



**P**ERCHED atop the old Hotpoint refrigerator at camp is an item that seems oddly out of place. Resting in its place of honor is a wild cherry branch. Only 14 inches long and an inch in diameter, the branch serves as a reminder that hunting is a sport of inches.

Drilled squarely in the center of the branch is a bullet hole from a flintlock rifle. The hole represents an encounter with one of the biggest bucks I've ever seen while hunting. Each time I take the stick from its spot atop the refrigerator, I relive the hunt, the shot and the sight of that heavy-racked buck trotting off, headed for parts unknown. The small portion of sapling, containing a clean, round hole tinged in gray from the lead ball, is important to me.

The branch reminds me that hunting is more than just the sum of our successes; that trophies are not just

mounted heads or filled tags. Hunting is the extent of our experiences, interacting with nature and becoming part of a whole larger than ourselves where we neither control nor dominate. The outcome is the result of our preparation and planning coinciding with the lives and instincts of other creatures.

As deer hunters, we watch intently for the movement that signals the coming of the buck we expect to see. When long minutes turn to hours and the day is winding down, our expectations are lowered. The buck needn't be so big and the antlers can now be less than the trophies seen in calendar photos.

We begin to accept the worst; nothing will pass this way today. Then without the warning or fanfare that such an event deserves, a deer materializes. Looking as if it has always been there, it fits into the surrounding landscape like



a long lost piece of a puzzle. The deer by itself is enough to drain the breath from your lungs. But now that your eyes see the “horns,” there is no regaining the breath you’ve lost.

You try to react, but it’s over and the deer is gone. You stare hard at the spot where the deer once stood; a spot that for a brief second held so much hope. Everything now seems different. At the same time there are both more and less possibilities. As the buck proved, in hunting, anything can happen.

It happens in all hunting. A turkey appears suddenly, putts and retreats, only to live on in our memories. Grouse hunters approach likely looking cover, ready, knowing what they must do at the first sounds of a flush. And yet, at the flush, they are left staring at a small hole among the branches through which the bird has disappeared forever from sight, but not from memory.

In the beginning, days afield are measured in terms of game seen, shots

taken and tags filled. In time, many hunters reach an understanding about what it means to be successful. As the years pass and the hunter matures, new measures of the hunt develop.

Shafts of sunlight, filtering down through the forest’s canopy, lighting up a distant hillside, take the place of game sighted. Encountering a red fox hunting mice in a hayfield or a goshawk cruising the timber in search of red squirrels can more than make up for shots not taken. And finally, tags left unfilled are faced without regret as long as friends and young hunters return safe and happy from the day’s hunt.

Only in one’s dreams does every buck fall before the hunter’s gun; every turkey answers the call with resounding double gobbles and each grouse takes wing from the grapevines only to thud on the autumn leaves after the shot.

Watching a successful grouse hunter, I often think that it may be the moments just after the kill that are both the happiest and saddest. As a hunter reaches for a fallen bird there is always a mixture of emotions. Success is blended with awe. The love for the bird as it once was is not easily replaced by the stirring of success. I’ve never seen a grouse hunter pick up a fallen bird who didn’t smooth the feathers encircling the neck, running a hand, scratched and bleeding from the push through the thickets that grouse call home, over the crown of the head and down the back with a gentle touch.

I never set out to be a hunter, but in the end I can think of nothing better to be. Yes, I have other interests. I enjoy fishing, hiking and skiing. But, in reality, I do not consider myself a fisherman, a hiker nor a skier. I’m a hunter.

