

Encounters with White-Tailed Deer

by Alex Nolan

Early one dry, white November morning I went down to the Ravines with the intent of finally seeing for myself where they began.

The Ravines are a steep, stream-carved series of gashes clothed in an oak, maple, and red pine forest. It is slowly evolving into an aspen one. The oaks will feed the squirrels and chipmunks, the Cynipids and Gypsy moths, and die. The maples will provide shade without suffering the irritating job of providing sap for pancake enthusiasts. The red pines will continue to produce a new whorl of branches year after year. But the aspen, being the only of these trees that can tolerate full shade, will eventually claim the forest for himself. His conquest over the other deciduous trees is evidenced by the many rotting maple and oak.

Like the trickling waters I meandered down the worn path to the bottom of the Ravines, a bed of brown leaves chuffing underfoot. Throwing caution to the breeze, I traipsed over and under fallen trees in a southerly direction. My breath trailed behind me in gouts of steam. A generous population of viny thorned plants had an easy time frustrating my travels; one of them ended up scoring a long red line along the back of my left hand that quickly beaded with blood. I ripped him up by his roots. A few times I straddled the brook like the Colossus of Rhodes and looked upstream. I defied the water to evade my probing. At many points the stream had become clogged by wads of leaves and sticks, but she was bent on getting the hell out of there before winter wrapped his icy fingers around her neck and paralyzed her. She had neither time nor patience for traffic jams.

It is unusual to find other humans in the Ravines. Their many splendors go mostly unnoticed by my peers. My peers will never know the wonder of acorn hunting. They will never feel the

excitement of uncovering the spent exoskeleton of a cicada, shed in a long-ago spurt of ecdysis. They will never sketch an autumn scene that will live suspended for only a few hours before it turns brown and falls to the forest floor. They will never discover or even wonder about the source of the Ravine streams. I pity them.

I was scrambling over a log covered in shelf fungus when I heard someone crashing through the leaves above me and to my left. As I said, finding other *Homo sapiens* in the Ravines is unusual, and the ones that I do find are normally smoking pot or surveying the land for an architecture course. There are more *Odocoileus virginianus* down there than humans, and that was exactly whom I found.

She burst away from me in a screen of kicked-up leaves, white flag whipping. With perfect grace the doe wove through the oaks. She rose above me, clearing a good four yards with every bound, up and up, steeper and steeper, until she was at the shelf, then gone in a brown puff of aspen leaves. For a fleeting instant my eyes and hers connected, and I knew that this ruminant and I were the same. We were each borrowing the Ravines: she to sustain her life and I to fulfill mine. Move swift, sister.

I stood there trying to hold on to that feeling of oneness. It faded without a struggle.

I changed course and began climbing up the steep embankment to the place where she had cleared the Ravines, hoping to catch another sight of her. After much stumbling I made it over and stood there. My heart was thudding from exertion and my breath hung around me in a steamy cloud. No sight of her. Even her hoof prints were invisible. A pair of gnarled trees sat perched nearby. I made short, furious work of climbing halfway up them and sat on a branch for a few minutes. I was hoping for one glimpse, but she had disappeared into the deeper forest, and in her place was perfect silence.

After a while I heard a Hairy woodpecker rap on a dead tree trunk. I suppose that the doe did too.

In the gray evening I went back down and brought a book to occupy me. The sunset was twenty minutes away and it would remain light enough to read for almost an hour.

I followed the stream northwest this time, through a wide patch of grasses. Someone had laid a small field of steppingstones along the stream for a distance. I imagine that they did that to reduce erosion, or perhaps to bully the water to keep at her given course. The result has been a perpetually flooded meadow of ankle-spraining rocks hidden beneath a carpet of coarse forest grass. I traversed the treacherous rocks and crawled along a slope that threatened to roll me into the stream. I found solid, rock-free ground after I cleared it.

There is a cradle of fallen maple and oak beyond the rock field. The thickest log lies perfectly perpendicular to the stream and sits a good meter over it. It is a recent death, for the splintered wood at the base is still sharp and white, and most of the leaves, brown though they are, remain affixed to the branches. It abided my weight as I sat cross-legged over the whispering stream, facing south. I extracted my book and read.

The sun was easily below the horizon and the formerly gray sky had become the cold blue of winter shadows when I heard someone stepping through the grassy rock field. It was just light enough to distinguish the tree trunks from the dun slopes whence they grow. Everything had become bluish. The usual forest sounds- shivering branches, bowing grass, and the occasional pat-pat of falling leaves- were dampened with the onset of night. I looked up, prepared to greet another human.

Deer sound deceptively human when they walk. They take one step at a time and stop frequently. It sounds like the careful navigation of someone who doesn't want to disturb the leaves. I suppose this is the cause of so many hunting incidents that end in a human colliding with a bullet.

He came out of the grass and paused. Maybe he was tasting the air. Probably he was listening for eavesdroppers like me. He came to the head of my tree, standing my full height, and stopped, flag ticking. He nuzzled the ground. I sat stock-still and did not breathe; I was afraid he might hear me.

I refer to it as he even though I could not tell which sex it was. It was too dark to see any antlers so I have no empirical basis to prove my suspicions. Let me only say that it behaved like a male and hence deserves the label.

He had just cleared my tree when two smaller deer emerged from the grass. They moved one at a time: the leader took seven or eight steps, then the second took an equal number of steps, and finally the last. It went on like this until the first- I'm sure it was a male- climbed high enough to clear the slope and disappear over the lip of the Ravines. The two others hastened to follow, abandoning their careful stop and go system. They would have been walking just along the dirt trail that leads into the woods. If I were up there on the path, they would have come within an arms length of me. They vanished behind the slope shelf, footfalls retreating into memory.

I sat for a while in wonder.

I slid off the log and followed the river back to the sloping trail. I climbed up the embankment to the shelf and looked north. I had made a lot of noise on my way up and the deer had made themselves scarce. I went a short way and knelt at the earth where they had just passed. Again I

found no hoof prints, but a splash of oak leaves had spilled onto the compacted earth of the trail, evidence of their passage. I ran my fingers over the dirt, trying to feel what they might have felt as they stepped across it.

For a moment I felt that oneness again, much stronger this time. Out of the earth from which I ultimately acquire my own sustenance do the deer make their living. From the same chemical reaction of water, carbon dioxide, and sunlight are they nourished as I am. The sunlight that fuels this process had become too weak to sustain it, and the deer were moving to accommodate their many-chambered stomachs. They are some of the last true pragmatists around.

I wondered if the ruminants lay hidden in the underbrush, watching me kneel on their trail. I looked out across the forest of maple, red pine, oak, and aspen, and knew that they were.