



Hunt Close

by Clarke C. Jones

His family had not owned a gun since the Revolutionary War, so he was caught off-guard one summer day when his teenage daughter, Samantha, told him she wanted to try deer hunting. She was the apple of his eye, and despite his reservations, he enrolled her in a Hunter Education course recommended by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF). He thought that would be the end of it.

Early last November, however, one of her classmates invited Samantha and her father, as guests of a hunt club, to go deer hunting.

You can imagine her father's surprise when—after they had spent just a couple of hours on a deer stand—Samantha killed an 8-point buck! Although very proud of his daughter for her skill and tenacity, he was perplexed. We have a dead deer in the woods; now what?

For the experienced deer hunter this situation may seem laughable, but there is a learning curve for most everything. I had the same feeling about “what to do with it” when the flight instructor handed me the controls of an airplane as I took my first (and nearly *our last*) flying lesson. Fortunately, for Samantha and her dad, the hunt club had the means and manpower to remove the 120-pound carcass from the woods. But if *you* are hunting for the first time and have to transport a dead deer home... what next?

One of your options would be to take your deer to one of the many approved processing locations located throughout Virginia. The best way to find deer processors near your hunting area is to contact Laura at Hunters for the Hungry at 1-800-352-HUNT (4868) or go online to download a list. Many meat processors operate year-round facilities processing beef and pork for farmers or the growing numbers of locavarians—those individuals, restaurants, or members of regional co-ops like Manakintowne Specialty Growers in Powhatan or Fall Line Farms in Goochland—who prefer locally produced and processed food. Meat processors must follow the same strict state standards when processing venison as they do beef. According to Louis Garza, owner of Country Road Meats in Amelia, which processes approximately 2,500 deer each year, state inspectors are almost always present at a processing site.

If you have had a successful deer hunt and want your deer processed, Louis extends some intelligent, common-sense information. “The hunter should immediately remove the internal organs and anal cavity of the deer so that the meat does not spoil. Clean the area of meat that is to be processed of leaves, dirt, or any other debris... Bring us the deer with the skin on. Unfortunately, we see a number of hunters who do not take these simple precautions.”

An up-and-coming generation of consumers finds hunting attractive because of the promise of eating locally produced, or in this case harvested, meats.

In Virginia, winter temperatures often reach from the upper 40s into the mid-50s, so get your deer to the processor as soon as possible! “Too many times people will want to ride around with their deer for hours, showing it off,” says Garza. “If it is warm enough for bugs or flies, they will get into the cavity and do what they do.”

Garza notes that at Country Road Meats, when you bring in your deer to be processed it is given a number and the number stays with the deer through every step of handling so that you get 100 percent of your deer back. According to Garza, a medium-size deer will yield up to 30 to 35 pounds of meat.

“We have a number of hunters who will donate their deer to Hunters for the Hungry

by paying the processing fee,” notes Garza. “All we ask is that a hunter does not bring us a deer so badly shot up or in such bad condition that there is nothing we can really do with it and it is of no use to anyone.”

Jackson Landers, who authored *The Beginner's Guide to Hunting Deer for Food*, is a strong advocate for the local food movement—eating locally and logically—and he offers another approach to deer hunting for food. “The Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries is the gatekeeper for hunting, and I believe it is very important how they, and the hunting community, receive the people who may want to get into hunting, who may want to start eating wild game, and who may want to learn how to

Below, when field dressing a deer, it is important to clean any areas of dirt, leaves, or debris before removing meat for processing.





A game cart can make the task of transporting a deer out of the woods much more do-able.

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prepare wild game,” believes Jackson. Landers points out that people interested in eating healthier foods, along with growing concerns over the chemicals or additives ingested by the animals or injected into the foods we eat, have influenced the rise in demand for locally accountable, grass-fed livestock and wild game.

At this writing, beef prices are at an all-time high. Legally harvesting wild game may be a way to offset food costs while assuring you of lean meat with no antibiotics or added hormones. But not everyone has access to either a pick-up truck or the hunt club resources to carry a deer to a processor, so Landers offers both the training and techniques for harvesting and processing deer on your own.

“Currently, I am advocating for ways to make the hunter education system more welcoming to adult beginners and not just the younger generation of those whose parents already hunt. It is important that we continue to encourage deer hunting,” says Jackson. He feels it is vital to promote deer hunting not only for the financial support it provides to wildlife management, but for the ecological benefits as well.

Landers believes in studying what you hunt and emphasizes that the more you know about the habits of what you are hunting locally, the greater success you will have afield. Admittedly, depending on your

hunting location, the topography of the land, and your physical size, it may be difficult for you to drag an entire, 120-pound deer out of the woods. Landers has taught people how to hunt and use simple tools to do so. With a couple of sharp knives, a tarp, and a backpack, Jackson instructed the individual hunter how to field-dress a deer and carry out as much as 30 pounds of food.

John Nadolski, owner of Nadolski’s Butcher Shop in Goochland’s Courthouse District, does not process deer, but each fall he holds standing-room-only seminars demonstrating how to butcher one. John coordinates this through annual programs presented through the Center for Rural Culture. With several sharp knives, Nadolski not only shows you helpful techniques for butchering a deer, but along the way shares recipes and wine pairings for every part of the animal.

Some deer processors agree that a large percentage of the deer meat they handle is made into ground meat, sausages, or jerky. Nadolski’s class highlights other options. “Attendees learn about classic game sauces they may not have thought about,” he says.

Billy Parrish, a deer hunter who attended one of John’s seminars, reports, “I am always looking for new ways to prepare meat to serve to people who think venison tastes ‘gamey’. I intend to make the French rack that he demonstrated at the seminar.”



You Can Make a Difference

Hunters for the Hungry receives donated deer from successful hunters and funds to cover the costs of processing, so that venison may be distributed to those in need across the state. Each \$40 tax-deductible contribution allows another deer to be accepted. Hunters donating an entire deer are not required to pay any part of the processing fee.

The David Horne Hunger Relief Bill gives hunters the opportunity to donate \$2 or more to the program when purchasing a hunting license. One hundred percent of each donation goes to providing venison to the hungry. For additional information visit www.h4hungry.org or call 1-800-352-HUNT (4868). Each of us can make a difference.



Enlisting the help of other sportsmen, in the form of shared equipment and knowledge, can go a long way toward making the new hunter more comfortable afield.

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Non-hunters are attracted to wild game from a culinary perspective. “They are looking for suggestions as to how to properly cook wild boar, for instance, and I am happy to show them, because you want your customer to have a pleasant experience when trying any new food,” Nadolski says.

The locavore movement was foreign to John five or six years ago but customers were asking if the beef at his store was grass-fed and, if so, what kind of grass. “My customers did not want grain-fed beef,” he explains. “We now are able to select both pork and beef from local farmers who produce the meats we want to share with our customers.”

The boom in the population of white-tailed deer in the United States has been a great wildlife management success. If you have ever hit a deer with your car or tried to shoo one away from your hostas, you might say it has been too successful. Recognizing this, DGIF attempts to balance their pressure on the landscape by offering hunters more liberal deer quotas than in the past. As Jackson Landers makes clear, we need to encourage more people like Samantha and her father to pursue deer—not just those who come from traditional, deer hunting families. One way to do that is through educational programs focused on deer and wild game hunting. Combined with versatile recipes prepared in innovative and tasteful ways, such programs can appeal to anyone interested in eating leaner meats and a healthier diet. 🍴

Clarke C. Jones spends his spare time with his black Labrador retriever, Luke, hunting up good stories. You can visit Clarke and Luke on their website at www.clarkecjones.com.

RESOURCES

- ◆ Country Road Meats
www.countryroadmeats.com
- ◆ Nadolski’s Butcher Shop
www.nadolskisbutchershop.com
- ◆ Fall Line Farms
www.falllinefarms.luluslocalfood.com
- ◆ Manakintowne Specialty Growers
www.manakintowne.com