

RESULTS OF MISSOURI'S 2011 ATLATL DEER SEASON

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to document, to the degree possible, information regarding the participation of atlatlists during the 2011 Missouri firearms deer season, and to document any successful hunts. The 2011 season was the second opportunity Missouri hunters had to pursue deer with the atlatl. Eleven individuals who responded to the author's 2010 survey indicated they had hunted at least one day. Of the eleven, one reported throwing once and another reported throwing twice. The three throws were all clean misses, resulting in no deer being wounded or harvested. (After last year's report was disseminated, the author learned of several others who had hunted, without success).

PROCEDURES

The author sent a survey to members of the Missouri Atlatl Association and to a number of non-member Missouri atlatlists. In most instances, the surveys were sent before the start of the season with a follow-up reminder at the end of the season. However, in two instances, it was sent to two previously unknown individuals who indicated they had hunted with the atlatl. The survey (Appendix A) was almost identical to the one used for the 2010 season with a few modifications.² Fifteen surveys were returned by individuals who had hunted at least one day. (In addition, several persons who had hunted during 2010 indicated they did not have the opportunity in 2011.) In a few instances, survey responses were supplemented by phone conversations or in-person interviews.

FINDINGS

Two of 15 known atlatlists who hunted during the 2011 fall firearms season harvested a deer. Luke Boenker of Maryland Heights bagged a young buck in St. Louis County the afternoon of the first day of the regular firearms season and Scott Rorebeck of Trenton bagged a doe during the morning of the second day. Six other hunters reported having one or more opportunities to throw at deer, resulting in clean misses.

Successful Hunters

Before reviewing the survey results I want to recognize Luke and Scott for their successful hunts. Since Luke lives fairly close to my home, I was able to take a number of pictures the day after he bagged the deer, and then in early January sat down with him for a taped interview. We also had the opportunity to appear together on two St. Louis television stations. The interviews were arranged by a Missouri Department of Conservation staff member. I was not able to do the same with Scott since he lives quite a distance away. However, Scott did send a short narrative of his hunt in the survey and a report from his local newspaper.

¹ President – Missouri Atlatl Association, devoemertz@sbcglobal.net, 314-680-3596. A draft of this report was reviewed by MAA Board Members: Justin Garnett, Ray Madden, John Whittaker, and Jon Wood.

² Mertz, Ronald E., MISSOURI ATLATL DEER HUNTING REPORT FOR THE 2010 SEASON. December 2010.

Both Luke and Scott took up the atlatl and dart fairly recently. Luke started throwing during the summer of 2011 and Scott started only about a year or so earlier. Their success points to the fact that, while mastering the atlatl is challenging, the necessary skills needed to be a successful hunter do not require years of atlatl experience. What is clear, however, is that both men spent a considerable amount of time practicing before the season. Also, part of their success is likely due to the fact that both had extensive deer hunting experience before taking up the challenge of the atlatl.

Luke Boenker



Luke Boenker with his deer, atlatl, and 7 ft. ash dart

An Interview with Luke

I got interested in the atlatl in 2010. I had known about it through reading. I wanted to do it last year (2010) because I knew it was legal, but I didn't get anything going. I didn't have any equipment. I didn't get ready quick enough for 2010. In the summer of 2011 is when I started to get my stuff together.

Previous Deer hunting experience: *I've always gun hunted. Then one of my brothers got me started with the bow. I started with the bow in the late 80's. I still rifle hunted, but then went to Colorado and Wyoming to hunt elk with a bow. Last year in Missouri and Illinois I shot 18 deer, two with a rifle and 16 with a bow. I almost always hunt from a deer stand. You have such an advantage over the deer.*

Hunting with the atlatl: *The first time I went out I had my darts in a quiver. I took one out and it fell to the ground. The first time I threw the dart at the deer, I missed. It landed right next to her feet and she didn't even jump. She didn't jump or do anything. She just kept walking. I guess she thought she had just stepped on a twig. I didn't get another shot. But then I did shoot one (the second day of hunting during the urban hunt) and hit it in the butt, but it never drew blood. I was up high in the tree and I saw the deer coming. They were feeding and walking-a perfect broadside shot, but when I threw it seemed like that deer jumped. It seemed like it jumped forward. I saw the dart go right to her but she jumped and the dart hit her in the back rump. I could tell it didn't go through. When I saw her run away the dart bent back so I knew it had not penetrated very far.*

On opening day of the regular season I hunted behind a friend's house. He has six acres in suburban St. Louis County. Normally I would have been out with a rifle, but I wanted to do this because I was so into it couldn't stop (with the atlatl). You know how it was when we were practicing, we were out till dark, it was so much fun. So I got a friend to go with me. He was bow hunting. We got there late, the morning had already broken. But that didn't matter because that place is so full of deer. I didn't see anything until about eight. A nice buck came walking up. He got within about 50 yards and for some reason he looked up in the tree I was in. He looked up and couldn't make out what I was so he just turned and trotted toward my buddy with the bow and he shot and missed it.

I was 27 feet up from the bottom of my stand to the ground. I stayed in that tree all morning long. We never saw another deer. My friend decided to leave. I think he was hungry, but I had brought my lunch. I had a back pack with water and sandwiches. So I took a nap up there. I tied myself tight to the tree and took a nap. Four O'clock came and there was only about an hour left. Then, at ten minutes after four here comes this buck walking up. He was behind me and offered no shot whatsoever, but luckily he walked under my tree and started up toward a hill. Now his back was towards me and I grunted at him. That deer just stopped and made a quarter turn, a perfect shot. I saw the dart go in and he just bolted, he made a u-turn and went the way he came and ran out of sight. The dart went completely through, but didn't pass out the other side. It went in about 20" in. I got down right away because I knew it was a hit. It was like a sidewalk of blood. I followed it and found my dart laying there. It was not hurt one bit. Then about another 20 yards down the hill he was laying there in the creek. I don't know how that dart came out of there. It traveled about 125 yards.

The dart destroyed the one lung and hit the tip of the other lung. I think it missed the heart. And that is probably why it ran so far, because it only got the one lung. It did get the tip of the one lung, but went through the center of the other one.

Practice: *Before the season I practiced a few times from a fork lift, and I practiced when I was in a tree waiting for a deer. That destroyed a few broadheads. One time I was throwing at a leaf, but there was a rock under it and totally destroyed the broadheads. I made a quiver using the bottom of a Clorox bottle*

and Styrofoam for holding the broad heads. I cut some heater hose to hold the darts. It holds up to 12 darts. I would always make sure my heels were together. I never bent my body forward.

Tree Stand: *The only advantage is that the deer won't see you. There are no real disadvantages. The only thing is that the tree can hinder your throw. You've got the tree behind you. You might have to step to the side, but the tree didn't get in my way.*

Advice to others: *Just practice. Practice at different distances and know the distances you are going to shoot and don't take a wild shot. With a bow, I always made my shots within 20 yards. With a dart, if you are up in a tree, it has to be at least 10 yards from the tree. That deer was about 15 yards from the base of the tree.*

Next Year? *I can't wait!*

Scott Rorebeck



Scott Rorebeck with his deer, atlatl, and 80" aluminum/carbon darts

Scott's Account of his 2011 hunt

I killed the doe on the second morning of the firearms deer season. I hunted from the ground. At about 7:12 a.m. the doe was strolling alongside a bedding area when she passed through my throwing lane and presented a fifteen yard walking broadside shot. The deer must have seen my arm movement, as she began wheeling before the dart caught her. The broad head entered behind the last rib on the left side and exited just behind her right shoulder. The dart remained in the deer and its angle was that of a quartering away shot.

On the evening of the second Saturday, Scott reported having an opportunity for a perfect broadside shot at a buck standing only 11 steps away but did not throw because it was only a 6 pointer and did not meet the antler restriction of at least 4 points on a side that was in effect for Grundy County.

Scott described how he hunts from the ground without a blind:

I dress in camouflage including face mask etc., and wear minimum (required by law) florescent orange. I scrape the area under my feet bare to the ground so I can move silently. I frequently stand by a tree so it breaks my silhouette, and I stand downwind. These steps usually defeat the deer's defenses ---sight, smell, and hearing. But one should wait until the deer walks behind a close tree and blinds itself to the hunter's movement before casting. Such a strategy would defeat the deer's ability to flinch or wheel as the hunter casts.

This was Scott's second year of hunting deer with the atlatl. While he, like the rest of us who hunted in 2010 did not get a deer, he wrote an excellent account of his experience last year which is included here in Appendix B.

SURVEY RESULTS

EQUIPMENT

As shown in Table 1, atlatlists used a variety of equipment in terms of both atlatls and darts. Of the 15 hunters who responded to the survey, nine used natural plant materials and six used materials made of carbon, fiberglass, or aluminum. In one instance, the hunter, (Scott Rorebeck) used a dart made from both aluminum and carbon.

Table 1. Survey data regarding dart and atlatl characteristics used in 2011 season

Atlatlist	Dart Material	Dart Length Inches	Foreshaft	Broadhead	Atlatl
KG	Carbon	68	N	2bl w raz ins	Hammer grip
BH	Carbon	63	N	4bl	-----
CW	Carbon	60	N	2bl	Hammer grip bamboo/bone
NR	fiberglass	70	N	2bl	Hammer grip antler spur
SR	Alum/Carbon	80	N	2bl, 125 gr	Split finger Ozark bluff dweller
RM	Alum	74	N	2bl	Australian split finger grip
LB	Ash	84	N	2bl,175 gr	Hammer grip
NJ	Ash	84	N	2bl, 200gr	Hammer grip
JG	Willow	60	5"	Stone	Basket Maker split finger
SS	Horseweed	82	9"	Stone	Cross peg
JH	Rivercane	66	N	2bl	Two hole
ES	Rivercane	66	7"	Stone	Hammer grip- wood/antler
AJH	Rivercane	72	6"	2bl	Hammer grip
JW	Rivercane	90	8"	2bl	Hammer grip
REM	Rivercane	88	4"	2bl	Hammer grip

The most common natural dart material (used by five hunters) was river cane (native bamboo) which grows in Missouri and throughout much of the southeastern United States. Three, including Luke Boenker, used wood darts and one had made his darts from horsetail, which grows naturally in Missouri.

The Missouri Department of Conservation has established a minimum/maximum dart length of five to eight feet and all darts were within these dimensions, ranging from five feet (60") to seven feet, six inches (90"). Only about half of the respondents reported dart weights which ranged from 2.7 to nine ounces and weights are not shown in the table. As might be expected, the heavier weights were reported for wooden darts while 7 foot river cane darts would weigh from about four to five ounces. Generally, carbon darts without additional weight added would be the lightest.

With the exception of the two ash darts, in which the Broadhead was attached directly to the shaft, most darts made of natural materials utilized a foreshaft varying in length of from 4 to 9 inches. In contrast, the broadhead was attached directly to the non-natural material darts.

Twelve of the fifteen hunters reported using two-bladed steel broadheads (one with razor inserts), while three used points made of stone (flint/chert or obsidian). For readers who are not familiar with darts, it should be noted that while darts are considerably heavier than arrows, standard arrow broadheads can be used because darts are typically made to be front weighted.

The majority of hunters reported using a "hammer-grip" atlatl. As the name implies, the atlatlist grips the atlatl in a fashion similar to gripping a carpenter's hammer. While this grip is likely the mostly widely used among modern-day atlatlists, there are a number of other effective ways of holding the atlatl which are related to the atlatl design. For example, the "basket-maker" atlatl which is associated with the American Southwest, is effectively used with a split-finger grip in which the atlatl shaft is placed between the index and second finger. Two-hole and one-hole atlatls, as well as other designs such as the cross-peg (Ozark bluff dweller) and some atlatls from Australia also lend themselves to a split-finger grip. While both of these two major ways of gripping the atlatl are effective, many atlatlists feel the split-finger grip allows for greater rotation of the wrist, enabling the dart to be thrown with higher speed.

THE HUNTING EXPERIENCE

Data regarding counties and days hunted, the use of stands, the number of times deer were in rifle/bow range only, the number of time in atlatl range, and the number of throws at deer are shown in Table 2.

Number of counties

As shown, the 15 atlatlists hunted in a total of 19 counties. While most hunted in one, four individuals hunted in two or more counties. While not shown in the table, two individuals reported hunting during the urban hunt in the St. Louis urban zone and one in the Kansas City urban zone. In addition, several reported hunting or intending to hunt during the extended season.

Days spent hunting

The number of reported days spent hunting ranged from one to seventeen with a mean of nearly six and a median of about five days.

Use of stand

Four hunters reported using a stand all of the time, six reported never using one and five indicated they used a stand less than 50% of the time. While not everyone described the type of stand used, Luke Boenker used a “climbing stand” which consists of two parts and allows the hunter to climb the tree without the use of a ladder, and two hunters used platform stands, both of which were relatively low.

Deer in atlatl range

Hunters were asked to report the number of deer they saw that were in rifle/bow range only, and the number in atlatl range. Fourteen of the 15 respondents reported seeing deer at least once and the large proportion more frequently saw deer that were within rifle/bow range than in atlatl range. Still, 10 respondents indicated they had seen a deer at least once within atlatl range and one reported that all 11 times he had seen deer they were within atlatl range. It should be noted that the judgment regarding atlatl range was not specified in the survey document and was left up to each respondent. In the author’s opinion, based on observing numerous competitors, atlatlists should not throw at deer beyond 15 yards, and even shorter distances would be preferred.

Table 2. Survey data regarding counties and days hunted, use of stand, deer in rifle/bow range only, deer in atlatl range, the number of throws at deer

Atlatlist	Counties hunted	Days hunted	Use of elevated stand %	Times deer in rifle/bow range only	Times in atlatl range	Number of throws at deer *
KG	Platte/ Buchanan	10	0	30	5	0
BH	Jackson/Ray/Lafayette/Saline	17	0	-	11	15
CW	Bollinger	9	100	1	1	1
NR	Grundy	3	100	10	1	1
SR	Grundy	6	5	8	4	1*
RM	Jasper	1	50	0	0	0
LB	St. Louis/Lincoln	8	100	4	3	3*
NJ	Jackson	5	25	20	5	4
JG	Callaway	3	0	2	0	0
SS	Grundy	4	0	10	3	0
JH	Christian	2	50	5	2	2
ES	Jefferson/pike	6	0	2	0	0
AJH	Cape Girardeau	2	0	1	0	0
JW	Monroe	1	100	1	0	0
REM	St. Louis/Maries/Franklin/Lincoln	9	30	0	3	3

*Indicates the hunter harvested a deer.

Number of throws and hits

Nine individuals reported throwing a total of 30 times at deer; however, half of these throws were by one individual. The large majority of throws, as reported by respondents, were clean misses while one throw resulted in a non-lethal wound and, two resulted in kills.

RESPONDENTS' NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS OF THEIR HUNTING EXPERIENCE

The survey invited participants to provide feedback, especially in terms of the challenges and satisfaction of hunting with the atlatl.

ES. *It was a wonderful and rewarding experience. The high winds were a concern for throwing accuracy (would have to had timed throw between gust). Only draw back was the large number of other hunters. The gun hunters I talked to were very fascinated by my atlatl.*

JW. *I had 2 portable metal deer stands made to allow me to hunt off of the ground. Both were 8' tall with a large 42" X 42" platform to sit/stand on. The deer stands were placed on opposite ends of the farm one week before opening day of firearm season. On opening morning I walked through the early hours to my stand located close to the river in the east bottomland. I had conferred with the property owners to the north and south of me and we had discussed positioning of our stands to give each of us the best/safest opportunity. I climbed in my stand in the dark and watched and waited. As the sunlight started filling the lowland, all of a sudden, I noticed a bright orange sweatshirt directly across the river from me at a distance of only 100 yards! Danger! I had forgotten to visit with the landowner on the other side of the river! I gathered my gear, left the stand and headed on foot back west to the other stand. I had walked about 300 yards when I heard a snort and saw several white tails bobbing up and down as they ran away from me. I watched my opportunities run away and it reminded me again that there is a lot more to hunting than just being able to make an accurate throw at a deer. I made it to the west stand and sat for a long time but I did not see another deer. I hunted again that same evening from the west stand but still did not see another deer. Even though I did not get a chance to throw at a deer, I did enjoy the solitude that comes from sitting lazily in a tree and relaxing while nature takes place right in front of you.*

AH. *It was a blustery season. Deer movement was largely at night. I enjoyed my hunts but have little to show for it. There is always next year!*

CW. *On Saturday (opening day of firearms season) about 7 am, I had two does come down walking very slowly and cautiously. It was pretty windy and deer tend to walk slowly and cautiously, stopping every few steps to look around. I waited until the first one was within range and I had a clear shot. The doe was about 15 yards out and I was in a tree stand about 15 feet up. I threw and the dart went right over the kill zone about an inch over to top of her back. I immediately froze. Both deer jumped and looked around seeing if anything was moving. The doe I threw at walked calmly up the hill and the second doe started coming up behind the first. I thought I would get a second throw. I very slowly reached over and grabbed another dart and loaded it into the atlatl. Right before the second doe reached the spot where I threw at the first one, she turned and started up the hill. I didn't see any more deer except around Tuesday I saw two does (probably the same two) from a different tree stand on the other side of the hill but they were about 35-40 yards out with a lot of brush between us.*

SS. *My best opportunity was at 12 yards, but it came in quartering toward me offering a non-lethal angle of throw.*

I found the hunt extremely challenging and resolved to learn to throw from tree stands. I am a proficient hunter and have taken many deer with the bow and with primitive muzzle loaders (flint locks and wheel lock guns), but nothing compares to the challenge of the atlatl.

BH. *I used 54 inch tall camouflage fabric using sticks or poles to create a blind. This wasn't too effective as the deer that approached it were scared off. I didn't have a place I could install the blind permanently*

to allow the deer to get used to it. I only used the blind two days, the other days were a combination of ground hunting/stalking or using some form of natural blind.

I threw a total of 15 times. Twice I was in a "natural blind" area near twilight and was able to get in three throws at the same deer without it startling (and that is when I learned it is a good idea to carry more than three darts; both times, three was all I had).

I've enjoyed it a lot and it has been a really fun and learning experience. My goal this year was to at least get some good throws and that was accomplished. For next year I'll have to work on getting closer shots to have a real chance of getting a deer. I think that will involve either an elevated stand or some improvement in the way I'm doing ground blinds.

JG. Twice I saw a group of deer at perhaps 30-40 yards from my blind, but never got close enough to throw. They froze when they saw me, which was good. They would have been an easy shot with a rifle. They would stare for a bit and bolt.

NJ. I threw four times at deer; one from a stand and three from the ground. From the stand the deer had not noticed me. I had to throw half sitting due to the tree behind me. I threw 3-4 inches under the doe's chest. All other tosses were made at alerted deer who had all more or less spotted me, but were not sure what I was. They all managed to evaporate before the dart reached them.

I'm new to the atlatl, but I am hooked. I'm going to practice more and succeed somewhere down the road. I'm looking forward to this moving to archery season. I'm making most of my own equipment and enjoy that part a lot. I have my grandkids throwing too.

REM. I hunted on nine different days including during the urban season in the St. Louis urban zone. However, during the urban season I did not see deer. The opening two days of the regular season were quite different from the rest. I was on my brother's farm in Maries County. My nephew, who teaches agriculture in Belle had made a 7 ft platform stand in the school's shop which we placed in a sparse cedar grove on the edge of fields and a woods a week or so before opening day. At about 7:30 in the morning I saw something move about 100 yards away and prepared a dart. Then, a young antlerless deer walked slowly within about 15 yards from the stand offering a clear broadside shot. I thought to myself, "Is this really happening?" But it was not to be. The dart sailed just under the deer. She did not panic, but turned around and walked slowly in the direction she had come. Although I was able to ready another dart she did not offer another clear shot. While I missed this "perfect" opportunity, I felt it was still a great experience and reasoned that even if I did not get a second chance, those several minutes would be memorable.

But, that afternoon provided an almost exact opportunity with, unfortunately, the same outcome. This time, a doe and two young came within reasonable casting range, but my throw at one of the young deer (probably the same one I missed in the morning), again passed under its chest.

Now, one might think that a person would learn to correct for throwing low twice, but on Sunday morning I had another opportunity that, while not quite as ideal, ended the same way. I was almost relieved when after returning to my brother's house, I discovered I had received a voicemail from Luke Boenker the evening before telling me about his success. I decided that was enough hunting for the day and drove 85 miles to my home and then to Luke's place to document his success. The following day I attended a lunch featuring fresh venison tenderloin made by members of Luke's extended family.

SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

This was the second year Missouri hunters were able to use the atlatl for pursuing deer. While it is likely that some individuals unknown to the author used the atlatl during the season, fifteen hunters responded to a survey sent to them by the author. This included eight of eleven individuals who had responded to the 2010 survey. This year, 75% of hunters reported seeing deer in atlatl range compared to 45% last year; and while only two (18%) reported throwing at deer last year, eight (53%) did so this year. Even more noteworthy, two atlatlists were successful in harvesting deer during the 2011 season.

While atlatlists were required to hunt during the firearms season the last two years, in fall 2012 they will be able to hunt during archery season. This change greatly expands the chance of successfully harvesting deer with an atlatl by increasing the length of time to hunt, providing more favorable weather conditions, and not requiring the wearing of hunter's orange.

It can be expected that with the expanded season and increasing awareness of the atlatl, the number of Missourians who take up this ancient tool for pursuing deer will continue to expand. However, opportunities often bring challenges. In this case, the major challenge for all who take to the field with their atlatl is to ensure that when they throw, they are reasonably confident of making a "clean kill." Practicing at a variety of distances with such targets as milk jugs suspended on a stick or 9" paper plates should help potential hunters assess appropriate distances and their skill level before the next season. This year, the Missouri Atlatl Association plans to include at least one contest during each of our events that will both enable us to gather data on "kill zone" accuracy and encourage potential hunters to assess their chances of making a clean kill.

This report was submitted to the Missouri Department of Conservation on January 17, 2012.

APPENDIX A

MISSOURI 2011 ATLATL DEER HUNTING SURVEY

This is the second year the atlatl will be legal for deer hunting Missouri. The Missouri Atlatl Association would once more like to document the experiences of atlatlists during the 2011 season. Please complete the form *after the last day of the firearms season* and return by email to: devoemertz@sbcglobal.net or to Ron Mertz, 165 Bon Chateau Drive, Town & Country, MO 63141. If you do get a deer please call me as soon as possible at 314-628-9376 or 314-680-3596. THANKS!

Describe the atlatl you used (eg. Hammer grip, split finger, single hole, other), material, etc.

Dart: material _____ Total dart length _____ Total dart weight _____

Separate fore shaft? Y N Fore shaft length _____

Is fore shaft fixed or removable?

Type of point: Stone ___ Steel ___ Other _____

Describe point style/size (e.g., two blade) _____

In what counties did you hunt? _____

Did you participate in any of the urban hunts? If so, what area(s)?

Did you participate in any managed hunts? ___ If so, what hunts? _____

How many days in total (through the regular firearms season) did you deer hunt with the atlatl?

About what percent of time did you hunt from: an elevated deer stand? ___, the ground? _____

If from the ground, did you use a blind? Describe _____

How many times did you see deer that were in rifle/bow range, but not in atlatl range?

How many times were deer in atlatl range?

How many times did you throw a dart at deer?

Briefly describe the outcome(s):

If you fatally shot a deer please write a brief narrative account. *Include time of day, distance of throw, where the dart hit, and the amount of dart penetration as part of your narrative.* (Please attach any relevant pictures.)

If you did not get a deer this year, we would still like your feedback regarding the experience, especially in regard to the challenges and satisfaction of using the atlatl. *Again, feel free to send any relevant pictures (blind, equipment, etc).*

Name: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX B

SCOTT ROREBECK'S 2010 ACCOUNT OF HIS ATLATL HUNTING EXPERIENCE

Scott wrote this piece after the 2010 season and after the 2010 report was disseminated. It is included here because it is entertainingly written and points to some of the challenges in bagging a deer with the atlatl.

The atlatl survey asked for feedback regarding the hunter's experience, even if the hunter did not get a deer. I'm more than happy to share some of my experiences.

The heavy three-eighths inch thick solid fiberglass shafts measure seventy inches long. (Note: Scott lighter darts in 2011). Wild turkey primaries provide guidance and old-style double edged steel broadheads tip the business ends. My oldest son Nathan threw one of these darts through a big buck hanging from the "meat tree" located in his yard. Previously Nathan removed the deer's backstrap and a flap of hide overlapped one side. The practice dart, which was dull as a butter knife, pierced both layers of hide on the close side, zipped through the buck's chest, and blew through the third hide layer. The Brodhead stuck out fifteen-inches past the far side. My broadheads carry stropped edges and if one had found its mar, penetration would have been fantastic.

I saw maybe thirty wild and free roaming deer within rifle or bow range while hunting on almost 300 acres of private property. I atlatl hunted the timber while my sons Nathan and Derek rifle hunted the fields. On opening day alone, Nathan counted thirty-three deer, of which thirteen were bucks including three shooters. Hunting property holding many deer makes for many chances.

If you asked my wife for a one-word description of her husband, she would probably answer--- Compulsive! Whenever I become interested in something--- such as bagging a deer with an atlatl--- my mind super motivates in an attempt to make it happen. I practiced throwing all summer. An average day started with me standing twelve yards from the target waiting for enough daylight to see the bull (a tennis ball). I threw until time to go to work. I threw through my noon hour and at five o'clock I'd beat it home and practice until dark. Some might find my behavior hard to believe, but compulsive I am. At times I'd almost feel ashamed of myself if I was throwing while the little lady pushed mowed the yard (she had a habit of giving me a dirty look while mowing in my direction). But, she understands my compulsive ways. Sometimes I'd zone out and the dart pierced the ball over and over. At other times darts flew wildly, but I eventually acquired confidence in my close range accuracy--- and I also developed a bad case of throwers elbow. Compulsive throwing and heavy equipment may have ruined my right elbow. Nowadays, after I throw a few times, the act of simply lifting a cup of coffee or buttoning my pants sends a searing pain through my arm. My right elbow may never be the same, but much like Alfred E. Neuman of Mad Magazine, I'm not worried--- as I am learning to throw left handed.

I managed to crawl out of bed and hunt most days of the season. I pestered the deer all day long on the weekends and because some people have to work I usually hunted either morning or evening during the week. This firearms deer season was the first in forty-four years that I enjoyed the break of dawn without a gun in my hands. For several years I hunted whitetails with black powder handguns and I've

nailed quite a few with my muzzle loading pistols--- killing some within atlatl range. My compulsive practice, my experience in close range deer and turkey hunting, and knowing I'd hunt ground holding a good deer population, led me to believe that if anyone in Missouri could shish kabob a deer with an atlatl--- I could. I even bought extra bonus tags, thinking why kill only one deer? I'll slay a few does and hunt a day or two longer and bag a buck. Perhaps too often I look through rose-colored glasses, but what the heck, at times optimism makes for a great ride. Someday harvesting a deer with an atlatl could become almost as common as bagging one with a bow--- if atlatlists hunt the long archery season while wearing full camouflage. On the other hand, a florescent garbed hunter who hunts from the ground and wants to cast a dart through a frenzied shell-shocked deer standing within twelve yards---has a tough row to hoe.

Although I saw many chances to take deer with a gun or even a bow, I experienced only four favoring an atlatl. For me, an atlatl opportunity happens when a deer stands within twelve yards, and I have the atlatl and its dart poised in striking position. Three opportunities occurred on season's second day.

On the first day of season a buck polished his antlers on a sapling about thirty-yards from where I stood and he never noticed my florescent orange. A thirty-yard deer may overlook a solid patch of color but a savvy pressured deer that sees the same material at spitting distance will at times turn almost inside out. Perhaps rifle hunters who insist whitetails ignore florescent orange ought to cover themselves with that obnoxious color and try close range atlatl hunting---they might change their tune. I dressed in full camouflage including a face mask, but to satisfy regulations I had to top that sneaky ensemble with a florescent vest and cap. Except for a spike buck that couldn't see me through a cedar, all deer within range saw me and became hyper-alert. Before skedaddling, some deer hesitated a few seconds because they couldn't smell me as I always respect the wind.

Also, on the first day I named a deer Dufus as he had a few tines on one side and crazily angled tines on the other. After describing the deer to the boys, Derek said he knew the buck and he probably didn't meet the antler restrictions. Nathan said he also had seen the deer close-up and it did meet the restrictions and "If Dufus comes by you dad---stab him." I encountered Dufus on the second day.

I walked with Derek to my stand in the frozen darkness of the season's second morning. He intended to shoot a trophy buck with his rifle and his endpoint was a ridge a few hundred yards beyond my position. Before separating I set my cell phone on vibrate and asked Derek to call me if he spotted a deer walking the fence line as I had a limited view and might need a heads up. Then I bellied across the fence that bordered the cut cornfield and took a stand by a tree ten yards inside the timber. I turned and faced west and began watching an opening in the fence line.

If all deer and turkeys held a conference to outlaw one item used by hunters I guess they would pick the Cell phone. Those little talking boxes assist in the demise of countless bucks and gobblers. Probably since the dawn of humankind hunters found ways to communicate with each other such as horns, whistles, and hand signals. If in close, the boys and I give a heads-up or locate each other with the Kee-Kee run---the lost call of the young turkey. Many years ago, while in the big city, my children vanished in a crowd at a mall. I suppose most parents would frantically search for their kids or call security. I just

whistled the kee-kee run and those youngsters appeared as if by magic. Although we still communicate with turkey talk and hand signals, the cell phone alerts silently, and it works at a distance prehistoric hunters could only dream about.

The tree's circumference easily concealed my silhouette and it stood close enough to the fence. That stand had only one defect; a bramble patch surrounded the tree's base. I'd forgotten my pruning shears so I stomped the brambles but they sprang back. Resigning myself to the situation, I unsheathed the three dart heads, leaned two darts against the tree, and knocked the third. Since I can't throw well when wearing gloves I left them at home. Within twenty minutes my fingers went numb, so I leaned the dart against the tree, let the atlatl hang from the dart, and put my hands into my pockets. As I stared at the fence, I fantasized that if a deer sailed over that barbed wire, I'd pull my hands from my pockets, smoothly run my fingers into the hanging atlatl's finger loops, cock my arm and send a feathered messenger of death right through the deer's vitals.....sometimes fantasy is a whole lot better than reality.....and reality was about to happen.

Maybe thirty minutes after dawn I noticed a deer behind me, which was strange because most deer run if downwind. A glance told me Dufus stood broadside and within twelve yards. My hand reached for the atlatl but stiff fingers fumbled the loops and the atlatl fell to the ground. Dropping the atlatl was not part of the fantasy. I wondered if Dufus would stay if I picked up the atlatl. There was one way to find out. I slowly bent over and grabbed the atlatl, rose up, knocked the dart, and turned around. Dufus never moved and I knew I'd named him correctly. I figured that deer was as good as dead as I began lifting the dart to throwing position---but, try as I might; I could not get the dart up. A look down revealed five or six brambles crisscrossed the dart's shaft. To remedy the situation I raised the dart and its atlatl straight up out of the brambles, and then turned the whole shebang into throwing position. Dufus wouldn't stand for that much movement and as I cocked my arm he made a few jumps and ambled away. A lesson learned was one should keep the dart's shaft out of the brambles. Of course, lessons learned are not always lessons applied.

After I turned around to watch the fence my phone vibrated. Derek excitedly whispered a huge buck was dogging a big doe down the fence line and get ready because they would walk past me. I asked why he hadn't shot and he said at first sight he couldn't shoot because the buck stood on the skyline and now he still didn't have a shot. I knew why Derek held his shot; he would never knowingly send a 7mm Magnum bullet my direction. I lifted the atlatl and waited...and waited...and my phone vibrated again. Derek seemed more excited as he told me the deer jumped the fence just south of my position. He said "Dad turn and look south-they are in the timber with you." I turned and looked south, about fifteen yards, because that was as far as I could see in that direction.

Within seconds I noticed a flick of white maybe sixty yards southeast. One could actually see such a distance if looking southeast. What the heck, I wondered how the deer traveled that far without me noticing them. While utterly confused, I put the dart's broadhead on the toe of my boot and I dug my binoculars from under my coat. By the time I focused I realized whatever was there was now gone. While gazing toward the southeast and pondering the situation, a large brown spot appeared in the corner of my right eye. I shifted my vision and saw that big doe, the one Derek had seen, standing

straight south of me---within eight yards---and face on. Trying to make the best of a bad situation I began lifting the dart--- and déjà-vu ---the dart stuck in the brambles.

I didn't have to look down to know what had happened so I pulled the dart straight up and leveled it into launching position. Just like Dufus, the doe wouldn't stand for such gross movement. She made a few jumps northeast and stopped broadside at eleven yards---behind a tree that covered her chest. With my arm cocked and ready to throw, I saw her head and foreleg on the north side, and her belly, butt, and back leg, on the south--- but the tree covered the vitals. The voice in my head that murmurs in a monotone all day long screamed "NO SHOT! NO SHOT!" So, I hesitated, and the doe made a Jumping about-face followed by a few more hops, and moseyed off much like Dufus. Where was the big buck? He probably watched the show. I never saw him and I never heard him, but such is the modus operandi of big old bucks.

Chance number three happened in the evening of the same day as I stood alongside a patch of cedar trees adjoining the cut cornfield about three hundred yards north of my morning stand. A cedar bough brushed my left side and three tall saplings grew in a clump directly to my right creating a cubbyhole, a natural hide, with nothing but cut cornfield to the west. A few branches jutted from the saplings but they seemed clear of the dart's flight path. I heard something walking in the timber east of me. I assumed the steps were that of a deer or a coyote and they kept getting closer so I shifted my weight to my right leg and brought the atlatl to throwing position. Out of the timber and into the field jumped what had to be one of the smallest deer in Missouri. It didn't have spots but small it was. Although young and inexperienced, that little deer saw me, and turned and faced my direction. I don't know why I threw. Sometimes the way of the predator overcomes me, my eyelids narrow, my vision improves, the Dr. Jekyll part of my brain becomes a Mr. Hyde, and with a smidgen of imagination I can almost feel my canine teeth turn into fangs. Does a lioness attack the biggest bull in the herd? Would an archaic hunter pass on such a tasty morsel? I'm not proud of throwing at a fawn and I can't rationalize the action, but I cast the dart.

I didn't see the dart fly toward the deer but I did hear a sound similar to the crack made by a breaking baseball bat. As the startled deer turned broadside I saw the dart laying catawampus in the field. That feathered missile of death had hit a limb which was also not part of the fantasy. I knocked a second dart and started to bring it to launching position when the voice in my head began talking again. It said "That deer is too little. You don't eat the meat and you always give your deer to others. You hunt for sport, and what kind of kill picture would that little thing make?" The voice had a point so I just stood there. Within seconds mamma doe and a larger sibling trotted into the field and the little deer joined them. They made a pretty picture as they disappeared over a rise in the cornfield. And, the predator smiled.

My fourth atlatl opportunity happened on the season's last Thursday or Friday evening. After checking wind direction with a lighter I made my stand by a huge creek-bottom tree which stood on low ground twenty-yards north of a hillside leading to a brush covered bedding area. My boot scraped the forest floor clean in a four-foot radius removing every leaf and stick and leaving black earth. I even snipped a few small sprouts from the scraped ground, as at the time I evidently suffered from bramble phobia, a self-coined term describing a morbid fear of getting an atlatl dart caught in the brambles. I may have

been the only hunter in Missouri suffering the affliction. After making ready I chose a sapling as a range marker which stood twelve-yards away. Then I leaned against the tree, held the loaded atlatl at waist level, and waited.

Shortly before dusk a big doe sauntered down the slope from the southeast and I could tell she would pass a few yards beyond the marker. The doe held her tail straight out which is a sign a buck probably trailed nearby. She stopped at maybe seventeen-yards, stretched her neck, and stared in my direction. Then she came a few steps closer, stopped again, stomped, and gave the old head bobbing routine. I held still. I'm pretty sure the florescent orange caught her attention, but because of the camouflage she didn't recognize me as human. The doe, like many deer toward season's end, was super-observant and I thought she would not give me a chance to raise the atlatl.

At that time a heavy-antlered buck walked down the slope from the southwest and he stopped about thirty-yards west of me. I paid him little attention as he stood well out of range. The doe walked toward the buck passing several yards south of my marker. She was too far for sure accuracy and too vigilant to make a move on. Evidently that doe was a thinker because after walking halfway to the buck she turned around and came back for another look. She again had her neck stretched and head held low while walking and staring at me. This time she would pass within range, and I saw something that raised my hopes, and my predatory instincts began kicking in.

Through squinted eyes I noticed she would walk past a tree a few feet in front of her. I still held the atlatl at waist level and to bring it to throwing position with the doe watching would be futile, but I knew the tree would temporarily block her vision. So, when her nose and then her eyes vanished behind the trunk I shifted my body weight and raised the atlatl into throwing position. When her eyes reappeared the doe's demeanor remained the same as she hadn't seen a thing. Boy oh boy was I proud of myself. I'd gotten away with a huge movement within almost spitting distance of a hyper-alert deer. The doe walked a few more steps and almost brushed against my sapling range marker. I remember the dart's head pointing behind her shoulder. All I had to do was swing my arm and it'd be over, and I was about to cast, when she spun around and trotted back toward her lover. And so went my last opportunity to harvest a deer with an atlatl during the Missouri 2010 firearms deer season.

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