Being prepared isn't always enough to be a successful deer hunter.

First Buck

Story by Tracy Rowe
Photos by Adele Hodde

When the alarm went off all I could think was that this had to be the coldest morning of the season.

The temperature gauge read 28 degrees Fahrenheit. I climbed back into bed, thinking it would be warmer that night. I laid there for a few minutes and thought "why did I buy all these cold-weather clothes if I'm not going to use them?" I got back up.

I took a scent-free shower with scent-eliminator soaps, shampoos and lotions. Scent control is important when you are hunting whitetail deer as they rely heavily on their keen sense of smell. Unfortunately, I have witnessed this first-hand when deer have approached my stand, seemingly relaxed, only to have them stop in their tracks and look directly at me. Not a muscle I'd moved, but they picked me off the tree by throwing their nose in the air and waving it around.

At the woods I climbed out of the truck into the bitter cold and slid into the rest of my hunting clothes—washed in scent-free soap and dried using dirt-scented dryer sheets. Storing clothing in a plastic tub helps eliminate human odors from getting on them, and inside my tub is a scent-wafer that smells like dirt to keep my clothes smelling more like the outdoors than the garage or truck. I also have put my clothes in a garbage bag filled it with leaves and

Deer season often means cold season—bitter cold. Yet archery hunter Tracy Rowe dressed for the weather and hit the woods.

sticks as almost anything from the outside will help mask human odors.

I loaded up my stand with all my carry-on baggage—buck grunt and doe bleat calls, rattling bag, extra clothes, boot covers, video camera, scents, snacks, rangefinder, and hand, feet and body warmers. And an extra release—I'm sure I am not the only hunter to have to climb back down to retrieve a dropped release. My friends and family say I look as if I am moving into the woods. I want to be sure I have everything needed just in case I need to stay all day.

I was set up by 5:50, nearly a half hour before shooting opened, giving the woods just enough time to settle around me. It was a beautiful morning, with just a slight northwest wind, but it was a wind that wasn't good for that stand and caused me concern. My scent was blowing directly in the direction I believed the deer would come.

Alerted to some crunching behind me, I turned to see a couple of does walking up the draw—not where I expected them but a route I knew they traveled based on sign I found while scouting. Watching them, I heard some more walking and behind them approximately 50 yards was another doe.

A buck was on her tail. A big buck. The biggest buck I'd had a chance at was 100 yards behind me in the draw where I did not expect him to be.

The first rule in deer hunting is: "Always expect the unexpected."

Why weren't they in the shooting lanes in front of me? Why, today, did they decide to come up the draw? Why, oh why?

Hauling hunting gear while dressed for the cold can result in overheating. Removing a hat and gloves until they're needed can help maintain proper body temperature.

Then it happened. The doe turned in my direction and started up the hill, passing within 20 yards of my stand. The buck was 10 yards behind her. I came to full draw while he was behind a tree, forgetting about the doe. Thank goodness she didn't catch me drawing or the gig would have been up. Waiting for the buck to step into the opening, I gave a soft mouth bleat to get him to stop. Already at full draw, all I had to do was hit the release.

I watched my illuminated nock disappear into a field of brown. There was no doubt this was a good hit, and I retrieved my buck less than 100 yards from my stand. He lay so majestic in leaves covered in a light dusting of snow from the night before. It was one of the most exhilarating moments of my life.

That was the moment I had been bow hunting for. Although I have harvested does with my bow, 6 years had passed without the opportunity to harvest a nice buck. It doesn't happen overnight and I'd spent a lot of hot, cold and wet days in the stand. All that being said, bow hunting is something I don't foresee ever giving up.

Tracy Rowe is an avid deer, waterfowl and turkey hunter and lives in rural Sullivan.

The author with her first buck, a hard-earned and beautiful Illinois whitetail.