

The De



What happens when a Highlands-dwelling, latte-swilling, self-described liberal elitist who's never fired a gun at a living creature – and thinks poorly of those who have – is persuaded to try deer hunting in Kentucky? He ends up with a pair of antlers on his wall.



*By Zach Everson
Photos by John Nation*

er slayer

“Shoot him again! What are you waiting for?!?”
“You never taught me how to reload!”

Jon Gassett reaches over the .257 Roberts, his rifle I’m borrowing, and chambers another round. About a minute earlier, the first bullet I’d ever fired at a living creature — done without hesitation — ripped across a 125-yard field and tore into the low chest of a 170-pound, eight-point buck who’d emerged from a few rows of corn and lowered his head to graze. The shot sounded like a balloon popping. The deer’s legs kicked up, evidence that he was wounded, and he darted to my left. Now, he is standing in tall grass, back hunched up, about 85 yards from the old tobacco barn I’m shooting from.

“Shoot him again!” Tim Farmer hollers a second time.

Once Farmer points out the deer to me, I can see him with my naked eye but not through the scope. Close tree branches are in the way, and in the excitement, I am pressing my eye too close to the scope, blurring my view. Then I spot him. The high grass obscures the area just above his left leg but below his center body mass, where his vitals — heart and lungs — are. My target. I aim the gun at his broadside, then move it down to where I suspect the sweet spot is. I tick off how to fire a rifle, steps I’d learned earlier in the afternoon:

1. Aim at the target.
2. Take a deep breath.
3. Expel the breath halfway.
4. Unlock the safety.

I run through them again, steadying myself for the final one:

5. Slowly squeeze the trigger.

Jon Gassett is the commissioner of the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, the state's hunting and fishing chief. His knowledge of the outdoors is both academic — Ph.D. in biology — and empirical: He's been hunting since he went out for squirrel at age six. Tim Farmer hosts KET's *Kentucky Afield*, in its 59th year as the nation's longest continuously running outdoors TV show, which Fish and Wildlife produces. Farmer's probably the state's second-best-known living sportsman after Animal Planet's "The Turtleman," who got his start on *Kentucky Afield*. But with the handsome looks you'd expect from a Marine Corps veteran now on TV, the ladies, they probably prefer Farmer to "The Turtleman." Also with us is Nathan Sangster, a videographer and editor for *Kentucky Afield*. He's recording all of this.

And me? I'm a Boston-born, Highlands-dwelling, ACLU-belonging, latte-swilling, Obama-supporting, Mac-using, truffled cheese-eating liberal elitist. Stereotypes don't invent themselves. While I'm a decent shot (a skill I was surprised to discover I possessed on my rare visits to shooting ranges), I mostly honed the talent through Duck Hunt and Operation Wolf on the original Nintendo, not time in a tree stand. I've fired a real gun fewer than a dozen times in my life and, until recently, never at a living creature. I'm no vegetarian; the Blind Pig's wait staff can testify to that. Before working on this story, I couldn't fathom taking pleasure in killing something and had little problem judging those who do.

Gassett, Farmer, a wounded 185-pound deer (yes, his estimated weight increased as time passed) and I are at Licking River Outfitters in November in Sunrise, Ky., 14 miles north of Cynthiana and about two hours east of Louisville. Licking River is a nonprofit that takes people with disabilities, wounded soldiers, kids and the occasional writer hunting. Gassett's parents, Robin and Ellen, manage its 600 acres, whose feeders and rows of corn attract wild, free-range deer and turkey. Wooden huts with space heaters, strategically placed tree stands (one with a wheelchair-friendly elevator), and a 150-year-old barn with tobacco leaves hanging from its rafters to mask the scent of humans facilitate shooting these animals. To ensure his schedule matches that of the 14 automated feeders that attract deer to his land, Robin doesn't roll back his watch to acknowledge the end of daylight-savings time until deer season ends.

Robin and Ellen moved here from Georgia, less to be close to their son than because of Kentucky's abundance of cheaper land and bigger deer. Last year, the nonprofit cost the Gassetts \$30,000 to operate. They received \$6,000 in donations, and the balance came out of their pockets. Since 2004, they've hosted for free any child, wounded soldier or person with a disability or terminal illness who wants to hunt deer or turkey. After nightfall (when it's illegal to hunt) and between morning and afternoon hunts, guests share hearty communal meals the Gassetts prepare in a compound decked out with tools and animal trophies. During my visit, breakfast is eggs, thick slabs of bacon and hash browns; dinner is chili. A couple of bunkrooms to the side of the main space provide a cozy place to crash.

So how did a leftist greenhorn wind up hunting with two accomplished outdoorsmen at the Garden of Deerden, sporting a hunter-orange hat and a similarly colored vest over new camouflage coveralls? (The law mandates the orange; the camo was to look authentic for TV.) As is often the case for a young buck such as myself, it came down to a woman. And food.

My wife Margaret is an assistant attorney general of Kentucky and the counsel for Fish and Wildlife Resources. "Hunters and anglers give more money to the environment than any other group," she's been telling me since we met and she learned of my anti-hunting stance. Manufacturers of guns, bullets and other hunting equipment are taxed 11 percent federally, with the proceeds allocated to state fish and wildlife agencies for conservation efforts. The amount received is contingent on the number of hunting licenses a state sells and its geographical size. In 2011, Kentucky, with its 300,000 licensed hunters, received almost \$7 million. Additionally, proceeds from hunting and fishing licenses and permits benefit environmental projects in the same way; combined, they brought the state \$24 million last year. (Fish and Wildlife receives no money from Kentucky's general fund.)

I've learned that many animals being hunted, including deer, need to be culled lest they destroy their habitat and disseminate their population, eat your CSA's organic crops or smash through the windshield of your new Prius. To ensure hunters don't overkill, most animals can only be hunted at specific times of the year (spring turkey, which opens on April 15, is the next popular season). And strict kill limits exist. For deer, it's usually one buck a year, while the number of doe depends on the part of the state. Game wardens enforce these laws.

My resident hunting license cost \$20, the deer permit \$30. I borrowed a gun, so the only other costs I incurred were \$18 for the orange vest and hat, \$50 for the camouflage coveralls and \$81.60 for bottles of Basil Hayden's and Woodford Reserve to give to the Gassetts as gifts. Buying two documents and answering 15 easy true-or-false questions (question No. 2: "A hunter should always identify the target visually and never shoot at sound or unidentified movement") for my one-year hunter education-exemption permit were the only legal requirements to being able to hunt. I accomplished all of it online.

After being with Margaret for six years, somehow I had the idea of writing an article about the trauma of trying to kill an animal for the first time, while also including hunting basics and exploring how outdoorsmen support conservation. Then, after Margaret witnessed my prowess skeet shooting while on vacation in Montana last summer, she was less enthusiastic about this assignment, realizing I may in fact be able to hit a deer and unsure if I could handle said trauma. (She believed an experience with me and a dying bird in our driveway testified I could not.) Her parting advice was more practical than existential, though: Any instruction to douse myself in deer urine to mask my scent was likely a prank.

As for the food? I love eating game, but it's illegal to buy wild game meat from a hunter, because historically, market hunting — the unregulated taking of wildlife for consumption and sale by private individuals — has led to a lot of wildlife atrocities. Deer, turkey and waterfowl, among other animals, were all almost market-hunted out of existence. "I think in the 1920s there were fewer than 1,000 deer left in the state," Gassett says.

So if you want to know that the game you're eating is fresh, wild and organic, you can't just know a hunter. You must be a hunter.

“He hit him both times,” Farmer says after I squeeze the trigger a second time. I rise from my crouch behind the hay bales I’ve been using to steady my rifle, and I look out the tobacco barn’s entrance, an opening big enough to drive a truck through (which we did, not wanting to get rained on). The deer is gone. The .257 Roberts’ recoil is minimal, but it’s enough to have prevented me from seeing which way the deer ran. By now, the late-afternoon sun that’d finally broken through after three days of rain is disappearing, and I have no idea where the buck is. *Louisville Magazine’s* likely to get hit with complaint letters about this assignment as is; it’ll be a barrage if it’s all for nothing and my hunt ends like the Pine Barrens episode of *The Sopranos*. For the meat, the trophy, the story: I need closure. I need a carcass.

Gassett and Farmer head to where the deer had been eating grass when I took my first shot. “Why not go where I shot him the second time?” I ask. “It’ll save time and, as he was at the far left of my vantage point, it’ll be an easier spot to find — just head to the tall grass and look back at the barn to where the hay bales barely come into view.” They don’t answer, and I remember that I don’t know what the hell I’m doing, so I shut up. We slosh the 125 yards through the killing field, spread out below the barn. Farmer sees strands of fur. Gassett spots blood. I look behind me, over the barn, and see the sunlight fading in the gray sky.

With my first shot’s accuracy confirmed, we trudge toward the high grass, following the approximate path the deer must’ve taken. *What was going through his mind?* I wonder as we search for hoof prints. *Did he have any idea what happened? Was he in pain?* (Actually, later, in hindsight, my liberal conscience will suggest that’s what I was thinking. Other than worrying about finding the deer, my only other true thought is that this slop is getting all over my pricey REI hiking boots and now I’ll have to have them cleaned when I get home.)

We reach the tall grass and fan out. I look back to the barn and try to put myself right where the deer was. I tramp a straight line through the grass, not knowing what I’m looking for but hoping to stumble upon a dead deer. What I do see is fine, white, hair-like pollen. Pollen? “Hey, Tim,” I say. “What’s this?” He comes over and confirms my suspicion: It’s deer fur. We yell this information to Gassett, who’s heading toward the woods. Within a minute, Gassett shouts back: “Found him.” The buck dropped dead about 20 yards from where he’d stood when I squeezed the trigger that second time.

I hurry toward my buck, but Farmer stops me. Is he about to prep me for some bizarre hunting ritual, like covering myself in the deer’s blood or eating deer heart? No, he just wants to let Sangster, the cameraman, set up to capture my reaction. Gassett and Farmer huddle over the deer and talk to the camera while I remain on the edge of the woods. Once called, I walk through the branches to where the cameraman’s bright light illuminates the deer. The sun has set, and I follow a path not too different from what my deer took. My sole thought is: I killed that. Farmer recaps my shots for the camera. The second one pierced both of the deer’s lungs. Perfect.

“It’s wet out; it’s been raining all day,” Farmer says. “The tracking would have been very difficult on a night like tonight.”

“Yeah.” My one-syllable response seeps with relief.

Before working on this story, I couldn’t fathom taking pleasure in killing something and had little problem judging those who do.



Conflict of interests? The writer as sheltered liberal and rugged outdoorsman.



PHOTO BY ZACH EVERSON

The time from first shot to death was about two minutes. It was more humane than what you'll find by searching "deer slaughter" on YouTube. I feel no remorse, no sadness. The epiphany I'd hoped for — about hunting and the sacrifice the animal made so I can eat and man's place in the universe and all that crap I read about in those pricey college English literature classes — never materializes.

All I feel is pride.

Heading to the barn and Gassett's truck, which we'll use to haul away my deer, I make two phone calls. The first is to my in-laws. Margaret's dad, a Fox News-watching retired Green Beret from Morgantown, W.Va., had been talking about my upcoming hunt ever since I first mentioned it. The only other times I can recall phoning them without Margaret on the line were when I asked for their blessings to propose and to tell them about the birth of our daughter. Their excitement during this conversation almost equals the other two.

My folks up in the Boston area get the second call. My dad, a Ph.D. physicist who's fresh off marching with the Pipefitters' Local 537 at Occupy Boston, answers.

"You shot a deer?"

"I didn't go hunting not to kill a deer."

"I didn't think you'd do it."

But I did do it. And now I have a 195-pound carcass to tend to.

Striking the proper pose with your new trophy is more complicated than killing it in the first place:

1. Kneel behind your kill.
2. Hold the head up by the antlers.
3. Use only your fingertips to lift the horns, as wrapping your whole hand around them will obscure the trophy.
4. Hold the deer's head to the side, so that the solid grass or sky serves as the backdrop rather than your camouflage, which (again) would obscure the deer's antlers.
5. Push the deer's head closer to the camera so it looks bigger.

I suspect these instructions aren't much different from what a director yells at the male talent during a porn shoot. I also now understand why hunters obsessed with collecting big antlers are said to be connoisseurs of horn porn.

Field dressing the carcass after you're done with your vanity photo is a bit more complicated. A young guy assisting Robin pokes a contraption that looks like a coat hanger for a size-72 blazer through the deer's hind legs; then a tractor scoop lifts the upside-down body. Robin slits open the deer's underside and pulls out the organs, plopping them into a metal bucket. I'd been warned about the smell. It isn't pleasant but also isn't as foul as when the bag in my daughter's Diaper Genie II Elite Advanced Diaper Disposal System ripped after not being emptied for seven days.

They ignore my offers to help. The temperature is in the 30s, and I suspect nobody wants the process to take any longer than necessary. Gutted, the carcass is in the tractor's scoop, raised off the ground to prevent coyotes from eating it. I call in my kill to Fish and Wildlife Resources, a requirement for every hunter so the department can keep tabs on the wildlife population. That call to record the animal, and noting its gender and the county where it died on the back of my permit, are the only post-kill legal requirements. Apparently the state will take care of notifying the deer's next-of-kin.

Then we do what men do: drink beer while swapping sto-

ries. Two Green Berets have been on a three-day hunt at Licking River through the Wounded Warrior Project. Both had been in Afghanistan, where a BB-packed grenade tore up one guy. The other one still has an AK-47 round lodged in his head. I'm going to repeat that: One still has an AK-47 round lodged in his head. He's been shooting a crossbow, as his doctors are afraid that a gun's recoil might do more damage. Both plan on staying in the military until they qualify for retirement. While not as extreme, the other four or five people — we were drinking, and I didn't take attendance — all seem to have a Manly Story in them. What do I share? Sometimes, after I get my hay fever allergy shots, I wake up in the middle of the night with itchy shoulders.

The next day, Gassett and Farmer continue dressing my deer. They hang it again from the tractor's scoop, and the two of them carve the carcass into about a dozen large slabs. After a lunch break, they cut the meat and grind some of it with an electric grinder that you'd find at any store that sells small kitchen appliances, package it into about a dozen one-gallon bags and label the cuts (ground, roast, sirloin, backstrap, tenderloin). It takes the two experienced hunters about three hours to turn the 210-pound buck into about 70 pounds of meat. They give me two large trash bags: one for all of the meat, the other for the severed head, which Gassett disconnects from the body with a few forceful twists. Neither bullet is in the carcass.

Back in Frankfort, after Gassett drops me off at my car, instinct takes over and I pull into Starbucks. Stereotypes don't invent themselves. The only customer who seems uncomfortable that I'm wearing camouflage coveralls is me. With a \$5 latte (iced venti, skim) in hand, *This American Life* podcast playing, the drive west on I-64 isn't much different than usual — except for my repeated looks at the two garbage bags on the floor of my Jeep's backseat.

Will I hunt again? Family and friends have asked me that more than anything else since my trip. (Second most-asked question: Are you going to start watching Fox News?)

It's unlikely I'll be up in a tree stand when the 2012 deer season for modern firearms opens on the second Saturday of November. But 12 ounces of frozen ground venison imported from New Zealand costs \$7.99 at Whole Foods; on this hunt, 70 pounds of deer meat, including choicer cuts, came to \$50, the cost of my license and permit. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg has taken to only eating meat from animals he's killed himself. I can't devote that much time to affordable organic dining, but when I need to replenish my deep freezer's venison supply, probably in a year or two, I'll head to the woods.

Visiting Kentucky during the holidays, my parents balk when I tell them my kill is on the menu. But when I describe it as bacon-wrapped organic venison steaks cooked in a red wine and red currant jelly reduction (Farmer's recipe), they are willing to try it. It receives rave reviews.

As for the whitened skull and antlers fastened to a slab of old gray barn wood now hanging on my kitchen wall? Called a European-style mount, it cost \$175 and took about six weeks for a Louisville taxidermist, Clearwater Sporting Goods, to finish. Upon seeing it, my mom, a tear in her eye, gives me a giant hug while my dad puts his arm around my shoulders and tells me how I've brought honor to the family.

Their enjoying the meal is true anyway. ■