

# FIRST HUNT FOUNDATION'S CONNECTING HEROES & HUNTERS

My name is Drew Toigo, a former wildland firefighter who joined the Army in 2017. After four years at Fort Hood, Texas, and two deployments with 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment as an infantryman, I received a medical retirement and found myself wondering about my next step.

After some thought, I packed what little I had along with my new Labrador pup and moved to Bozeman, Montana, to pursue an equine science degree at Montana State University (MSU). I felt a strong pull to be there so I could bring hunting back to my family tree, which was lost with my great grandfather's passing.

Starting new at the age of 26 while surrounded by much younger students doesn't make it easy to find kindred spirits. I was on my own starting with the waterfowl opener, my first ever hunt. Opening day came and went with no ducks. So did every weekend after.

I shared my frustrations in the MSU Veterans' Center where a fellow veteran gave me the number for the Montana Wounded Warriors Foundation. I didn't meet their criteria since I was not yet a Montana resident. But like a hand reaching through the smoke when needed most, they directed me to Rich Cotte, a veteran who runs the First Hunt Foundation's Connecting Heroes & Hunters program.

By the weekend, Rich and I had talked a half-dozen times discussing potential plans—not for ducks but antlerless whitetail deer. Days later I found myself driving toward the Canadian border

Up north, a mere 90 miles below the Canadian border, where the weather acts like a wild animal and the delicate balance of nature and man is tested each day, there's a sleepy little town with no gas station known as Dupuyer, Montana. Just a few miles to the west, under the craggy cliffs of the Rocky Mountain Front and nestled against the Lewis and Clark National Forest, sits Boone and Crockett's Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch.

for my first ever deer hunt.

I woke up on day one before everyone else, astonished that this was happening. The beautiful Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch soon became visible as the sunrise appeared through the Rasmuson Wildlife Conservation Center's (RWCC) large picture windows.

Rich and I spent the next few hours exploring the adjacent Heirmosa Ranch with Ian, the owner, and Kevin, his ranch manager. They shared their best spots with tons of insight on how best to hunt the property, including a warning to watch out for grizzlies.

As we finished up the tour, Ian asked that I keep one

thing in mind: not to shoot a doe with a fawn. We all shook hands and, thanking him for the incredible opportunity, I promised that I would honor that request.

After zeroing my rifle again at the Palmer Shooting Range and grabbing a quick lunch at the RWCC, I found myself leaning against a juniper with my mentor Rich next to me. I was soaking up every second. That afternoon flew by glassing up deer and whispering with Rich. This enjoyment is exactly why hunting still happens.

That day was perfect with great weather. It replays like a movie in my mind, but that's not how it goes all the time. I was here to learn. That

night the weather flipped, and winds reached 76 mph. With rain now falling and my bones aching, I wanted to get out there again. It was going to be a long haul, but I wanted it all.

As we settled into our morning glassing spot on day two, the rain turned to a misty rainbow as if to say I passed the first test. As clouds approached ominously and winds shifted, we decided to move to a better position for viewing the creek bottom before working into the valley.

This was my classroom, and nature was my teacher. I heard a sound from behind me and turned to see a big doe with a fawn and a yearling grazing up the hill behind us. After spotting me, they disappeared over the hill down into the valley. I was hooked. I wanted to be a part of protecting this amazing tradition.

Shortly after, Kevin showed up to tell us he had

just watched a good-sized grizzly cross the road into our valley. We decided to remain on the ridge as Kevin headed back to track the bear from his truck. Several minutes passed, and through a predetermined honking morse code, he let us know the bear was headed our way.

We soon spotted our grizzly intruder crossing the opposite ridge. Rich ranged the bear at 550 yards, barely 100 yards from where we sat that morning. Its coat resembled a tan and brown panda with a silver streak down its back. With each step the big bear's body rippled, 500-600 pounds of traveling muscle headed straight for the national forest—away from us.

We had to be careful. Some bears have learned gunshots mean dinner bells, but the hunt was still on. It was time to step into their world, down into Dupuyer Creek. We bumped a young buck who bounded away calmly, like he



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knew my tag. Working along the creek, we found the grizzly track. The back paw was as big as my size 11 boot—a reminder to keep our heads on a swivel like I had in Syria.

“Freeze, look!” On our right between us and the creek was a great-looking doe. As I flipped the safety off, two more heads stepped out. A doe and two fawns. I recalled Ian’s request and squeezed the safety back on.

As I stood up they bounded off, the doe and fawns still together for a reason. A healthy herd needs to pass on knowledge, just like my own search. No matter if I got a deer, I would not regret that decision.

As the snow started to fall, glassing was no longer an option, I had to move. Despite feeling all the same aches and pains we veterans share, I had a mission. Flashing hand signals to Rich, I pushed down into the valley with 45 minutes of shooting light left. I spotted a good-sized fallen tree still attached at the stump and thought it would be a great rifle rest if there was a doe.

As soon as I reached the tree, I saw her—a ghostly doe at about 50 yards. I dropped softly to a knee and

then prone. She watched, not giving me a shot but stomping to tell me she knew I was there. Rich, frozen 20 yards behind, was unable to see the doe. This was mine and mine alone.

The snowfall was beautiful with each flake piling on my trigger finger. I counted each heartbeat in this old-fashioned standoff. Minutes passed as hours. At 6:05 p.m. she turned to give me one clear shot through the trees. One shot to the lungs, and she was down.

We got back to the lodge as night fell, hanging her to cool while we searched for a warm meal. This amazing opportunity with great people who invited me into the hunting community will forever be part of my story.

What will the future of hunting hold for me? I’ve heard groups of hunters called a community, but that rings as an understatement. I believe hunters are more of a family, willing to reach down to help someone find a new mission in life when they need it most. ■



**ABOVE:** Drew was careful to honor the landowner’s request not to shoot a doe with a fawn. **BELOW:** Drew with his doe on his first big game hunt.



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