

# The Deer Hunter

by ZACHARY SLOBIG

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In which a city slicker, armed with bow and arrow, heads for the wild hills above Los Angeles in pursuit of the elusive black-tailed deer

**"You put a rifle** in just about anybody's hands and they could have a deer their first day out," says Caleb Siemon, dressed head to toe in fatigues. It's four thirty in the morning, the quarter moon is low in the sky, and we are in his Toyota pickup heading for Angeles National Forest, an hour northeast of Los Angeles. As we pass a Denny's and a Hollywood Video, Siemon and his buddy Brian McMahon tick off tips like a couple of Boy Scouts. Stay downwind: human odor must be masked at all costs. Scent neutralizers should be applied liberally—Siemon's favorite is Ted Nugent's signature Wang Dang Sweet Doe Tang. Leave behind the antler rattle, which can mimic the sound of bucks sparring over a doe but wouldn't be any help this late in the season. Finally, there's the "gumoflaug." It tastes like a mouthful of pine needles and dirt, but masks human breath, which, for archery hunters like Siemon and McMahon, is crucial. "My comfort range is 30 yards," says Siemon.

An hour later I am crouched under a manzanita bush, breathing through a camouflage mask, ear cocked to the wind for any snap of a twig. "Look for ears or

antlers," whispers Siemon. "And keep quiet." He has given me his Smith & Wesson .44 Magnum. "Strictly for emergency situations," he said earlier. Siemon, when he isn't hunting, is a glassblower of increasing renown, and a family man. "I've got nothing to prove," he added. "There are mountain lions and bears out here, and my only goal is to come back with meat and come back alive."

Sounds simple enough, but I don't come from hunting stock. Growing up, the closest I came to killing an animal was chucking rocks at pigeons under the elevated subway on my way to school. Unlike Siemon and McMahon, who are in their second season of L.A. County deer hunting, I do not instinctively scan the landscape and think of the potential protein count. So, before I headed to the hills, I practiced stalking a flock of wild turkeys that were strutting down the tree-lined streets of my Berkeley, California, neighborhood. I fired away with my camera phone, but they quickly disappeared down a Prius-occupied driveway and I went home to sweet basil turkey sausage from Trader Joe's.

**Los Angeles is** a mountain town. That's easy to forget with the bustling throngs and the cell-phone towers disguised as palm trees, but it's the only major American city bisected by an actual mountain range. And on rare days in the early winter, after the wind has swept the smog and wildfire haze away, those snow- ▶





Caleb Siemon  
prepares to  
hunt deer in  
L.A. County.









**“When you’re quiet and calm enough that they’ll take a shit right in front of you, then you’re making progress.”**

**LEFT**  
Siemon hides in the brush of Angeles National Park.

**RIGHT**  
Siemon has been hunting deer in L.A. County for two years.

► capped peaks suddenly appear in all their unlikely prominence. As Angelenos head out with mountain bikes, some urban woodsmen prowl the trails searching for man’s most primitive preoccupation—fresh meat. So here I am, shivering in the chaparral, strapped like Dirty Harry next to a compound bow—wielding glassblower, watching the morning glow spread over the city.

The sun is rising, and my legs are already asleep. The furious squeal of tires slices through the quiet—the echo of *Tokyo Drift*-style racers who like to use the roads for training, explains Siemon. “These are urban deer,” he says. “They don’t seem to get spooked by that.” Three hours later, with not a buck in sight, we decide to get moving, following a fire road down into a nearby canyon fragrant with sagebrush.

We run into another archer, an old-timer with bushy gray sideburns, pushing a shiny blue mountain bike. “I bought this for fifty bucks at Toys R Us and it gets me down into those out-of-the-way spots,” he says. “Sometimes I just leave it up here stashed in the brush.” An antler-handle knife is sticking out of the top of his pack. I can imagine him as a younger, slimmer man, triumphantly claiming his trophy. He tell us spotted a nice buck that very morning, but way out of range, and advises us to try another canyon farther down the road. “Back in the day we used to count 250 deer a day around here,” he says wistfully.

“Tall tales,” harrumphs McMahon as we continue down the trail.

“These days I find myself checking out every type of terrain and thinking about the deer that could be there,” Siemon says. “I can’t stop thinking about it. They just taste so good.” He recently spotted a buck on a golf course not far from his house and fantasized about sneaking around with his bow and taking it out. “I already bought the golf bag,” he says with a sly grin. Often, on his drives through Laguna Canyon, where he lives, he’ll pull over when he spots deer. He follows as close as he can and quietly observes. Bow hunters must be more in tune with their prey, says Siemon. “When you’re quiet and calm enough that they’ll take a shit right in front of you, then you’re making progress.”

Taking the old-timer’s advice, we follow a new trail down into a different canyon. We pick our way through

the brush, slipping a bit in the washed-out sections. Just as the trail flattens out at a ridge, where the scrub is low and soft, our headlamps light up two sets of eyeballs. Before Siemon can even think of notching an arrow, the deer bound off deeper into the ravine. The thump of hooves quickens my pulse. I’m beginning to see why hunters often call black-tailed deer the ghost of the Pacific. These are the only deer I’ve spotted all day, and they never reappear.

**Later that night,** at Siemon’s father’s house, we feast on venison filet mignon. Siemon marinates our filets in olive oil, balsamic vinegar, thyme, rosemary, and cracked pepper, then salts it while it grills. His father slices it as his grandfather pulls himself away from the football game to join us at the table as Siemon’s daughter, just shy of her first birthday, crawls the kitchen floor. Four generations of the family gather around for a Sunday supper. We didn’t catch this meat in Angeles National Park, though; it’s from the freezer, and before that, from West Virginia, where Siemon bagged it on his wife’s family’s farm. I’m told, the success rate for the bow hunter is less than 10 percent. Most days of archery hunting are just quiet, optimistic walks in the woods. “That’s why it’s called deer hunting,” says Siemon. “Not deer killing.”

GOOD

