

Traditional Deer Hunting

This time of year finds many people in southeastern Oklahoma sighting in guns, setting up tree stands, and getting ready for deer hunting season. Similarly Choctaw communities of the past began gearing up for the cold season deer hunt after the fall harvest was complete. In honor of deer season past and present, this month's edition of *Iti Fabvsa* will present a little bit about traditional Choctaw deer hunting.

Choctaw ancestors, like indigenous people from all over the globe had a very special connection with the animals that they hunted. This connection could not be conveyed more eloquently than was done long ago in the following Choctaw story: one evening after killing a doe far from his village, a Choctaw hunter made camp, hanging his bow and quiver in a nearby tree and laying down near the deer carcass to sleep for the night. Upon awaking the next morning, the hunter was astonished when the dead deer arose and bid him follow her to her home. After a long journey, they entered a hole in the ground, where the hunter was led before the King of all deer. Soon, the hunter fell asleep. The deer placed a deer hide over the sleeping man, fitted deer hooves to his hands and feet, and attached antlers to his head. The hunter's family eventually became worried by his absence, and searching for him, found his bow hanging in the tree where he had left it. When they gathered around it and began to sing the mourning song, a herd of deer appeared through the woods, one coming closer than the others. Some of the singers caught a hold of this deer, and hearing it speak, realized it was actually the hunter. They tore away the deer hide; blood began to flow, and the hunter/deer died. The family took the body home and buried it with a dance and ceremony (recorded by Bushnell 1909:32).

As highlighted in this story, animals and humans are similar in many ways. In the traditional way of thinking, an animal giving up its life so that humans can survive is an act of significance. Ancestral Choctaw people relied on deer "issi", not just as a main source of meat, but also for hides that were made into clothing, bones and antlers that were made into tools, tendons that were made into thread, hooves that were made into rattles, foot pieces that were rendered into glue, intestines that were made into bow strings, and many other materials that supported

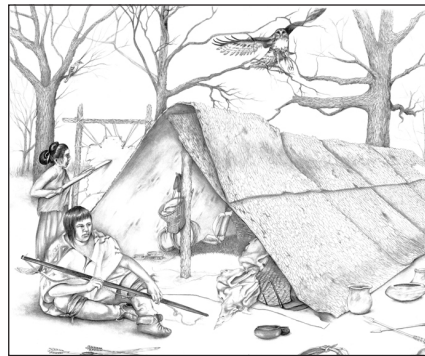


Fig. 1: Artist's depiction of a Choctaw winter camp (Ruby Bolding)



Fig. 2: Depiction of deer stalking by Theodore Debry 1591.

the Choctaw way of life. The indigenous inhabitants of the Southeast acknowledged a profound debt for all that the deer and other animals provided for them. This was expressed through dances

and other forms of art that honored the animals, and through managing the landscape so that it could support a larger deer population than would be possible naturally. This was done by regularly setting low-intensity wild fires that cleared brush and increased browse for the animals (Denevan 1992:371-372).



Fig. 3: Depiction of communal hunting Du Pratz 1758.

Traditionally Choctaw hunters harvested deer during "hvshtula", the cool months of the year. During this time, extended hunting trips known as "owa" (Byington 1915:318), were made to favorite deer hunting spots. Here, families set up winter base camps for hunting (Fig. 1).

Until at least the late 1700s, Choctaw people hunted deer almost exclusively with the bow and arrow (Adair 1775:285, 309; Lincecum

1906:435). The most common hunting practice was stalking, whereby hunters on the ground tried to maneuver as close to the animals as possible before shooting (Fig. 2). Cushman, speaking of a hunt with a Choctaw friend in the early 1800s, conveys the essence of this approach:

"I closely watched his every movement as he slowly and stealthily advanced, with eyes fixed upon his object [a prey animal]; now crawling noiselessly upon his hands and knees, then as motionless as a stump; now stretched full length upon the ground; then standing erect and motionless; then dropping suddenly to the ground, and crawling off at an acute angle to the right or left to get behind a tree or log..." (Cushman 1899:180-181).

Readers who have tried to sneak up on a deer will certainly appreciate the immense skill required to get close to one in this manner. While stalking an animal, hunters often ranged up to 30 miles away from camp (Adair 1775:401). Odds of success with the stalking technique were improved, particularly during the fall deer rut, with the use of a decoy made to look like a deer.

Communal hunting was another technique commonly used in the Southeast. One method involved hunters encircling an

area several miles in diameter and setting brush fires. Over a few hours, the ring of fire would be brought in tighter and tighter until all of the animals that were originally within the several mile area were trapped within a tiny area where they could easily be shot (e.g., Beverly 1705:39). Besides the two methods of deer hunting just described, hunting blinds were also used. Animals were also ambushed in natural traps, such as highly incised creek beds (cf. Swanton 1946:314), with walls too steep to climb out. Deer were also taken with arrows fired from boats when the animals were crossing streams.

Many Anglos were impressed with the reverence Choctaw hunters held for the deer and the fact that they usually wasted very little of a kill (e.g. Adair 1775:431). According to Cushman, Choctaw hunters never killed game animals in a wanton manner (Cushman 1899:181). At least some Choctaw communities had strict game laws to prevent over-hunting, and some are said to have refrained from hunting the biggest and best animals in order to help the species get stronger (Bremer 1907:3). In the traditional Choctaw way, once an animal was taken, it was distributed to as many neighboring Choctaw families and groups as the size of the hunt justified (Swanton 2001:54).

Conserving any natural resource requires respect for that resource, a commitment to avoiding waste and coordinated management practices. These are elements of traditional Choctaw game management. Unfortunately, for a period of just a few decades, our ancestors stopped managing the deer population in this sustainable way and paid a terrible price for it. During the 1700s and early 1800s, Choctaw people became increasingly involved in the fur trade with France and then with the U.S. Forts, trading houses, and later factories were set up in

and around Choctaw country as places for Choctaw people to exchange hides (primarily deer) for European merchandise. Over time, Choctaw society came to rely more on these European items and less on Choctaw-made items. Hunters began to go out and shoot more and more deer in order to be able to acquire more merchandise. In the year 1817 alone, Choctaw hunters brought in 54,011 pounds of deer hides to the fur factory at St. Stephens (American State Papers, Indian Affairs Vol. ii. p. 208). St. Stephens was just one of three factories doing business with Choctaw hunters at that time. Hunting pressure from Anglo American also began to increase. Before long, over-hunting had destroyed the deer herds in the ancient Choctaw hunting lands on the Tombigbee River. Choctaw hunters began traveling farther and farther west in search of deer, eventually traveling all the way out to present day Oklahoma to hunt. As a whole, Choctaws eventually racked up debts to the fur factories, and were not able to pay them off because the deer were gone. The U.S. government repeatedly used these outstanding debts as a pretense to get Choctaw land sessions through treaty.

Today, after several decades of sustainable management practice, the deer population has returned to at least its ancient size, and may be bigger than ever before. Over the upcoming months, many Choctaw hunters will continue an ancient relationship, hunting deer to feed their families and at the same time helping to keep the deer population size healthy and in balance. Choctaw tradition and lessons from the past both teach us that these amazing animals deserve our respect, our best efforts at conservation, and our thanks.