Growing up in the woodlands of Crawford County paid off when meeting up with the Monarch of Crawfish Creek.

Natalie's Secrets

Story By Rich Wagoner
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Go southward through the heart of Illinois, past the white squirrels of Olney and the woods of Bone Gap and you enter the Wabash County hunting grounds of Natalie Kieffer. A direct descendant of early Illinois settlers (her great grandfather Norris founded Norris City), Kieffer carries on the spirit of that pioneer independence each year during hunting season.

Scouting for deer and preparing for her hunts are her favorite pastimes, but she still has time to excel in academics and school functions. A student in Mortuary Science at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, Kieffer's high school years were spent with service clubs and playing softball and tennis. From the age of 12 she has accompanied her father on hunting trips around the hills and streams of Mt. Carmel. Helping to feed her family at such a young age, and pitting her skills against nature, were exciting challenges to her, and learning the secrets the outdoor world has to share inspires her search for more knowledge.

Kieffer exhibited her strong character at an early age when she quickly sprang into action after a team of horses hitched to a sleigh became spooked. She grabbed the loose reins and stopped the team, then unhitched the team and freed her grandfather from underneath the sleigh.

Years of accompanying her father on hunting trips have honed Natalie Kieffer's skills in interpreting nature.

"I didn't have time to think," she humbly recalled. "My instincts told me what to do. I have always tried to look out for the men in my family. I never wanted them to think I wasn't as good as any boy could be.

"I was the only girl in the hunter safety class, and everybody wondered what I was doing there," said Kieffer. "But, I was determined to learn about hunting because it gave me the opportunity to spend time with my Dad."

Her father soon learned that his daughter had a special talent. He didn't have to ask twice about going out on a cold, wet-morning rabbit hunt, or taking a scouting trek around the woods. Deer hunting became a link between them and they thrive on it. A hunter for many years, her father has never killed a deer as large as her trophy 13 point whitetail—a magnificent animal weighing more than 200 pounds and crowned with massive antlers.

The buck had been spotted several times in the thick, wooded area close to their house. A splendid animal in full prime, with all the intelligence, experience and instinctual prowess that entails, even a brief, late-evening glimpse convinced Kieffer it was the largest deer she'd ever seen, and she began formulating a plan.

Sighting in her gun at 25, 50 and 75 yards, she decided a close shot would be her best option. The location for her stand was carefully selected, based on wind direction, cover, deer trails and type of tree—with her personal parameters for success thrown in for good measure.

She was ready.

The day she picked for her hunt was a school day, but she calmly attended classes then drove directly to the woods, still dressed in school clothes and wearing her favorite perfume. A seasoned hunter will tell you that scent is the No. 1 factor in hunting deer, but darkness was approaching and Kieffer didn't have the time to go home, remove the perfume and put on camo. She had a blind date with the unknown monarch of Crawfish Creek.

Although prepared for an afternoon in her deer stand, Natalie Kieffer was moving through the brush when she met her trophy buck.

Walking quietly through the timber, she thought about the secrets she had learned from the chipmunks, squirrels, coyotes, foxes, turkeys and beaver of Crawfish Creek. She thought about her father, mother and friends, and a mysterious animal that just might appear that day.

Working her way to the center of the timber and her stand, she was startled by a loud, crashing sound. She froze in anticipation.

Was it him?

There was movement in the thick brush at 100 yards, and something that looked like a rocking chair drifting over the low tops of the brush swept closer to her. Kieffer picked an opening as the deer came within 25 yards. She carefully aimed and fired.

The buck bounded up an embankment and looked back at her. More than 200 pounds scrimshawed against the forest backdrop. His crown of antlers glinted in a shaft of evening light. His heart had been pierced by her, but somehow he stood there defying death, staring back. But she still had secrets to share with the buck. Not knowing she had hit him with the first shot, she "grunted" and the deer turned and came towards her. Her second shot finished her work, the ancient cycle of the huntress and the prey completed.

In the silence of dusk, the young woman walked over and laid her orange hunting vest over the still body of her forest challenge. There was no braggadocio, no exultation and high-fiving. She was alone with her thoughts.

Why Kieffer does what she does is her own secret. The challenges of life and its disappointments seem to sharpen when she is alone in the woods with the secrets she has learned. Secrets that help her cope with life and death, and the problems that she faces every day. Facing them with the same independence of her ancestors—and determination to help others along the way.

Natalie Kieffer with her prized trophy, the Monarch of Crawfish Creek.

Rich Wagoner, an avid outdoorsman who enjoys backpacking and other outdoor sports, resides at Ghost Hollow Ranch adjacent to Jim Edgar Panther Creek State Fish and Wildlife Area near Chandlerville.