

The 5th Participant

■ By Steve Sorensen

Bill Marchel

THE HUMAN HUNTER IS MERELY ONE OF NATURE'S MANY PREDATORS WITH CERTAIN BIOLOGICAL NEEDS.

Today will be the day. It's almost a premonition ... and what I think about every time I go deer hunting.

It's also what I think about while rushing to leave work early or rolling out of bed at 4 a.m. I have the premonition even if I haven't decided which tree stand I'll use, or which ridge I'll climb. Whenever I'm hunting, I always step into the woods with confidence. It's an inkling that the day will bring something special.

And I *always* anticipate something special. I envision a big 8-point walking into a shooting lane and my arrow disappearing into its chest. Alas, the shot never seems to happen the way I picture it.

Of course, a kill usually doesn't happen. Every day cannot be a day for death. I typically go home empty-handed. However, I'm seldom disappointed if a deer remains just out of range. Sometimes, the whereabouts of a deer remains an utter mystery.

Yet I always believe every day is the day for a new experience, insight, outdoor adventure, or merely a new opportunity

to share in nature's drama.

Testing the Hypothesis

Yesterday's hunt started like any other. I knew something was going to happen. I left work early and started the long hike to my stand loaded with optimism and a quiver full of arrows.

I'm superstitious enough to believe that if I do something different, something different will happen. So, I took a new route to my stand believing magic might pay a visit.

When I was within 100 yards of my stand, I reached into my pack and retrieved my scent-drag. I just had a feeling a scent trail was today's ticket to success. I wound the trail around a thicket opposite an abandoned apple orchard. It seemed like the perfect option, considering any receptive deer passing through this feeding area would then walk within 15 yards of my stand.

I was nearly done applying the scent trail when I glanced to my right and spotted a pile of feathers. An unfortunate bird, maybe a turkey, had met its executioner.


Closer inspection revealed the feathers weren't from a turkey after all. They were oddly those of a barred owl, distinctive because of the rounded tips with softly frayed ends — an adaptation that silences the wings for surprise attacks.

After completing my scent trail, I climbed to my stand and hung up my bow and small backpack. I turned to look over my right shoulder and there, 20 yards from my tree and hanging from a dead snag about 6 feet high, was more evidence of the magnificent creature's demise. A wing, complete with all its primary feathers, moved just enough in the gentle breeze that I could see it was dark on top, creamy light on the bottom and featuring distinct chocolate-brown bars.

As I settled in for my hunt, I couldn't help but question how the wing got there. I assumed an even larger bird carried it there to strip it of its meat. The dangling wing seemed to serve as a harsh reminder of the delicate line between life and death in the deer woods, even without the

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human hunter playing a role.

As I waited for deer, I mulled the mystery of the great bird's ending. I thought of the many squirrels that made this spot their home. Their industrious character took advantage of the nut bounty in a nearby hickory grove. I enjoyed watching their antics and listening to their noises in the forest litter.

I pictured the owl, whose wingspan had been nearly 50 inches, watching for a careless red squirrel, or maybe a gray, to let down its guard. But there must have been a third participant. What was it?

Maybe it was a bald eagle, which aren't uncommon in this area. Maybe not. They seldom hunt within the woods.

Maybe it was a great horned owl, just a little larger than this barred specimen. Or, could this drama have included an earth-bound predator? I imagined a coyote lying in the thicket, waiting for the squirrel to work its way close enough to become a quick, easy meal. Maybe while the coyote watched, the barred owl swooped and sunk its talons into the squirrel. Such a surprise assault might have triggered a response from the coyote, and it reacted by pouncing.

The owl's remains were scattered in several piles. A coyote might have carried the squirrel away but was soon hungry again. The executioner was executed; the predator had become prey.

Of course, that doesn't explain how the owl's wing got up in the tree. My thoughts then entered the possibility that a crow — the fourth participant — found the remains and carried them away from ground-dwelling competitors. After the crow had stripped the remaining meat off the wing, he might have left it there as a totem — a reminder that every day is indeed a day for death.

Conclusion

The human hunter is merely one of nature's many predators with certain biological needs. I envy the efficiency of the full-time predators, yet I'm glad that my life does not depend on killing something every day.

Yes, today is the day. Today is always the day.

— Steve Sorensen is an avid whitetail hunter from Russell, Pa.

