

Waiting for shooting light

By John Wootters

For me the most exciting time of any day of hunting comes just before day-break. I call it "waiting for shooting light". Dawn is only a hint of pink to the east, and it takes its own sweet time in arriving.

Meantime, in the darkness, I hunt with my ears. Tiny scratchings and scrapings and rustlings paint pictures in my brain, images of the night creatures hastening homeward before the burgeoning day shift catches them out.

The mind makes much of such noises. It can make a 10-point whitetail buck out of an armadillo's rustling in dead leaves, and a climbing 'coon can become a mountain lion exploring my tree. A sudden soft sweeping of wings must be – and is – the arrival of an owl on my limb. I can see only a shape a little darker than the darkness around us, but the bird's night vision must be able

me that I can see — a deer! The movement caught my eye, but the light is still not strong enough to see antlers, if any. The animal is very close, and I strain to make out the thick neck and shoulders of a buck. It's no use; instead, the gathering light reveals the slender body proportions of a doe.

But maybe there's a buck following her; it's way early for rutting activities, but maybe he's rushing the season, like the cardinal.

Wait! Another deer is coming behind the doe ... and still another!

And the last one is male! Now, antlers are materializing in the pale light and they look like – look like: spikes! The group is a mother doe and her six-month-old twin fawns, a little buck and his sister.

I grin them past, unsuspecting, shapes in the gray light of dawn. A glance through my rifle sights shows that I still have insufficient light to aim.

Seeing whitetails on the move makes waiting for the sun even harder, but I've done it on a hundred mornings. There are always things to help pass the time. I remember the astonishment on the face of a raccoon when he found a human sitting in the middle of his treetop highway.

And the mother bobcat and her two half-grown kittens that ran up within 10 feet of where I was sitting on the ground one morning.

to read my dog tags because it doesn't linger, sailing away with a soft sibilance like a sigh, seeking an unoccupied limb.

Now I notice that the coming day is prying at the fingers of darkness on the forest. I peer blindly into the dark, trying to see before I can. The suspense builds, but the stars are beginning to fade.

I think I almost can, but I'm rushing the unborn day. My dark-adapted eyes still cannot put substance to any of the shadows below.

Suddenly, from the highest twig of the tree, a male cardinal whistles a few bars of his territorial "sweet, sweet, sweet" song. It sounds oddly out of time in December and makes me smile. Is he rushing the mating season that's still five months away ... or recalling the pleasures of the past one, five months gone?

Either way, he's celebrating the new dawn and I welcome his cheerful contribution.

All at once, a surge of adrenaline tells

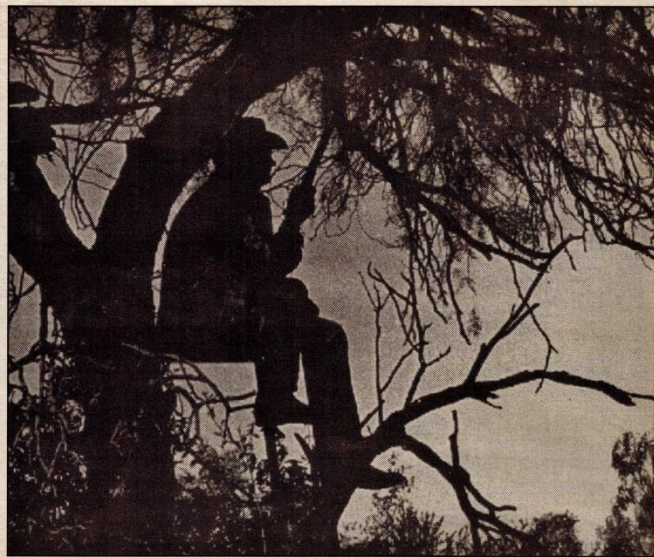
Always something new to see.

With infinite slowness the light is coming, and I notice that a subtle current of air is now moving on what has been an flat-calm morning, an almost imperceptible drift toward the southeast. The first rays of the rising sun advancing across the landscape are warming the air and producing thermals as the warmed air rises and draws still-cold air in to replace it. This is the mechanism that, on a cold morning, makes it seem always a little colder just before the sun appears.

Now more birds are waking and joining the dawn chorus; the non-migratory species – chickadees, titmice and a ladder-backed woodpecker chime in, and a couple of white-throated sparrows get busy turning over dead leaves beneath my oak.

The sun crawls high enough to touch the frost-tipped tops of the grass in the clearing I overlook. I can see trails in the grass where the three deer that passed under my perch pushed through it and knocked off the frost. Using binoculars, I can also see a couple of other trails, made by deer that crossed before I had light by which to see – or shoot. Of course, I picture them as heavy-antlered, mature bucks.

That fantasy will get me out of a warm sleeping bag again at four o'clock tomorrow morning, and bring me back to this chilly platform to watch and wait ... for shooting light.



John Wootters photo

Waiting for a new day, with all of its infinite possibilities. Folks who have never seen a sunrise in the woods can't even imagine what they're missing!