

North State Game Club

Bladen County, NC

By
Patrick R. Baker

The call came in late September: “Do you want to go deer hunting at a hunt club in eastern North Carolina this fall?” The invitation was from my friend and long-time hunting buddy, Thomas Cullen, and of course my answer was, “Yes!” These days I find that I enjoy the anticipation of a new hunting or fishing adventure almost as much as the actual journey itself. So for the next two months I felt a little like I did as a boy before Christmas. Just before the new year, I landed in the pine woods of Bladen County, North Carolina, at the North State Game Club.

The club recently celebrated 100 years of traditional deer hunting. Founded in 1906, the club has changed little since its inception. The lore of North State was most notably brought to America’s attention just after WWII by one of its best-known outdoor writers, Robert Ruark. His article, “Dixie Deer Hunt,” appeared in the October 26, 1946, issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Today Ruark’s article is humbly displayed behind a small wooden bar in the club’s parlor named after founder John Pickett Council. When I read it, I realized how little had changed in 100 years, from the club’s original size to the way hunts are conducted today. Currently the club is



Robert McLean with daughter Lisa Jane presiding as judge at the boys’ and girls’ kangaroo court (Photo courtesy of Dickson McLean)



A hunter looks on as the morning harvest is cleaned and dressed. (Photo by Patrick Baker)

composed of 55 members and has no plans for expansion. There are eight prospective members waiting patiently in the wings for the rare opening, and preference goes to sons, sons-in-law, and brothers of current members. There are also several honorary members who no longer hunt or pay dues but return on occasion for venison stroganoff and collards.

The club generally has 10 major hunts per season, commencing in mid-October and concluding on New Year’s Day. Over the course of the season there are always several special hunts. The first

weekend of November is typically reserved for the women’s hunt. The Thanksgiving weekend hunt begins on Wednesday evening and wraps up mid-day on Saturday, with a traditional Thanksgiving meal on Thanksgiving Day. Many of the members’ families come to join them in the feast. What was once the boys’ hunt, but is now the boys’ and girls’ hunt, takes place on Christmas Day and the two following days. Finally, there is the New Year’s Eve gathering, which entails a hunt that afternoon, followed by a New Year’s morning hunt. The hunt and the season are capped off with



A lone wood duck box on the North State pond in the North Carolina winter wind
(Photo by Patrick R. Baker)

The John Pickett Council parlor with Ruark's article displayed on the far wall
(Photo by Patrick R. Baker)



a traditional lunch of black-eyed peas and collards for good luck. North State is more than a place to harvest deer; it is a place for fellowship, family and tradition, not to mention fine Southern cooking.

On a typical hunt, members arrive on Thursday night to enjoy a hearty supper, which is likely to include butterbeans, cornbread, collards and the mainstay, venison. The deer harvested at North State remain on

the premises for the season, and only at the end of the campaign are the leftovers divided equally among the members. The club embodies the spirit of the Southern gentleman, with all members given equal footing. As the old-timers tell it, there once was a mailbox mounted near the entrance to the club where members were required to store their egos, awards, degrees, and titles before stepping onto the premises. After the hunt, they could reclaim their accolades on the way out.

The dining hall is the hub of camaraderie and fellowship, as well as food. Long tables stretch from one end to the other, and in accordance with their century-old tradition, hunters are asked to remove their hats for the blessing. The house specialty is venison cooked over hot coals in the dining hall fireplace. You can hear the meat sizzling over the soft dinner chatter, interrupted occasionally as a member calls out, "Who still needs some?"

Once fed, the members make their way to their quarters for the night. There are two main cabins on the grounds, dubbed The Mayflower and The Hilton. The cabins are tight quarters with bunk beds for 25 in each, heated by wood-burning fireplaces and seasoned by a century of laughter, Kentucky bourbon and cigar smoke. There is also another three-sided structure called The Bullpen, open on one side to a fire pit. On certain weekends when ladies are present, one half is designated as The Heifer Pen. On most weekends, junior members find themselves relegated to The Bullpen.

As a newcomer I staked my claim in The Bullpen. I unrolled my sleeping bag on a thick bed of Southern pine needles and laid my duffle and shotgun alongside. Soon the fire crackled and popped, and with a cold beverage in hand, I listened as tales of past years were spun into the wee hours of the friendly North Carolina winter night. I drifted off to the relaxed melody of slow, Southern drawls, interrupted by an occasional belly laugh in the distance.

Ding, ding, ding! I was startled

from my sleep by the dining hall bell. At first I thought it could be a fire – then, clearing my head, I came to the realization that it was already time for breakfast. The men emerged from their cocoons and cabins, and headed for the dining hall. Over breakfast my host, Dickson McLean, a second-generation member, briefed me on the day’s schedule. Dickson’s father was a member, as is his brother Robert, reinforcing North State’s claim as largely a family affair. When I pressed him on why North State was so special, he answered simply, “the camaraderie and Southern cooking.” While his explanation was succinct to the point of terseness, it was all that needed to be said.

I was sipping my second cup of coffee when the bell rang again. We moved outside for the traditional pre-hunt “circle up” in front of the dining hall. As we stood with semi-autos, pumps, and even single-shot shotguns in hand, we were given our marching orders for the day. A head count was taken, and once the final tally was rendered, the hunt master announced the parcels of land that would be hunted that day. Each section of the club’s 6,000 acres is named for a former member or a special contribution made to North State. Soon the hounds were loaded, and we found ourselves in dirt-stained trucks driving down sandy roads heading to our posts.

The hunting horn was blown at eight, and the hounds were released. While some hunt clubs rent their dogs for the season, all 50-odd North State hounds stay on the premises year-round. Soon I could hear them baying on the ridges above my stand, and I scanned my field of fire, anticipating the possibility of a buck bolting from the young Southern pines. I desperately wanted a deer to tempt fate and come within range of my 00-buckshot load.

My eagerness was tempered somewhat by the risk of being hauled into North State’s kangaroo court, the Court of North Fryer Swamp. You see, at North State, if someone misses a deer – or on slow days if there is even the *rumor* that some-



The boys wait for their instructions at the ‘circle up’ (Photo courtesy of Dickson McLean)

one has missed a deer – the accused is tried by a jury of his peers at the Friday night campfire. In fact, if someone doesn’t miss a shot and allow for court to be convened, it isn’t considered a good hunt. The court’s conviction rate is 100 percent and the sentence doesn’t vary: the convicted’s shirttail is cut off and hung in the dining hall for all to see.

As fate would have it, this writer missed a nice buck that afternoon. A cold sweat began to emerge on my brow as I trudged back to camp. Ignorance of North State’s Rule #1 would not be a strong defense. The law was clear: *We are here for the purpose of harvesting deer – bucks and big does.* I was preparing myself to be tried, convicted, and have my tail nailed to the wall, when fate intervened again: I got a call about urgent family business and beat a reluctant retreat back to Virginia.

At North State, time stands still. I am sure my trial will be continued over to

another fall. I have little doubt that if I am fortunate enough to return to North State, even if several decades down the road, at least one member will remember that I’ve been out on bail awaiting trial, and I will be duly tried, convicted, and my shirttail cut away to finally commemorate my Dixie deer hunt.

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