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October 2023
Petoskey, MI 49770

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About 1,360 words

Books for the Deer Blind

November 15th in northern Michigan often blows in at the head of cold rains, strong winds, plummeting temperatures and sometimes a few inches of fresh snow. And in those miserable temperatures we'll be sitting and sitting and sitting. Many hunters have gone to great lengths and greater expense with chairs, heaters and miracle fabrics to keep their bodies warm, dry and relatively comfortable in the blind. However, what about the mind? Let's face it, that's the limiting factor (at least it is for me). We don't go in because we're cold. We go in because we're bored and hopeless. After all, it takes perseverance to stare down a few shooting lanes for five hours without seeing a deer.

One solution is to stare at your phone. If social media and news headlines don't give you a sore neck and a blue light headache, you are almost guaranteed to fall ill with a bad case of anxiety, jealousy or disgust. I've got a better idea. Read a book. Here's a handful of them, all focused on deer hunting, that will keep your hopes up and help you to know you're participating in an activity with so much shared meaning that it hardly deserves to be called a sport.

Deer Camp: Last Light in the Northeast Kingdom

Photographs and text by John M. Miller

The cover of ***Deer Camp*** is a stark yet familiar black and white photograph of two guys wistfully staring out a snow covered, paint chipped single pane window of a gray weathered clapboard deer cabin with two rows of bleached antlers above and below the window. None of the antlers would make it on the cover of *Field and Stream*. The room behind them is dark as are most deer camps in November. You can't see it in the picture, but I think they're having a cup of coffee and wondering when and if to go back out in the afternoon. It's a great cover.

Despite what your teachers told you, you can judge a book by its cover, and in ***Deer Camp's*** case, you can also judge it by its publishers – MIT and The Vermont Folklife Center. So how do THEY publish a book about deer hunting, let alone one with green topo maps used as the endpapers?

My parents gave me this book back in high school, and it's the most important book I've ever read on deer hunting. It's written by a guy whose parents didn't deer hunt. John Miller is more of an anthropologist than a deer hunter. In fact, he's not a deer hunter. And in not being a deer hunter, he somehow felt he missed something

important growing up. So, for five years straight, he'd leave home for three weeks in November and following maps drawn on napkins (this was pre-GPS 1992) he'd show up at deer camps and sleep on the floor under the poker table. Miller gets it. "I first wish to thank the hunters who gave me their trust, even when I arrived uninvited at such a private sanctum as a hunting camp traditionally limited to family."

Deer Camp is filled with black and white photographs (move over Ansel Adams) of the camps, landscapes, tools and people who share the cultural heritage of deer hunting. Equally powerful are the stories shared with Miller that he shares with us. Perhaps at the end of his project, Miller might have understood deer hunting even better than those of us who do it.

A Thousand Deer

By Rick Bass

Following a similar trail to Miller, Rick Bass focuses on just one deer camp, his own, in ***A Thousand Deer***. Rather than northern Vermont, this time we're exploring the hill country of Texas, and while I do not know exactly where in Texas that is, I do know that it can rain and sleet there. Trucks can get stuck in the mud on a New Year's trip to the cabin. So stuck is said truck that Bass's cousin and his young son had to crawl out the windows to exit it. Bass writes of the grief and absence he'd felt that fall after losing his mother and how it kind of took the fun out of hunting where one's thoughts can be an unwelcome visitor in the blind or on the mountain. And yet somehow, shoveling for hours with shaking fingers in the yellow light of a Coleman lantern, Bass finds relief in the focused and immediate purpose of rescuing his cousin's truck. He spends a paragraph describing the lighting of a Coleman lantern and how it brings a swamp out of the darkness where before there had been no swamp and you cheer Yes! Yes! That's how it is! Who can get you that excited about lighting a Coleman lantern and getting a truck unstuck? Rick Bass can. This book is a collection of essays published in magazines including *Field & Stream*, *Sports Afield*, *Gray's Sporting Journal* and *Texas Parks and Wildlife*. Bass is such a good writer that he's probably the only deer hunter in the world to receive a positive review in *People* magazine. "Bass captures quiet human truths amidst his astonishing portraits of life in the wilderness." Yes! Yes, he does!

How to Bag The Biggest Buck of Your Life

By Larry Benoit (with Peter Miller)

Okay, I get it. Some of you don't want to find your inner self or the meaning of life while deer hunting. (In fact, if that's you, I'm surprised you've read this far.) You just want to find the biggest buck of your life. There's a book for that, too! Larry Benoit gets right to the point in his title ***How to Bag The Biggest Buck of Your Life***. Published in 1975 by The Whitetail Press in Duxbury, Vermont, this is a cult classic. Benoit takes you through the mountains of Maine following the tracks of monster bucks in the snow all day long until you finally get a shot deep in a hemlock swamp at

sundown and then hope by your compass and some miracle you can make your way back to the truck in the dark. In order to do so, he'll teach you how to try on multiple pairs of uninsulated soft rubber boots until you find the one that fits so well you can feel the twigs before they break beneath your toes. He'll also teach you how to quit smoking long enough before deer season to have a chance of making it up and down the mountain. Living out of a converted school bus as a deer camp, Benoit is the real deer in deer hunting. He'll make you feel more like a man just by reading his book.

The Deer Camp

By Dean Kuipers

Last, and quite truthfully the least, of these four books, Dean Kuipers' ***The Deer Camp*** is a complex, hard read. A memoir of a father, a family, and the land that healed them says it all. The healing part at the end is quite heartwarming in a sad yet positive way. But the selfish and destructive nature of the relationships that required the healing was tough to read. Kuipers' grew up in Kalamazoo, so this time we're exploring familiar territory not far from Fred Bear's legendary Grousehaven camp near Rose City. The deer camp is Kuiper's dad's attempt to bring the family back together after he pretty much single-handedly destroyed it. Through the restoration of the land and the building of the cabin, the family begins to heal itself as well. It's not a perfect story – no family's story ever is, not if it's truthful anyway. But despite the raw nature of ***The Deer Camp***, it's worth reading. After all, it gives hope for broken relationships. It also gives hope that if you hunt long enough in lousy habitat that shouldn't harbor a big buck, you never know when one might show up.

And maybe this is the book that will keep you in the blind so you're there when it does.

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