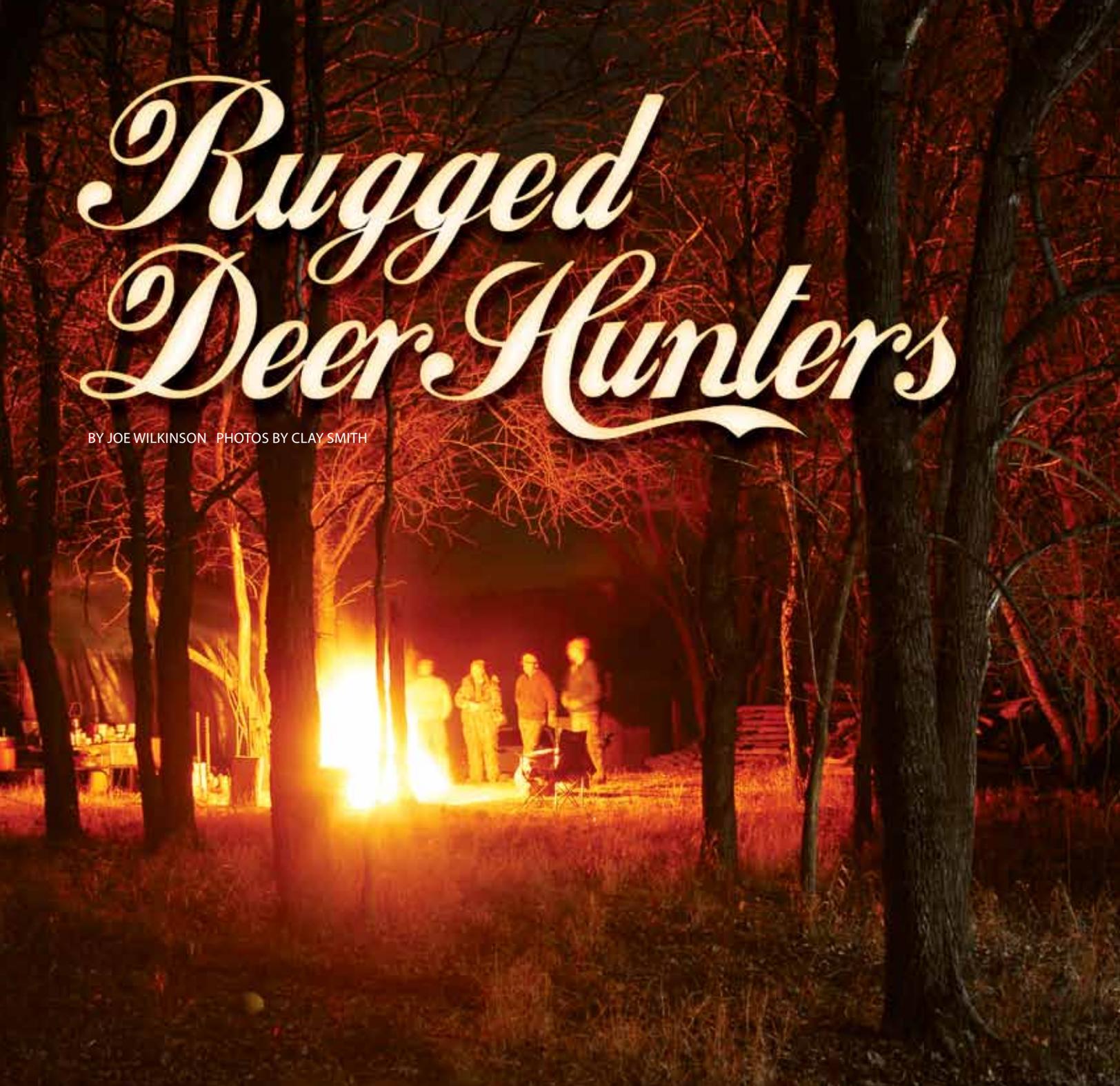


# Rugged Deer Hunters

BY JOE WILKINSON PHOTOS BY CLAY SMITH



**F**acing the roaring bonfire, it was warm...almost hot. With a pit 7-feet wide, the flames were waist high. Every 10 minutes or so, someone would set another block of wood, or maybe a pallet, into the flames. With eight of us circling the only heat source for miles, we traded stories and wondered about our prospects for the morning. The fire also provided the light on this night before opening day in southwest Iowa. This was Deer Camp and there were few frills.

Sweet potatoes wrapped in foil went into the coals. A camp tradition, they sparked a couple more stories across the fire pit. Snacks were passed around. A couple beers.

A few more stories. By then, the sweet potatoes were nearly cinders. Time to turn in. But there would be no ride back to town. No RV and kitchenette. No warm cabin or running water either. Just a big, drafty lean-to, a few feet from the fire. Did I mention there were few frills?

Want to hunt with Scott Young of Shenandoah? Better bring a winter-rated sleeping bag, maybe stuffed inside another one. It got down to zero that night. The lean-to, a tarp-wrapped teepee on a concrete grain bin base, would sleep seven that night; hunters, a couple cots, sleeping bags, ground covers; lying feet to the center like spokes on a wheel. "I've been out West, elk hunting.



A roaring fire provides light and heat as members of Scott Young's deer party swap tales and get ready for the next day's hunt. Based in a timber northwest of Shenandoah in Page County, the group hunts in three counties, taking advantage of generous antlerless tag allotments in southern Iowa. Cooking meals over campfire coals and sleeping in tents and a lean-to in the cold December air are part of the rustic deer camp life.

Camp was something like this; a big fire and one story after another; about past hunting seasons," observes Young. "We all can't afford to do that, though. They can't get out there. So we kind of do the same thing in Iowa."

Preparations start in advance of the first shotgun season on this wooded hillside, 12 miles northwest of Shenandoah. Everybody throws in \$25 for groceries, so the larder is stocked by the time they arrive. The lean-to was already in place when I pulled in late Friday afternoon. Young had the fire roaring by then. Wood is a cheap commodity; a by-product of his landscaping business. Chunked-up trees and pallets are dropped off during the year. It takes a lot of fuel to keep that bonfire roaring through the weekend and into next week.

To the north of camp, Jared McManis, also of Shenandoah, cuts limbs away from a treestand. A blocker will be positioned there in a few hours. McManis, Young's stepson, has hunted here for 10 years. About sunset, the kitchen went up—a large tarp serving as roof and one wall—to block the wind. A campstove sits on the wooden picnic table. Plastic coolers hold the weekend's food and beverages. No ice, though. In December, the insulation keeps everything from freezing. "We had eggs freeze once," remembers Young. "We learned. Now, the coolers keep it warm or cold, depending on the weather."

Through the evening, the cold-weather hunters

arrived. Brothers Doug and Darin Chambers arrived separately, ready for another December deer camp. "Most of us grew up and went to high school together. Now, we're maybe married and we don't see each other as much," says Darin, of Essex. "But we'll always see each other deer hunting. It's the people—my buddies—just us out hunting and hanging out."

Craig Franks, from Essex, does a lot of waterfowl hunting and bow hunting, too. But he wouldn't miss the nights sleeping on the ground and the day's hunt. "People—my own family—ask me why we do it," says Franks. "We're out here away from everybody. I don't have to go home. Nobody bothers me. It's fun, really."

The high mileage award each year goes to Gary Suntken. After getting off work Friday, he drives five hours from Cedar Rapids. It's back home for him. He and Young grew up nearby, in Corning. Suntken sometimes hunts part of the weekend with another group, but always works in a couple days at Deer Camp.

A last pass of the smoked turkey, another log on the fire and it was time to hit the sack. A couple hunters made use of the one-seat outhouse. To call it rustic would be a stretch. Others found trees in the dark. As the teepee-dwellers made final adjustments, the fire waned. "I bring a cot and make sure I get a good sleeping bag," says Suntken. "When you climb in, it's cold at first."



You just have to zip it up and you'll get warm. Then the snoring starts," he laughs.

Unsure of the space available—and snoring tolerance—I pitched my one-man tent a few yards away. I had never before slept in all my clothes, a blaze orange hunting parka and a stocking cap. I did that night—for about four hours. Gradually, the cold convinced me that “awake by the fire” would be better. The sound of snoring from the teepee told me I had made the right call, location-wise. A couple guys had gone to bed wearing earplugs, having learned from the past. But we were here for the hunt, not to rate the sleeping accommodations. And when the mercury is at zero, everybody's an early riser. No breakfast this morning, though. That would come later. A bottle of juice, a visit to the facilities and we were ready to roll.

As five of us walked north to the edge of the 80 acres for the first drive, we could just make out each other and the trees. The other three had gone south, away from us, to post up back near the gravel road. The hunters had drawn numbers the night before to determine who would sit and where. From the treestand in the corner, blockers dropped off as we worked west, just inside the trees. I stayed with Franks, 80 yards past where Young and his son, Clayton, were posted. This was the 13-year-old's first official Deer Camp weekend, camping and hunting with the big boys.

It didn't take long for a medium-racked buck to move out of the CRP strip and across the field. Crossing between us and the Youngs, Franks didn't have a safe shot. A few moments after I lost sight of it, a single blast sounded. Was Clayton's first deer on the ground? A couple more whitetails crossed from the other side, but there were no shots. At a set time, the blockers knew to switch their attention. That's when those gravel road blockers began walking toward us. But it was their blaze orange, not gray-brown fur that emerged; ending the “two-part” first drive.

As the last blockers assembled, they exchanged details. There was no buck for Clayton, but the next drive was taking shape. “Craig, you go sit by the big tree snag. Scott will come in on the road.” After years of hunting together, everybody knew which big tree snag it was, where Scott would walk in from and where his drive would end. We split up into four pairs and got to work. Half of us hiked across a pasture to the west, covering a fenceline and pond. The water offered two prospects: if a deer veered right, it offered a shot; to the left, it would be out of range.

However, the deer didn't want to cross back into the open. Pushed by the drivers, three came trotting through the brush. At the edge of the pasture, though, they doubled back. A couple more slipped back into the grass and brush of the ravines. A volley of shots let us know that



the drivers were benefiting. Walking out at the end of the drive, we came upon Clayton...standing over his 10-point buck. It was one that veered back into the brush instead of crossing the pasture. "I looked up and there was a big buck walking over there," about 50 yards away, recalls Clayton. "It started running, came right down over here (at us) around these trees." He and his dad shot at the same time, with Clayton getting credit for his first deer.

With a deer to hang and camp nearby, it was time for breakfast. No one leaves hungry from a meal in Deer Camp. As the coffee pot went on the coals of last night's bonfire, the hash browns and bacon went into the campstove frying pan. Next to the coffee, Darin Chambers of Dexter lays strips of locker-made bacon into a heavy skillet. We sampled that, while waiting for the eggs to fry.

"I cook a lot at home," says Darin, who smoked last night's turkey on the grill. "I like to experiment a little bit."

As Clayton basked in the glory of taking a nice buck—a little trash talking began over one of the dollar pools.

"No, you haven't shot the biggest buck yet," laughs Suntken. "Because he's still out there. I'm getting him after breakfast."

That's a key arguing point. Whoever shoots the

biggest weekend buck wins the pool. Clayton already won the other, taking the first "fork antlered" buck. And of course, the taker of the smallest deer serves the rest of the group Saturday night.

Clean up was a breeze. Into the fire with paper plates and cups and the dishes were done. Time for a road trip. Deer Camp itself might be a blast from the past, but we still needed internal combustion engines for the half-hour trip to Taylor County and the next farm.

The afternoon drives covered a lot more territory than the morning pushes—from blocks of CRP, wooded ravines and timber to pastures and streams. The deer cooperated, too. On this opening day of the first shotgun season, we could watch two or three—or eight or 10 deer—walk or slowly trot across the landscape; pushed by hunters a mile or two away. Crisscrossing the farm, the group ended the day with four more deer to take back to camp.

By nightfall, the open pit furnace was blazing again. The flames and a camp lantern helped light things up, as the hunters rehashed the day and made plans for Sunday. With it barely dark, there was plenty of time to plan their next meal, too. "As we get further into the weekend, there's a lot more time to cook," observes Young. "Once we get done hunting and get back, we'll have a beer or two. Then we have all night to cook."

Sometimes, that means a big pot of slow-cooking stew.



**LEFT:** Following the first two opening day drives, it's back to camp for coffee and breakfast—eggs, hash browns and bacon from a local locker. Drivers, like Jared McManis, sometimes move through head-high switchgrass, pushing whitetails to standers. **ABOVE:** Sometimes they get away. No one could shoot as this whitetail split the blockers on one of the last opening day drives in Taylor County. **RIGHT:** Doug Chambers and McManis team-drag their harvest back to camp.



Other times, they'll grill the inside loins from the deer they've hung that day. It's a bonus for not having to be anywhere at a certain time.

"You're away from TV and the telephone. There's no agenda. You're just enjoying yourself," underscores Doug Chambers. "It's time out here with friends, sitting at the campfire and telling stories. Same thing with the food. You can make hash browns, bacon and eggs over a stove, but it tastes better over a campfire."

The group continued sleeping under the stars through Monday night. A couple of hunters had to head back to work Monday. A friend of Young's, Dave Cheney, came out early in the week from Randolph. They took 14 deer back for processing. Another dozen were harvested in the other seasons. Most they processed themselves, with the locker doing some sausage and jerky. Another four or five went to the HUSH (Help Us Stop Hunger) program to feed the needy. Overall, another successful season in Deer Camp.

"It's the thrill of the hunt," concedes McManis. "You go out trying to get that trophy, but knowing you are probably not going to get one," yet Clayton gets a 10-point buck for his first deer.

It's the whole picture that keeps everybody coming back. "It's the comraderie, the people," offers McManis. "We get away from work for a couple days...and we eat pretty good, I'd say." 🍖