



ERICA DARDEN

A weekend to *remember*

By Elina Garrison

Under the glowing light of the check station, young hunters swarmed like moths with bright orange wings, reaching into a hat that held their lucky number – lucky hunting spot number that is. It was the first morning of the annual supervised youth hunt at Camp Blanding Wildlife Management Area (WMA). Each youth picked a number that corresponded to an area he or she would share with a parent or grandparent for a day of hunting. They listened with serious attention to the rules and pored over the maps with their flashlights in the early morning darkness. You could feel the anticipation in the air, but it was the quiet kind, characteristic of people who



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Kolby Aton proudly holds the buck he took during the FWC's supervised youth hunt.

spend a lot of time in the woods. Even the birds weren't awake yet, so naturally, talking was done with hushed voices.

About an hour before sunrise, the place came alive as the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) pickup trucks fired up, and the hunters began piling their tree stands, blinds and coolers into the back of the trucks. FWC employees and volunteers then drove everyone to their assigned hunting spots. Each hunter and supervising adult had more than 250 acres of woods to themselves. This was done for safety of the hunters and to ensure everyone could enjoy a day of undisturbed solitude.

The first excited, "we got one!" call came in mid-morning. We followed 10-year-old Laci Henry and her stepfather, Ricky Kite, down a small trail to a creek where Laci had set up her blind. Along the way, Laci demonstrated her "woods smarts" by pointing out scrapes and tracks. When we came upon the young buck, taken with a perfect shot that "dropped him where he stood," Laci was beaming with pride.



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Telling stories back at the check station was part of the experience, and avid hunter Curtis Parker had many tales to tell.

As the day went on, more deer were brought in and the tales of the day's hunt flowed around the check station. There were big bucks with handsome antlers accompanied by proud hunters ready for handshakes

and congratulatory pats on the back. A yearling doe was brought in, and while we stood around congratulating the young boy, he asked his dad, "Could we please get her head mounted?"

It would be perhaps the smallest, most humble deer ever presented to any taxidermist, but that's a wonderful thing about kids; they often see things the way they are, not the way they are told to see them. The doe was his first deer, his trophy, and therefore, it belonged on his bedroom wall. (Antlerless deer may be taken during the supervised youth hunt.)

The stories didn't stop with just those who had taken a deer. Regardless of their luck, kids returned from the woods with that bright-eyed and rosy-cheeked look that told the tale of a day spent outside in the sun and wind. One boy boasted he had seen "all kinds of monster bucks." When asked if he shot any of those monster bucks, he paused for second and replied,



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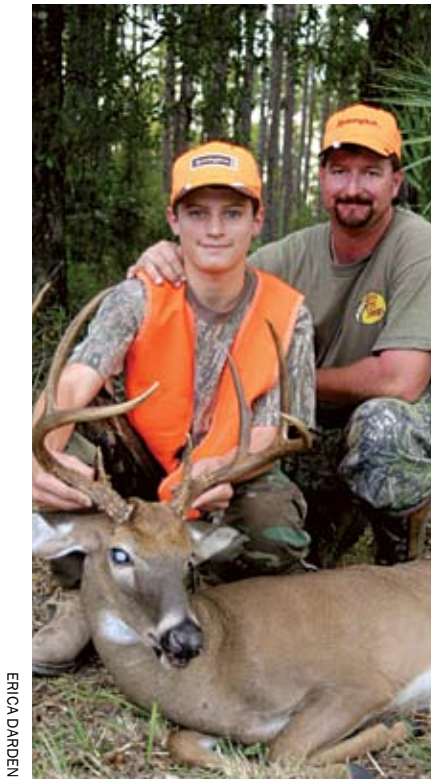
Laci Henry and her stepfather, Ricky Kite, show off Laci's first deer.

“Well, no, they were all running away,” and then continued on with the story about the monster bucks lurking behind pine trees. Maybe he didn’t come out of the woods with a deer, but he sure came out with a story worth sharing.

There were stories of armadillos that made leaves rustle, causing little hearts to race, and of flocks of turkeys that paraded around, as if knowing they were safe for the day. We heard stories of deer that were seen moving through the woods without coming close enough and of deer that did, but due to shaky hands, were spared.

One little boy missed two, or it may have been three deer (but who’s counting?) and someone suggested perhaps he had what is known as “buck fever.” He thought about it for a while and agreed, that was it – buck fever all right! The fever started when a little doe came into his view. He shot, the doe stood for a second and, as the dust behind her settled, took off running. The boy came down the tree stand to look for signs he had hit the deer when, suddenly, another deer, this time a buck, appeared behind the trees. Well, that caused the fever to rise and the shaking to start. It wasn’t just his hands that were shaking, as he demonstrated; his arms were shaking and his legs were shaking so much he looked like a pint-sized Elvis in camouflage.

And the little boy who had seen the “monster bucks” wasn’t just telling tall tales. About an hour before sundown, news of “the big buck” started buzzing around the check station. A little while later, 14-year-old Michael Hunnewell and his father, George, brought an 8-point buck to the check station and the place went wild. Michael’s little sister was running around so fast all we saw of her was a blond blur. All around, cameras were going



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Hunting partners Michael and his father George Hunnewell.

off and congratulations were showering down.

It wasn’t Michael’s first deer, in fact, he already had bagged a deer on Joe Budd WMA in 2003 that made the Florida Buck Registry. But this was a special buck and his whole family was there to share the excitement. When the jubilation finally settled down a bit, we asked Michael about his hunt. He told us he had first seen a spike buck and a doe. He waited for one of them to turn broadside to him so he could take a shot, but both had walked off without giving him an opportunity. He felt disappointed and frustrated, but didn’t want to take the shot unless it was a good one.

Over lunch, his mother reminded him just to stay patient and something else would come along. And, as usual, Mom was right. Just before the hunt ended, Michael saw huge antlers sticking out of the brush and his heart jumped at the sight.

As I talked with Michael and his family, it was clear that spending time outdoors as a family was an important part of their everyday life. That sentiment was a common thread weaving through the stories of other parents and grandparents accompanying the youths at the hunt. The parents and grandparents taught the essential outdoors skills by example and simply giving the youth the opportunity to explore, to observe and learn from nature. All of us who treasure time we spend with nature, have the responsibility of sharing and teaching about that treasure to youths.

Speaking of treasures, as darkness fell on Sunday evening and the weekend hunt was coming to an end, I overheard George Hunnewell, standing next to Michael, say to another hunter “I am very, very proud of my son.”

I can’t think of a better gift than those few words that a father could give to a 14-year-old boy.

By the end of the two-day hunt, 11 boys and one girl harvested deer. They are: Floyd Abram II, Luke Allen, Kolby Aton, Sam Beah, Grant Bostick, Donny Brantley, Laci Henry, Michael Hunnewell, Nathan Lain, Eli Patterson, Garrett Poole and Garrett Thorton. **FW**

Supervised youth hunts for ages 8-15

The FWC currently offers four supervised youth hunts every year; two at Camp Blanding WMA and two at Andrews WMA. To participate, youths must be between the ages of 8 and 15 and must be accompanied by an adult 18 years or older. For more information on how to apply for FWC supervised youth hunts, visit MyFWC.com/hunting and click on “Quota Hunt Permit Information.”