nearly our entire body. These traits meant we could be persistent in pursuit of prey, most of which could not cool themselves and thus would tire more quickly. We actually grew shorter in stature after the advent of agriculture.

We all owe our big brain, our skill as com-



municators, even our very body shape to our early ancestors' choice to become meat eaters. To say that hunting was instrumental to our rise as a species is an understatement, for it was more than just a way to eat. Hunting made us human.

For many people today, that urge to hunt is deeply buried. For many others, it is still as near to the surface as a good belly laugh.

Sunlight streams in dappled patterns through the aspen leaves, filtering to the forest floor where asters sip it up. A clear creek courses east through the woods, bending its way around ancient esker ridges until it finally turns north and spills into the brawling St. Louis River.

White-tailed deer bed just below the ridge tops, high vantage points from which they can watch for wolves or other dangers. Here they chew their cud of regurgitated asters and greens, and they can slip quietly down to the creek for a refreshing drink.

Over long years I have learned their ways, walked their trails, noted where bucks make scrapes in the same locations every year, leaving generations of whitetail DNA soaked into the soil as they urinate to make their presence known. With luck, one of these deer will, come November, become my family's food.

There is not a deer I have killed that I haven't momentarily mourned. Long ago I decided that if I were going to eat meat, it would be meat that I killed, meat free of drugs and from an animal that had ranged free and enjoyed the warmth of a rising sun. Its flesh would store the sun and the asters and the clear, clean waters of the creek, and by eating it, I would absorb the essence of that place.

Despite my brief sorrow at taking this life, I find immense satisfaction in seeing those rows of tightly wrapped packages of venison in our freezer. Chops. Steaks. Hamburger. All have been butchered carefully on the kitchen table, with no scrap unused. The meat that is unfit for us goes into the dog's dish. The thick fat from the haunches is trimmed away and skewered outside for chickadees and woodpeckers. The hide is cleaned and rolled and sold or donated to be turned into gloves and mittens and other useful things. And all these uses, all these good things, come at little environmental cost to the planet.

There are other reasons people hunt. For many it is a communal experience, time to be with family or friends, which also may hark back to an earlier tribal instinct. Still others seek bucks with exceptionally large antlers, which I also believe is ancient instinct, since

Mediterranean Venison Steak Pita Sandwiches (serves 4)

Even family and friends who say they don't like venison ask for seconds when it is prepared using this simple and delicious recipe. The dish is also great with wild duck. The quality of your ingredients counts. The better the olive oil, olives, feta, basil, and oregano, the more raves you'll get. But don't be tempted to use fresh garlic; you'll end up with a pasty mess. The seasoning needs to be dry to press into the surface of the steaks.

2 venison steaks, cut 1-inch thick (about 1 ½ pounds)
1 ½ teaspoons dried basil
1 ½ teaspoons garlic powder
1 ½ teaspoons dried oregano leaves
½ teaspoon salt
Pinch of finely ground black pepper
1 to 2 tablespoons olive oil
1 to 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice, or half a medium-size lemon
4 pitas, warmed
Crumbled feta cheese
Chopped Kalamata or ripe olives

Make sure the venison is well-trimmed—no bone, no silver skin, no fat. Combine seasoning ingredients in a bowl and press firmly into the steaks so seasoning does not fall off when steaks are handled. Heat oil in large cast-iron or nonstick skillet over medium heat. Place steaks in skillet and cook to medium rare, 4 to 5 minutes per side, turning them over when seasoning on pan side is nearly crusted. Steaks are done when center is reddish-pink; do not overcook. While steaks are still sizzling in skillet, pour or squeeze lemon juice over them. Place steaks on cutting board and slice into strips. Arrange a portion of venison steak on each pita, then add desired amount of feta and olives.

TOM THULEN

the bigger the antlers, the bigger the body, and early hunters surely would have chosen animals that provided the greatest amount of food. Regardless of the reason they hunt deer, studies show, 95 percent of hunters eat, or their family eats, the animal that they kill.

Although a smaller percentage of people hunt today than did just a generation ago, there are encouraging trends. Women are increasingly joining the ranks, and when they are polled and asked why they hunt, nearly half say it is to provide food. Blogs and books are popularizing hunting among another perhaps unlikely group—largely urban, environmentally conscious younger people who have decided they too want to know the source of their food. Some of these authors give workshops in large cities on how to become a hunter.

I am not, of course, thinking of any of this as I hunt. I am, for that time, as alive as I ever am, my grossly undermatched senses as tuned as they can be, my mind as focused as I can make it. If luck smiles, if I have done everything right, a deer and I will cross paths. I will, despite every urging of my tense body, take my time to make a clean shot, to make a nearly instant kill. And when I kneel beside the deer's still body, I will do as I always do—thank it for its life.

To hunt well is to become a part of the land. To hunt well is to eat of the earth in a manner that honors the source of your food.

In those moments when I kneel over the prostrate deer, I am, for a little while, just one more human hunter in an unbroken line that stretches back millions of years, swept along in the current that begins with birth and ends with death.

And I am aware that among all the carnivores, we alone know this.