

Monarch of the Pines

by Scott Rollins

Virginia Outdoor Writers Association, Inc.

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For as long as I can remember, I've been in love with hunting. From the time when I was just a little boy standing beside my father hunting deer, to wading out in a waist deep swamp gunning for ducks as a teenager. Even if all I took home that day was a pocketful of dirt and some scratches, I loved being out there in the wild.

Many of my friends enjoy hunting or fishing, but I would say for me it's an obsession. I enjoy spending hours in the woods or out in the fields chasing whatever quarry is in season. But there is one experience that will never fade from my mind. I remember it as if it happened a few hours ago.

I was sitting in a patch of open pines on a drab foggy morning. A dim light was just starting to peek through the treetops. There I sat motionless, quiet as the breeze. My eyes were open wide; constantly scanning the woods around me. My ears were alert to the slightest murmur. It was early black powder season. I was waiting for a decent buck to pass by in hopes of beating my father to the first bag of the season. As the sun attempted to shine through the clouds, the pines around

me began to come to life. Birds were fluttering from branch to branch, serenading me in their flights. Squirrels were scurrying along the forest floor and there were hoots from an owl as he settled in for his daytime slumber. The fog rolled through the woods, and it was truly heaven on earth.

As dawn broke, a slight drizzle came down and I vividly remember the branch above my head dripping water directly on my nose. I didn't bother wiping it away for fear my eyes would not be the only eyes scanning for movement. I settled comfortably into my stand. Somewhere deep in the pines I could hear the sharp bark of a fox as he searched for his breakfast. It was at that moment that I heard a branch break on the wooded floor. I searched every inch of the woods around me. I heard another faint snap. I looked high and low, but the pines gave me no help in finding the source. I decided to blow a short note on the grunt call located around my neck. Within a split second, there was a crash. The specter had revealed himself. I could clearly see the buck coming towards me as he trotted down the winding creek. My heart began to race, and my

senses became almost superhumanly acute.

I watched as my "decent" buck turned into a wall of tines. His eyes were glaring as he made his way to confront his unseen adversary. His ears were constantly swiveling, hoping to pinpoint this mystery buck's location. He stood there in an opening, his head held high; shoulders locked firm. When he saw there was no real contender, almost in a disappointed fashion, he lowered his head and continued to walk along the creek. Slowly I raised the rifle and trained the crosshairs behind his front shoulder. I eased the hammer back. My palms were sweaty and my heart thudded against my chest. Time seemed to stand still. All of my focus was on him. I slowed my breathing, tightened my grip, and squeezed the trigger. The woods instantly became silent. No birds were singing, no squirrels dancing; just the echo from my shot and the rain pitter pattering on my clothes. The monarch of the woods had fallen where he stood.

As the world around me returned to normal, I quickly climbed down from my perch and became as giddy as a boy on his first day of school. I

had finally taken that trophy buck that so many hunters wait years for the opportunity to shoot. There he lay at my feet in all his glory. All I could do was smile as I looked over his rack. I ran my fingers through his coarse fur. He was about as mature as they come with his thick, heavy tines and a few broken point tips.

That buck now hangs above my bed. To this day I catch myself staring at it; replaying the scene in my head. I can still hear the breeze whispering in the pines and the rain softly falling and that old king as he strolled along his domain.



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